



**COMMISSIONER FOR OLDER PEOPLE FOR NORTHERN IRELAND
(COPNI)**

AUDIT AND RISK ASSURANCE COMMITTEE

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE AUDIT AND RISK ASSURANCE COMMITTEE
held on Monday, 22nd January 2024**

PRESENT:

MEMBERS: Alan Walker (AW) (Chair)
Lee Wilson (LW)
JP O'Doherty (JP O'D)

IN ATTENDANCE

Valerie McCloskey (VMcC)	Department for Communities
Conor Shields (CS)	NIAO
Caitlin Toyne (CT)	NIAO
Catriona McHugh (CMcH)	Cavanagh Kelly
Commissioner Eddie Lynch (EL)	COPNI
Evelyn Hoy (EH)	COPNI
David Murray (DM)	COPNI
Gary Carpendale (GC)	COPNI

<p>Agenda Item 1: Apologies</p> <p>No apologies were noted.</p> <p>CMcH advised that she had to leave the meeting early and asked if she could make her report at the beginning of the meeting. The Chair agreed to this.</p>	<p>Noted</p>
<p>Agenda Item 2: Chair's Business</p> <p>a. <u>Conflicts of Interest</u> There were no conflicts of interest.</p> <p>b. <u>Compliance Report</u> The Committee noted this paper.</p> <p>c. <u>Register of Gifts and Hospitality</u> The Committee noted this paper.</p>	<p>Noted</p> <p>Noted</p> <p>Noted</p>

<p>d. <u>Register of International Conferences and Events</u> There were no items for this period.</p> <p>e. <u>Direct Award Contracts</u> There were no Direct Award Contracts in this period.</p>	<p>Noted</p> <p>Noted</p>
<p>Agenda Item 3: Draft Minutes of Meeting and Action Tracker.</p> <p>a. <u>Draft Minutes of Meeting – 23rd October 2023</u></p> <p>Those present accepted the accuracy of the minutes and the Chair agreed to sign the minutes.</p> <p>b. <u>Action Tracker</u></p> <p>DM discussed the measures taken against the action points and all action points had been completed.</p>	<p>Agreed</p> <p>Agreed</p>
<p>Agenda Item 4: Matters arising not already on the agenda.</p> <p>DM advised that the annual self-assessment of ARAC effectiveness was due for completion by ARAC members. DM advised that he would be in contact with the ARAC regarding the self-assessment. AW asked DM to send across a timetable for the self-assessment completion. The ARAC self-assessment is a template which is produced by the National Audit Office.</p>	<p>Agreed</p> <p>AP255</p>
<p>Agenda Item 10: Update from Internal Audit</p> <p>CMcH advised that there were no Internal Audit reports to present at the meeting. An audit of COPNI's Corporate Governance arrangements is due to commence in February, with an audit of COPNI's Research and Policy arrangements scheduled to commence in March. CMcH confirmed the two audit reports would be presented at the next ARAC meeting.</p>	
<p>Agenda Item 5: Commissioner's Update</p> <p>a. <u>Engagements</u></p>	

The Commissioner advised that there were several key meetings and events which took place since the last ARAC meeting in October.

The Commissioner attended an RQIA meeting in Malone House, Belfast with senior officials from the health service. The discussion revolved around ways the health service could be more open and transparent in dealing with complaints from the public.

The Commissioner was invited by the Age Friendly Network to one of their meetings. These networks bring together local age sector groups to strengthen the voice of older people and support them to influence decisions on local policy and services.

The Commissioner attended a meeting with Antrim and Newtownabbey Loneliness Network which helped people experiencing loneliness and isolation stay connected. This was a particular issue for older people.

The Commissioner advised that he met with Age Concern Causeway which is a local independent charity providing a wide range of social and support services for older people in the Causeway Coast & Glens Borough. They have undertaken a lot of work with people suffering from Dementia.

The Commissioner attended a meeting with Libraries NI. The point was raised that it has been difficult to get older people back out to libraries since the pandemic. The Commissioner stated that the social connection is important for older people's health and wellbeing, and there is scope for COPNI to work with Libraries NI to promote the benefits of reading. It was noted that QUB have undertaken a lot of work on the benefits of reading for those suffering with Dementia.

The Commissioner launched COPNI's annual Christmas photography competition in December. There were over 60 entries. There was one winner and two runners up, and 15 to 20 of the entries are currently on display in an exhibition in Hollywood Library. The Commissioner noted there was a very encouraging attendance from participants at the launch of the exhibition.

The Commissioner was invited by Belfast Health and Social Care Trust to the Royal Victoria Hospital (RVH) Emergency Department to see firsthand the issues faced by the Emergency Department. LW asked the Commissioner to raise the issue with management in the RH Emergency Department of care packages not been in place when patients are discharged. This

was placing additional pressure on carers. The Commissioner advised that many members of the public have contacted COPNI about this issue. He noted that there are issues around the recruitment and retention of carers.

The Commissioner also attended a launch event on Mental Health awareness in men over 50 years of age, which was launched by Age NI. Age NI will be delivering a series of online “Good Vibrations” workshops, giving men the opportunity to get together so that they can learn how to improve their physical and mental health.

b. Accounting Officer Matters

The Commissioner confirmed he, along with the Chief Executive and Head of Corporate Services, had attended the Accountability meeting with DfC the previous week to discuss outstanding issues.

The Commissioner confirmed that the Department for Communities (DfC) has approved the Strategic Review of Future Needs (Staffing) business case. COPNI has subsequently advertised and shortlisted for the posts of the Head of Legal and Advocacy and the Head of Corporate Services. Interviews are due to take place on Thursday 25th January 2024. The post of Head of Policy and Research will be advertised at a later date after the other two posts are filled.

The Commissioner confirmed that COPNI had met with the Sponsor Branch and DfC Finance to discuss funding for his participation in the UK COVID-19 Inquiry, and that COPNI had been encouraged to submit a multi-year business case, which was forwarded to the Department in December 2023. COPNI is working with the Sponsor Branch to respond to any remaining clarifications, but the Commissioner noted that approval was needed imminently to enable legal counsel to review outstanding documents and prepare him fully to provide his oral evidence.

Agenda Item 6: Chief Executive’s Update

a) Staffing issues

EH advised that COPNI had approval from DfC to recruit for the three Grade 7 posts as outlined in the Strategic Review of Future Needs (Staffing) business case.

EH informed the ARAC that a grievance case taken by a member of staff was ongoing and a hearing of the case was scheduled for June 2024.

EH advised of a conflict of interest pertaining to a case pending against the Commissioner taken by two long standing members of staff. The case was for discrimination based on age and gender. This pertains to an issue around back pay prior to April 2020. It was agreed that this would be discussed at the end of the meeting under any other business, and that the Chief Executive would leave the meeting to allow discussion of the issue amongst other attendees.

EH also stated that as part of the UK COVID-19 Inquiry Business case, COPNI had requested funding for an additional solicitor on a fixed-term contract basis for the remainder of the Inquiry.

b) Senior Management Team

EH advised that along with the Commissioner they were working through the NDNA report, which was commissioned by DfC. They are currently sharing the report with the senior management team and working through the various options outlined in the report. The report would also be shared with the ARAC. There were concerns about how COPNI's independence could be impacted by the potential implementation of some of the recommendations.

EH noted that COPNI continue to work a hybrid system of working for staff there is some home working and some days in the office. There are all in days for all staff twice a month. EH confirmed the system continues to work well.

EH confirmed a new corporate plan is currently being drafted. A separate annual business plan will be submitted to DfC in March 2024, as agreed with the Sponsor Branch. The future priorities for action will have to be agreed with the new Commissioner once they are appointed. The current Commissioner's term finishes on the 12th June 2024, and EH noted that the Executive Office is responsible for the recruitment competition for a new Commissioner.

EH confirmed that a report on the Care Homes Regional Contract is due to be published before the end of the 2023/24 financial year. EH also confirmed a report on Tackling Ageism will be launched in 2023/24, reporting on findings from the Commissioner's recent Tackling Ageism roadshow.

<p>EH advised the ARAC that VMcC was leaving the sponsor team in DfC to take up a new role elsewhere. EH thanked her for her support to COPNI over the years. AW also wished VMcC well in her new role on behalf of the ARAC.</p> <p>c) <u>Finance and Expenditure</u></p> <p>DM presented the Finance report. DM advised that COPNI should achieve close to full spend in 23/24, and that there has been a pause on the recruitment of the vacant Finance Assistant role to relieve budgetary pressures.</p> <p>DM reaffirmed that a business case is with DfC for funding of COPNI’s ongoing participation in the UK COVID-19 Inquiry. DM emphasised a prompt response is required to ensure enough time is available before the oral hearing in April to engage legal counsel in preparation of the Commissioner.</p> <p>DM confirmed a new website has been procured, with final capital costs circa £12k less than projected. This expenditure will be achieved before the end of the financial year.</p> <p>DM advised that the additional £161k of funding allocated by DfC was not utilised by COPNI. It was allocated by DfC in error and has been returned in full.</p> <p>LW asked about projection of spend to the end of the year and what was the remaining expenditure going to be spent on. DM advised that this was shown in the right-hand column of the Finance and Expenditure update. DM advised that, in the absence of unforeseen easements or pressures at this point COPNI are forecasting full expenditure of the budget. JP O’D asked if any easements are made will they affect next year’s budget. V McC advised that this was not the case.</p> <p>d) <u>Quarterly Performance Report</u></p> <p>Paper was noted by the Committee.</p> <p>e) <u>Quarterly Assurance Statement</u></p> <p>Paper was noted by the Committee.</p>	<p>Noted</p> <p>Noted</p> <p>Noted</p>
<p>Agenda Item 7 : Business Plan</p> <p>Paper was noted by the Committee.</p>	<p>Noted</p>

<p>Agenda Item 8: Risk matters</p> <p>DM presented the updated Risk Register which was recently reviewed.</p> <p>Vacancies and HR Planning: has reduced from high risk 16 to medium risk 6. DM noted that the business case (Strategic Review of Future Needs) has been agreed with DfC and the SMT posts will now be recruited on a permanent basis. This will offer stability for future planning as permanent staff will be in place. It was noted that the Finance Assistant role has not been recruited due to existing budgetary constraints.</p> <p>DM stated that the staffing risk for the UK COVID-19 Public Inquiry work represents a new risk with COPNI's participation in the work of the Inquiry having had a significant adverse impact on COPNI's workload. DM stated that COPNI was seeking to mitigate this risk through the provision of an additional solicitor, and a business case requesting this resource is currently with DfC.</p> <p>DM confirmed the UK Public Inquiry had indicated that it was unable to fund COPNI's work as it viewed COPNI as a substantial body, which should have access to funding. A business case has now been submitted to DfC to cover the period until summer 2026. DM set out that the Inquiry work is now expected to increase exponentially in advance of the hearing of Module 2c in April 2024. There are over 11,000 documents so far for the legal counsel to review, and with no funding in place, the timetable for response and preparation is already very tight. DM stated COPNI need approval as soon as possible, with it projected that £90k of expenditure to take place to the end of the 2023/24 financial year. VMcC advised that DfC were aware of the urgency of this request and there was support for the bid. However, DfC had to undertake their own due diligence checks and a timescale could not be put on a response.</p>	
<p>Agenda Item 9: Comment from Department for Communities.</p> <p>V McC advised that it could be June or July before a firm funding position is known for the 2024/25 financial year.</p> <p>V McC advised that the appointment of a new Commissioner was undertaken by the Executive Office. DfC had no part in the recruitment process.</p>	

<p>AW asked if there was any support available from DfC to assist the outgoing Commissioner. VMcC advised that she would make inquiries with colleagues in DfC as to what support was available.</p>	<p>AP256</p>
<p>Agenda Item 11: Update from External Audit</p> <p>CS introduced himself as the new audit manager with the NIAO who will be responsible for overseeing the 2023/24 audit. AW asked if there was any change to the Report to those charged with Governance. CS advised that there were no changes. All members advised that they were content to adopt the report on behalf of ARAC.</p> <p>The accounts were laid before the Assembly on the 23rd November 2023. CS confirmed a planning meeting for the 2023/24 audit was scheduled for 29th January 2024.</p>	
<p>Agenda Item 12: Audit Recommendation Tracker</p> <p>DM confirmed that all recommendations, with the exception of one, are completed.</p>	<p>Noted</p>
<p>Agenda Item 13: Accountability and Financial Management Guidance Update</p> <p>Paper was noted by the Committee.</p>	<p>Noted</p>
<p>Agenda Item 14: Schedule of meetings for coming year.</p> <p>The Committee accepted this proposal.</p>	<p>Agreed</p>
<p>Agenda item 15: AOB:</p> <p>EH left the meeting to allow the committee to discuss the issue relating to the discrimination case referenced earlier in the meeting.</p>	
<p>Date of Next Meeting</p> <p>DM confirmed that the next ARAC meeting would be held on Monday 22nd April at 1.30pm.</p>	<p>Agreed</p>



Commissioner for **Older People**
for Northern Ireland

Signed: _____
Chairperson

Date: _____