



Commissioner for Older People
for Northern Ireland

**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 April 2025**

PRESENT:

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

IN ATTENDANCE

Lisa McAlorum (LMcA)	Department for Communities
Conor Shields (CS)	NIAO
Caitlin Graham (CG)	NIAO
Catriona McHugh (CMcH)	Cavanagh Kelly
Siobhan Casey	Commissioner/COPNI Accounting Officer
Evelyn Hoy (EH)	COPNI
David Murray (DM)	COPNI

Agenda Item 1: Apologies No apologies were noted.	Noted
Agenda Item 2: Chair's Business The Chair welcomed Siobhan Casey, COPNI's new Commissioner, and confirmed that he and his fellow ARAC members were looking forward to working with Siobhan moving forward. SC thanked the Chair for his kind introduction and likewise spoke of her enthusiasm for working with the ARAC across her term of office. 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 Noted

<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>d. <u>Register of International Conferences and Events</u> There were no items for this period.</p> <p>e. <u>Direct Award Contracts</u> The Committee noted this paper.</p>	<p>Noted</p> <p>Noted</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 – 20th January 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>The Chair asked that the matter pertaining to an outstanding Industrial Tribunal case be discussed at the end of the meeting as there was a conflict of interest for one of the attendees.</p>	
<p>Agenda Item 5: Commissioner's Update</p> <p>a. <u>Engagements</u></p> <p>SC advised that she had been in the role since 7th April, and that the majority of her first week in the role has been taken up with media commitments, including meeting the First and Deputy First Minister, as well as interviews with the BBC and ITV. SC also confirmed that she had been the guest speaker at the British Geriatrics Society Spring meeting, as well as attending the Old Library Trust as part of their 'Step Forward' campaign. SC said she looked forward to engaging increasingly with older people in the months ahead, particularly in respect of consultation regarding her new 4-year Corporate Plan.</p>	

Accounting Officer Matters

SC confirmed that she had undertaken a smooth handover of duties from the Interim Accounting Officer and had been well briefed by the COPNI Senior Management Team on organisational priorities. SC confirmed she would be seeking to move forward on any outstanding issues and would work closely with the Sponsor Branch, specifically in progressing the development of the Partnership Agreement and the recommendations from the NDNA review.

Agenda Item 6: Chief Executive's Update**a) Staffing issues**

EH advised that a member of the Communications team would be leaving in May following their resignation, and that COPNI is managing long-term sickness leave in one post. In the absence of a confirmed budget allocation, EH confirmed that vacant posts could not yet be recruited as affordability could not be assessed until more information was available.

b) Senior Management Team

EH advised that COPNI continues to hold twice weekly SMT meetings.

c) Finance and Expenditure

DM advised that the Finance and Expenditure update showed a provisional year end resource underspend of £9k, which represented expenditure within 1% of the overall budget allocation. DM confirmed that this was a very pleasing position, particularly given the financial pressures faced during the year. DM advised that COPNI would continue to review the year end position ahead of the submission of the accounts to NIAO for scrutiny in the annual external audit.

DM advised that COPNI had received a 3-month budget allocation for 2025-26, which if extrapolated across a 12-month period, represented the same baseline funding as has been provided for COPNI across the 2023/24 and 2024/25 financial years. DM noted that this would be discussed further when the Risk Register was scrutinised.

AW expressed that the Committee were pleased with the provisional outturn and thanked EH and her team for the work undertaken in delivering a budget underspend given the pressures faced throughout the year.

<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>Agenda Item 7 : Business Plan 2024/25</p> <p>EH advised that the Business plan for 2025-26 was being amended following the appointment of the new Commissioner, to ensure alignment with SC's own priorities and vision.</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>In respect of staffing, DM advised that there are currently two vacant posts in COPNI, the Finance Assistant, and Legal Officer, and that there would soon be a vacant Communications Officer post. DM emphasised that a combination of the recent approval of the Pay Awards for 2024 and 2025, and the increased National Insurance costs from April 2025, meant that COPNI was no longer in a position to recruit these roles when they became vacant, due to lack of affordability. AW noted that this risk aligned closely to the Budgetary risk and confirmed that a conversation needed to take place with DfC to assess how COPNI's current structure could be funded given the current constraints, or indeed how the scope of COPNI's work would need to be reduced to align with any diminished staffing resource. LMcA confirmed that budget allocations were currently interim arrangements until the Minister agreed a final allocation for 2025/26.</p> <p>AW advised that the risk pertaining to the powers and duties of the Commissioner should perhaps be increased if there is significant impact arising from the COPNI being unable to recruit staff, and any subsequent impact on the Commissioner's ability to undertake the duties of the role. EH confirmed that this would continue to be considered and adjusted when more information on impact is understood.</p>	

<p>Agenda Item 9: Comment from Department for Communities.</p> <p>LMcA confirmed there were no further comments to be made from DfC.</p>	
<p>Agenda Item 10: Update from Internal Audit</p> <p>CMcH advised that the Financial Systems audit had been completed, and that only two Priority 3 recommendations had been identified, as set out in the report. The audit had therefore been awarded a Satisfactory audit outcome. CMcH thanked DM for his support throughout the audit and confirmed that along with the Satisfactory Human Resources audit and the review of implementation of prior year audit recommendations, COPNI had received an overall Satisfactory assurance rating for the 2024/25 Annual Report.</p> <p>AW thanked CMcH for the work involved in completing the internal audit programme for 2024/25 and congratulated EH and her team on a good result. AW also acknowledged that CMcH was moving on from Cavanagh Kelly and this would be her final attendance at the ARAC meeting. He wished CMcH every success in the future. At this stage CMcH left the meeting.</p>	<p>Noted</p>
<p>Agenda Item 11: Update from External Audit</p> <p>CS advised that the audit work for 2023/24 had been completed in March 2025, and the Annual Report and Accounts had been laid before the Assembly on 8th April 2025.</p> <p>CS confirmed that NIAO's audit fee had increased in 2024/25 due to increased volume of chargeable hours across recent audit engagements, and that this had been communicated to DM.</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>
<p>Agenda Item 13: Accountability and Financial Management Guidance Update</p> <p>This was noted by the ARAC.</p>	<p>Noted</p>
<p>Agenda Item 14: Schedule of meetings for coming year.</p>	



Revised dates would be issued for the July meeting.	ACT269
Agenda item 15: AOB: There was no other business.	
Date of Next Meeting DM would confirm the date of the next ARAC meeting by email. EH left the meeting to allow the committee to discuss the issue relating to the case referred to earlier in the meeting.	

Signed: _____
Chairperson

Date: _____