

Audit and Risk Assurance Committee

Minutes

Meeting Overview

Meeting:	Location
Audit and Risk Assurance Committee	MS Teams
Date:	Time:
23 March 2026	2.00 pm

Attendees

Name	Title
David Small	ARAC Chair
Fiona Ryan	Commissioner
Craig Gartley	ARAC Member
Joy Hadden	ARAC Member
Elaine Marley	Head of Corporate Services, COSICA
Karen Wilson	Grade 7, TEO HIA/Sponsor Branch
Martin Larkin	TEO HIA/Sponsor Branch
Catriona McHugh	Internal Audit Manager, McHugh Lindsay
Andrew Allen	Audit Manager, NI Audit Office
Note Taker	Title
Elaine Marley	Head of Corporate Services, COSICA

Agenda Item

1. APOLOGIES

- Joanne McComb - Head of Office, COSICA
- Ruth Jordan – PA to Commissioner & Corporate services

Agenda Item

2	COMMISSIONER'S UPDATE	Action
	The Commissioner advised that it had been a busy, productive, and rewarding quarter for the Office. The Commissioner highlighted the Office's work involved in the memorial unveiling that took place in Stormont in Feb 2026 and the challenges faced in getting to that point. The Commissioner talked about the meeting with the First and deputy First Ministers. The Consultation report was launched at this, and key learnings highlighted to the FMDFM. The Commissioner reported that the response to the Consultation report had been positive. Along with increased engagement through the awareness raising campaign, which included increased social media. The Chair, on behalf of ARAC agreed it had been a busy and productive period for COSICA but with positive outcomes.	
3	CHAIR'S BUSINESS	Action
	• No Conflict of Interests were reported. • The Chair noted E Marley's link with COSICA's legal advisors but confirmed this did not constitute a conflict as E Marley was appointed after the tender process. This "Interest" had been noted and will be appropriately managed going forward. • The Chair confirmed that he was no longer a member of the Northern Regional College Governing Body, and this should be updated. • No Fraud reported; The Policy circulated is up to date and still active. • Register of Gifts & Hospitality shared – no issues or concerns. • No Whistleblowing complaints. • Credit Card statement circulated – no issues or concerns.	RJ
4	MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING	Action
	• The minutes of the previous meeting on 12 December 2025 were accepted.	

5	MATTERS ARISING	Action
	- The Chair read matters arising and the following was noted. ➤ Skills audit – will review later in the year but the overall position is good. ➤ Business Planning. The Chair asked K Wilson for update. K Wilson noted DoF is bringing forward the Administrative & Financial Provisions Bill. Clause 14 of the bill which gives discretion as to a particular Commissioner's term had no issues when raised at the Assembly Committee. DoF will bring forward executive paper in terms of the bill and are finalising a timeline in relation to the Commissioner. K Wilson added there are several emerging issues still to be decided and once agreed will give more clarity. K Wilson said there are options going to Ministers this week. The widening of the remit is part of the consideration and the public inquiry into the Mother & Baby homes was noted. The Commissioner pointed out that this still does not help COSICA's risk position. The Chair agreed that the continuing uncertainty around tenure created serious risks for COSICA, including risks around staff retention and the ability of COSICA to deliver. He emphasised to K Wilson the urgent need for more clarity to avoid escalation of risks. K Wilson assured that FMDFM were aware of the issues.	
6	BUSINESS PLANNING	Action
	- The Commissioner confirmed that the Business Plan was meaningful in terms of being realistic and legislative. - There is a focus on research and engagement, in addition to anticipating and mitigating risk as far as they can with the uncertainty of the future position of the Office. - The Chair agreed the Business Plan has a good programme of work, but the uncertainty of the Office makes the focus for Year 2 difficult. The Chair noted the benefit of having the Advisory Panel and that the budget looked good. - C Gartley added the Business Plan is clear and comprehensive. - J Hadden agreed with The Commissioner and added that until we know what is happening with the future of COSICA the Business Plan should be kept under review.	

7	RISK REGISTER	Action
	<u>Risk 1: Legislative timeframe on tenure of Office</u> • The Chair commented that Risk 1 continued to be the most significant risk facing COSICA and the RAG rating is appropriate. • The Commissioner was aware of the risk and recognised potential issues around going concern. • Loss of legacy knowledge including systems and processes increased vulnerability and uncertainty. • The Chair highlighted (6) Delegation of functions of Commissioner; he felt these are likely to be limited - COSICA would miss the Commissioner's advocacy role and key risks would remain. <u>Risk 2: Failure to adequately represent the interests of victims and survivors.</u> • The Chair highlighted this is a potential area of concern. The RAG rating is appropriate for now, but the risks could change and it may become more significant depending on the future of the office. Keep reviewing. • The Commissioner added that given the nature of the work, this is the most accurate assessment available. The trust from survivors could change, it all is dependant on where we go. <u>Risks 3, 4 & 5: No issues, appropriate RAG rating</u> <u>Risk 6: Inappropriate or unauthorised release of information/loss of IT equipment due to lack of awareness in handling and storing sensitive data.</u> • The Chair commented that this risk could also become more significant depending on where we go and if further key staff members were lost. • The Commissioner added that this is an escalating risk. We need to know what strategy we are pursuing to manage this risk.	
8	FINANCE UPDATE	Action
	<u>Budget Position and Monitoring Rounds</u> • E Marley presented the Finance update for Quarter 4 2025-26. We are tracking to budget, and TEO are being kept informed. All Pay remits have been paid, except for The Commissioners which is being accrued for from Dec 25. EM identified minimal risk of breaching Grant in Aid. • The Chair advised that we should continue to work closely with TEO.	

9	INTERNAL AUDIT	Action
	• C McHugh opened by sharing they are delighted to be back working with COSICA. <u>Internal Audit Charter</u> • C McHugh presented a summary of the IA Charter, assuring compliance. The Charter was discussed with ARAC, acknowledging the additional responsibilities it places on management and ARAC. The Chair on behalf of ARAC was supportive of the Charter and it was approved. <u>Strategy</u> • C McHugh advised that the unique position of uncertainty prevents logic of a 2-year plan. Introducing a rolling 12-month plan will be more beneficial and allows them to still be compliant with IA standards. • C McHugh presented Year 1 of the audit showing a strong focus on organisational sustainability, workforce management, strategic planning and programme direction, and the delivery of statutory functions, noting that we should revisit in 12 months as we must be agile with uncertainties facing the organisation. • The Chair noted we can take assurance from prior IA work that COSICA's traditional audit areas and governance arrangements are strong. The main risk to COSICA is sustainability and therefore the IA strategy is focused on the right issues, we can adjust throughout the year as things change. • C Gartley suggested it is coming up to a busy time of year and asked if the pressure on staff was considered with their timeline. • C McHugh noted they will aim to keep to the timeline but will consider pressures on staff. • The Commissioner added we will keep ARAC updated with the timeline and we will work to meet targets but also being realistic. • The Chair, on behalf of ARAC approved the IA Strategy, adding that if we get more clarity, we can look at traditional audit areas down the line.	

10	EXTERNAL AUDIT	Action
	- A Allen provided a summary of the audit strategy, highlighting that they had considered many risk areas, but that management override remains the most significant risk. This is common among many other organisations. Materiality is set at 2% however the materiality does not apply to irregularity. - The Chair, on behalf of ARAC, noted the audit strategy and accepted the considerations and conclusions reached by NIAO. He confirmed that the ARAC was not aware of any suspected fraud or irregularity.	
11	AUDIT RECOMMENDATIONS TRACKER	Action
	- The Chair reviewed and discussed the Open recommendations on the audit tracker. Having worked on the Assurance Mapping this can be marked as complete, but it should be looked at again later in the year. - Two recommendations; GDPR and Information Security and Human Resources should be kept open to review at the next ARAC meeting. - C Gartley inquired if the new IA team will review this tracker. - C McHugh commented that they would review the tracker later in the year and that this task was noted in the IA strategy.	EM
12	DAO LETTERS	Action
	DAO (DoF) 01/26 and FD (DoF) 01/26 – No issues that concern ARAC.	
13	AOB	Action
	- The Chair suggested another ARAC self-assessment, focusing on the same template as last year, highlighting it is good practice. - C Gartley and J. Hadden confirmed they will complete the self-assessment. <u>Date of next Meeting:</u> ❖ Tuesday, 9 June 2026 at 11.00 am (MS Teams).	

ARAC ACTIONS				
<i>Action Point</i>	<i>Agenda Item</i>	<i>Action</i>	<i>Responsible</i>	<i>Status</i>
1	3 – Chairs Business	Remove COI for The Chair	R Jordan	Complete
2	5 – Matters Arising	More clarity on position of the future of the Office.	K Wilson	Ongoing
3	5 – Matters Arising	Update on Department of Finance Bill, re Commissioner's contract.	K Wilson	Ongoing
4	11 – Audit Recommendations Tracker	Mark item 1 as complete.	E Marley	Complete

Agreed by ARAC Chair D Small

9 June 2026