



NORTHERN
IRELAND
HUMAN
RIGHTS
COMMISSION

27 March 2024

Minutes of the Audit and Risk Management Committee held in the offices of the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission

Alfred House, 19-21 Alfred Street, Belfast, BT2 8ED (Note: some members attended virtually via Microsoft Teams)

Present: Sean Donaghy, Chairperson of the Audit & Risk Management Committee
Stephen White OBE, Commissioner
David Lavery CB, Commissioner
Helen Henderson, Commissioner

In Attendance: David Russell, Chief Executive
Lorraine Hamill, Director of Finance, Personnel and Corporate Affairs
Claire Martin, Director of Communications and Engagement
Alice Iskander, Administration Officer (Minutes)
Vivienne Fitzroy, Boardroom Apprentice
Amanda McMaw, ASM Belfast
Mark Lawther, Ernst & Young (EY)
Deirbhile Murtagh, Ernst & Young (EY)
Elaine Manak, National Audit Office (NAO)
Stephanie Knox, Northern Ireland Office (NIO)

1. Welcome and Apologies

- 1.1 The Chairperson welcomed everyone to the meeting and introductions were made.
- 1.2 Apologies were received from:
Colin Caughey, Director (Advice to Government, Research and Investigations)
Éilis Haughey, Director (Human Rights after EU Withdrawal)
Rhyannon Blythe, Director (Legal Services)
Thomas Lough, Northern Ireland Office (NIO)
Caoimhe Ward, Ernst & Young (EY)
Colin Wilcox, National Audit Office (NAO)

2. Declarations of Interest

- 2.1 No declarations of interest were made.

3. Chairperson's Business

- 3.1 The Chairperson had nothing to report.

4. Minutes of the meeting held on 25 January 2024

- 4.1 The final minutes of the Audit and Risk Management Committee meeting held on 25 January 2024 were not available due to unforeseen circumstances. The minutes will be shared as soon as possible.

Matters arising from 25 January 2024

- 4.2 There were no matters arising.
- 4.3 The Chair congratulated everyone on the success of the 25th Anniversary Celebrations which took place on Friday 1 March 2024 within the Commission's premises at Alfred House.

Action:

Training needs of the Audit & Risk Management Committee to be placed on the agenda for the next meeting.

- 4.4 It has been identified that committee members would benefit from a course in Data Security.

5. Director (Finance, Personnel and Corporate Affairs) Report

- **Financial Report for February 2024:**

- 5.1 The Director provided an overview of the financial report for February 2024 with reasons for overspend and underspend.
- 5.2 The Director reported that there is a total estimated underspend at year-end of £227,808.
- 5.3 A 5% pay award, back dated to 1 August 2023 has been estimated for salaries. It was hoped that the pay award would be confirmed before the year-end. There will also be a one-off non-consolidated payment of £1,500 for staff which will be pro-rated.
- 5.4 Two 'Engagement and Communications' posts will commence in the new financial year on permanent full-time contracts.
- 5.5 97.8% of invoices subject to prompt payment were paid within five working days.

- **Absence statistics for period ended 29 February 2024 (paper enclosed)**

- 5.6 We have three members of staff who are on long-term sickness absence.

- **High Value Purchases 1 January 2024 – 29 February 2024 (paper enclosed)**

- 5.7 The Director provided an overview on high value purchases for the period 1 January to 29 February 2024.
- 5.8 The Director reported that there were no purchases over £5,000 involving single tender action.

6. Freedom of Information requests for period January to March 2024 (paper enclosed):

- 6.1 The Director (Communications and Engagement) provided an overview of Freedom of Information requests for the period January to March 2024.
- 6.2 The Director (Communications and Engagement) reported that there has been one *freedom of information* request, from an NGO, since the Committee last met in January 2024.
- 6.3 The *freedom of information* request was in relation to the Commission's engagement with the RQIA (Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority) on the outcome of a Judicial Review.
- 6.4 The Director (Communication and Engagement) informed the Committee that all information was sent to the NGO with staff names redacted.

- ***Details of a complaint made to the Commission following a decision from the ICO (for review and comment)***

- 6.5 The Chief Executive provided an overview of the complaint received by a member of the public in relation to the Commission's employment of independent experts to conduct research for a report on "Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) in Post Primary Schools in Northern Ireland: A Compelling Case for Reform" (June 2023).
- 6.6 The Committee discussed the complaint and agreed that the Chairperson would write to the Chief Commissioner to confirm that the matter be brought back to the full Commission.

7. Chief Executive Report (oral update)

- 7.1 The Chief Executive provided an update on the risk register.
- 7.2 The Commission is currently understaffed and is likely to be under pressure as the Northern Ireland Assembly gets back to operating.

The Commission is currently recruiting for a *Senior Finance, Personnel and Corporate Affairs Officer* through an agency as an interim measure.

There have been challenges with recruiting a *Policy and Research Officer*, due to grading and attracting appropriate candidates to fill the posts.

7.3 An *Economic Review* panel has been established. A report is due to be completed by the end of June 2024.

7.4 Work continues on the business case for the Commonwealth Forum of National Human Rights Institutions which is being supported by the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office.

A&L Goodbody have been appointed to assist with establishing the Secretariat as a legal entity.

7.5 The budget build has been submitted to the Northern Ireland Office. The business plan for 2024-25 cannot be formally signed off until the Commission has received confirmation of the budget.

8. Internal Audit Update

- ***Review of Dedicated Mechanism function Internal Audit Report (paper enclosed)***

8.1 Amanda McMaw of ASM Belfast presented the findings of the internal audit review of the Dedicated Mechanism and confirmed a satisfactory assurance rating.

8.2 Three recommendations were made, all of which have been accepted.

- ***Follow up review terms of reference (paper enclosed for information)***

8.3 The Committee approved the draft terms of reference for the follow up review.

9. National Audit Office (oral update)

9.1 The external audit of the Commission's Annual Report and Accounts will commence in May 2024. Following that, an audit completion report will be presented to the June Audit and Risk Management Committee meeting.

10. Corporate Risk Register (paper enclosed) (for review and comment)

- 10.1 The Chief Executive provided an overview of the Corporate Risk Register.
- 10.2 Following the resignation of the Senior Finance, Personnel and Corporate Affairs Officer, and whose position the Commission seeks to fill through an agency as an interim measure, the CEO reported that there may be delays in meeting financial reporting targets.
- 10.3 Cybersecurity NI is taking on the IT contract through the Service Level Agreement with ECNI. Operations are expected to be fully in place by 3 April 2024.
- 10.4 The Director of Legal Services will be on long-term sick leave for at least 6 months or longer. The Commission has no funds to cover sick leave and parental leave. The duties of this post and the caseload will fall on the Chief Executive and two other Directors, which will add pressure.

11. Any Other Business

- 11.1 There being no other business the meeting closed at 3:30pm.

The next Audit and Risk Management Committee meeting will take place on 19 June 2024 at 14:00.