



**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 28th JULY 2025**

PRESENT:

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

IN ATTENDANCE

Judith Woodbourne (JW)	Department for Communities
Caitlin Graham (CG)	NIAO
Ryan Falls (RF)	Cavanagh Kelly
Siobhan Casey (SC)	Commissioner
David Murray (DM)	COPNI
Gary Carpendale (GC)	COPNI

Agenda Item 1: Apologies	
Apologies were noted from EH.	Noted
Agenda Item 2: Chair's Business	
a. <u>Conflicts of Interest</u>	
The Chair advised that if any members had any changes or updates to the Declaration of Interest forms these needed to be updated and forwarded to DM/GC.	Noted
b. <u>Compliance Report</u>	
The Committee noted this paper.	Noted
c. <u>Register of Gifts and Hospitality</u>	
The Committee noted this paper.	Noted
d. <u>Register of International Conferences and Events</u>	
There were no items for this period.	Noted
e. <u>Direct Award Contracts</u>	
The Committee noted this paper.	Noted

<p>Agenda Item 3: Draft Minutes of Meeting and Action Tracker.</p> <p>a. <u>Draft Minutes of Meeting – 28th April 2025</u> Those present accepted the accuracy of the minutes and the Chair agreed to sign the minutes.</p> <p>b. <u>Action Tracker</u> DM discussed the measures taken against the action points and confirmed all action points are now completed.</p>	<p>Agreed</p> <p>Agreed</p>
<p>Agenda Item 4: Matters arising not already on the agenda.</p> <p>No other matters noted.</p>	
<p>Agenda Item 5: Commissioner’s Update</p> <p>a. <u>Engagements</u></p> <p>SC advised that COPNI had undertaken a three-month engagement with older people to ascertain the issues which were most impacting them. There were over 1,250 responses to the engagement and a wide range of issues were raised including access to services, transport, ageism and GP access. A detailed analysis of the issues will be undertaken to build a clearer picture how the Commissioner’s priorities for the four-year corporate plan could be aligned to face these challenges.</p> <p>SC advised that she had meetings with many of COPNI’s key stakeholders over the last number of months. This was central to exploring how organisations in the sector can work together strategically to deliver for older people. SC also noted that the previous Commissioner had given evidence to the COVID-19 Inquiry in Module 6, which focussed on Care Homes during the pandemic.</p> <p><u>Accounting Officer Matters</u></p> <p>It was noted that COPNI had limited resources and would need to prioritise engagement on the issues affecting older people. SC advised that it was important to have a joined-up approach with the representatives from the four nations when engaging and lobbying government on the shared challenges facing older people throughout the UK.</p>	

Agenda Item 6: Chief Executive's Update

In the absence of the Chief Executive, DM reported. He advised the Committee that the Supreme Court appeal into the issue of Continuing Healthcare had been rejected.

a) Staffing issues

DM reported that it was a challenging quarter for staffing. Two members of staff had vacated roles in the Policy and Communications teams for alternative opportunities, and only one of these roles could be filled on a temporary basis due to affordability constraints. COPNI did not have the budget to recruit either vacant post on a permanent basis. Elsewhere, DfC had approved additional financial support to bolster the legal team, which had been under significant pressure from a staffing perspective. DM advised that salary costs should account for 75% of COPNI's budget. However, the reality was that as the baseline budget had not increased in the past few years salaries at present accounted for a much higher percentage if all posts were recruited.

JW advised that DfC are currently working through the options paper of the New Decade New Approach review of Arm's Length Bodies, the recommendations from the report will be with the Minister in late summer/autumn. DfC will work with the Commissioner regarding any proposed changes to the structure of COPNI.

AW advised that now was the time for a reset and that either the baseline funding for COPNI is increased or the expectations of what can be delivered by COPNI are restated within the restrictions of the funding allocation. JP O'D advised that it would not be possible to get a reset in budget at this stage of the financial year.

JW advised that one of the priorities for DfC was to look at the current budget position for ALB's. DfC were looking at how ALB budgets at the start of the year would be sufficient to meet annual salary costs.

DM advised that COPNI's baseline salary costs have increased by 15% over the last few years due to a combination of pay progression and salary increases but there was no corresponding increase in budget. COPNI are unable to make savings in accommodation, IT, or overhead costs due to existing contractual obligations. JP O'D noted that the results of the October monitoring round would not be known until December.

<p>AW suggested that the ARAC meet in a months' time to discussion the budget situation and any forthcoming updates from DfC. The meeting would look at risks and scenario planning if the current budget constraints continue.</p> <p>b) <u>Senior Management Team</u></p> <p>DM advised that COPNI continues to hold weekly SMT meetings.</p> <p>c) <u>Finance and Expenditure</u></p> <p>DM advised that the Finance and Expenditure update showed a £15k underspend. This is due to two members of staff leaving the organisation during this period, as well as various timing issues with overhead expenditure lines. DM noted that the staff training budget has been cut in previous years due to budgetary constraints, but this is a situation which cannot continue going forward. A lack of sufficient staff training increases exposure to staff retention risks.</p> <p>DM advised that there is a training plan however there is insufficient budget available to deliver the plan in full. COPNI continues to provide compulsory training which COPNI has a statutory requirement to undertake such as Fire Safety training and Data Protection Training, as well as CPD training to qualified staff.</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 2024/25</p> <p>The Business plan for 2025-26 was being amended following the appointment of the new Commissioner, to align with their strategic goals and priorities.</p>	<p>Noted</p>

<p>Agenda Item 8: Risk matters</p> <p>DM presented the Risk Register and discussed the main areas of risk.</p> <p>The staffing position as previously discussed outlines that currently four vacant staff posts exist. The current financial position is that approved staffing levels are unaffordable within the current budget, and COPNI is having to take mitigating actions to balance the budget, including managing vacancies.</p> <p>The Data Protection and Cyber Security procurement for an IT provider was launched recently. This process has been administered and managed by ECNI, with support from CPD. COPNI will avail of the services of the successful provider through a Service Level Agreement with ECNI.</p>	<p>Noted</p>
<p>Agenda Item 9: Comment from Department for Communities.</p> <p>JW confirmed that DfC have ongoing discussions with the Commissioner and there were no further comments to be made from DfC.</p>	
<p>Agenda Item 10: Update from Internal Audit</p> <p>RF advised that two audits were scheduled for 2025/26. These were Data Protection and Information Security and Case Management. This was the third year of the three-year audit plan. RF advised that the Institute of Internal Auditors have issued new global Internal Audit standards. The new standards when adopted will place additional responsibilities on ARAC members regarding the Internal Audit function. The ARAC will be made aware of these changes prior to adoption.</p>	<p>Noted</p>
<p>Agenda Item 11: Update from External Audit</p> <p>CG advised that there are changes to the audit timetable. As a result of other commitments, the 2024-25 audit will now commence in January 2026. It is envisaged that the audit would be completed by Mid-February. DM advised that he was content with this timetable.</p>	<p>Noted</p>
<p>Agenda Item 12: Audit Recommendation Tracker</p> <p>DM confirmed that the tracker has been updated to reflect the recommendation from external audit.</p>	<p>Noted</p>

Agenda Item 13: Accountability and Financial Management Guidance Update This was noted by the ARAC.	Noted
Agenda Item 14: Schedule of meetings for coming year. This was noted by the ARAC.	Noted
Agenda item 15: AOB: There was no other business.	
Date of Next Meeting The next ARAC meeting was scheduled for Monday 20 th October. DM would confirm this meeting by email.	ACT270

Signed: _____
Chairperson

Date: _____