



SOUTH EASTERN REGIONAL COLLEGE

Minutes of a Meeting of the Education Committee of the Governing Body (the “Committee”)

held on Tuesday 31st March 2026, 5.30pm, via Microsoft Teams

1) Chair’s Business

a) Attendance and Apologies

Present: Ms Majella Corrigan (Chair), Mr John Nugent, Mr Tommy Martin (Principal & CEO), Mr Derek Wilson, Mr Paul Finnegan, Mrs Nuala Reid, Ms Grainne McVeigh, Mr Alan McCrum, Ms Denise Stockman, Mrs Pauline Leeson, Mr Sam Hagen, Mr Mark Brashier

In Attendance: Mrs Heather McKee (Deputy Principal PPE), Mr Gary Ritchie (Deputy Principal Curriculum), Mrs Claire Williamson (Secretary), Ms Victoria Boyd (Head of Training Programmes and Apprenticeships) Items 1-3 only

Apologies: Ms Cathy McKay, Mr Steven Lee

b) Declarations of Conflicts of Interest

The following conflict were declared:

- Ms Corrigan declared she is employed by DENI. She is a current member of the Governing Body of Stranmillis College.
- The Principal & CEO declared his daughter was a part time lecturer at the College.
- Mr Lee declared his wife was a Deputy Head of School at the College.
- The Deputy Principal Curriculum declared his wife and sister-in-law were both employed at the College, and his son is enrolled as a student.
- Mr McCrum declared his wife is employed by ETI.
- Ms Stockman declared she is an Associate Strategic Advisor with SIB

No measures were implemented regarding any of the conflicts disclosed. The Chair reminded members to declare any potential conflicts should they arise during the meeting.

c) Minutes of Previous Meeting

Minutes previously issued to all members.

The committee reviewed the minutes from the meeting held on 27th January 2026 and agreed they were a true and accurate reflection of the meeting. The minutes were agreed on the proposal of Derek Wilson and seconded by Sam Hagen.

d) Matters Arising

Papers previously issued to all members.

The Secretary advised that the report produced by the Deputy Principal PPE to demonstrate the level of duplicate reporting had been reshared in the papers in response to the concerns raised by the Head of School Engineering and Science at the previous meeting.

2) Correspondence

Papers previously issued to all members.

a) Evaluation of special educational needs and/or disabilities provision in South Eastern Regional College

The Principal reported that the verbal feedback provided by ETI at the time of the evaluation was positive and constructive, and this has been reflected in the subsequent individual college letter.

The evaluation recognised that learners within the discrete SEN/D provision are confident, settled and feel safe in calm, well-managed learning environments, with teaching approaches that respond effectively to individual needs. Staff were commended for their strong commitment to learners and the inclusive, respectful culture observed, supported by ongoing professional learning.

Strengths were also identified in the college's approach to personal development, particularly through participation in the Duke of Edinburgh Award, which supports independence and preparation for adulthood. Assessment, support planning and transition arrangements were described as well established and consistently applied, with effective engagement with schools,

parents/carers and external agencies. Inspectors also confirmed that safeguarding arrangements aligned with current statutory guidance at the time of the evaluation

3) Head of School Presentation

The Chair drew attention to the scale, complexity and strategic significance of SEN and apprenticeship provision, noting that this remains one of the most administratively intensive areas of college activity. The Principal emphasised that the funding models are heavily weighted towards compliance, milestones and achievement evidence, creating a disproportionate administrative burden. Despite this, the college has continued to grow provision significantly in recent years, with strong volumes and consistently high-quality outcomes, reflecting the effectiveness and commitment of the team.

The Head of Training Programmes and Apprenticeships outlined the scale of the operation, including a workforce of 24 FTE delivery staff, supported by training support officers, dedicated administrative and financial staff, and assistant managers. Members noted the complexity of managing multiple funding contracts, hourly rates, recontracting exercises, and individual learner attachments, particularly where learners take breaks or leave programmes. It was highlighted that apprenticeship funding is back-loaded, with the majority of income realised in later years based on achievement, creating timing pressures as learner numbers grow.

Members discussed the extensive audit and scrutiny environment in which the provision operates, including ETI evaluations, compliance audits and enhanced quarterly financial reporting requirements. The Chair queried the rationale for three-monthly financial reporting, noting the cumulative impact of scrutiny on capacity. It was recognised that the recent recontracting process required substantial additional work over the summer period, without corresponding recognition or adjustment from the Department.

The Principal advised that senior officials have acknowledged the need to review delivery models and that the Department must begin to better recognise colleges as the primary delivery arm, particularly given the volume of contracts currently awarded to private training organisations. Members noted the governance and accountability risks of arms-length funding models, particularly where colleges are required to repeatedly provide detailed evidence for the same learners and provision.

In relation to SEN and disability support, members noted the significant and growing level of need among learners and the associated cost pressures for the college. It was acknowledged that external support arrangements currently in place are proving more responsive and flexible, particularly given previous recruitment challenges for learning support staff, but that a more

sustainable long-term solution is required. The financial and staffing impact of disability provision was highlighted as a material risk.

The discussion also addressed employer engagement, essential skills requirements and the challenge of aligning funding with employer expectations, particularly in relation to maths and English provision. Members noted the importance of sectoral partnerships and labour market data in shaping provision, supporting curriculum planning and ensuring responsiveness to local and sectoral needs.

The Chair concluded by commending the resilience and professionalism of staff working within this highly pressurised environment and formally noted national recognition achieved by learners and staff, including success at the Northern Ireland Apprenticeship Awards, as evidence of the quality and impact of the provision.

At this juncture the Head of Training Programmes and Apprenticeships left the meeting.

4) Response to Consultation Review of approach to widening participation in Higher Education

Papers previously issued to all members.

The Deputy Principal Planning, Performance and Engagement advised that a draft response to the Department's consultation on the Review of Widening Participation in Higher Education had been circulated, with a submission deadline of 16 April. She emphasised that the response was very much in draft form and welcomed comments from members, noting that final feedback was required by 13 April to allow incorporation.

Members acknowledged that the draft was detailed and reflected extensive prior discussion across a number of committees. The Chair noted that while the proposals set out in the consultation were well-intentioned, several of the suggested approaches would require significantly more staff resource and funding than is currently available, and this issue had been appropriately highlighted in the draft response.

Discussion focused on the proposed sector-wide approach to targets and accountability. The Deputy Principal explained that progression outcomes for SERC learners who move on to universities such as Ulster University and Queen's University Belfast are counted within university metrics rather than SERC's, despite the intensive support provided by the college to enable this progression. Members agreed this reinforced the case for recognising system-wide contribution rather than institution specific targets.

Members also discussed changing learner behaviour and aspirations, with concern noted that traditional degree pathways are becoming less attractive for some learners due to cost, relevance and employment considerations. It was noted that the draft response appropriately reflects the need for flexibility, local context, and alignment between ambition, governance expectations and available resource.

The Chair concluded that the draft provided a robust and balanced response, clearly articulating support in principle for widening participation while setting out the practical and resourcing constraints that must be addressed if policy ambition is to be realised.

5) Strategy Day

Papers previously issued to all members.

The Deputy Principal Planning, Performance and Engagement outlined the draft agenda for the Strategic Planning Day scheduled for SERC Strategy Day – Monday 18 May 2026, noting that the session with Janis Scallon, Director of FE, DfE, and Graeme Wilkinson, Director of Skills, DfE, would provide an important opportunity to set out the Department’s vision for Further Education and to enable focused discussion with members following the opening session.

Members emphasised the importance of using the morning discussion not only to hear the Departmental perspective, but also to reflect on what had been learned from the exchange, including how emerging priorities align with SERC’s strategic direction. It was noted that demographic change and shifting learner demand would be key themes, and reference was made to previous sessions where both FE and skills perspectives had been present. Members discussed whether the invitation list should be extended to ensure appropriate senior representation from the Department, subject to confirmation of attendance.

The discussion also explored strategic choices and prioritisation. Members noted the importance of being clear about what the college is prepared to stop or do differently in the context of constrained resources, acknowledging earlier commentary that strategy must involve conscious tradeoffs. It was agreed that this conversation sits closely with affordability, sustainability and value-for-money considerations, and should be informed by both financial capacity and strategic impact.

The Chair highlighted that the Strategic Planning Day should create space for open, evidence-based discussion on what the college can realistically deliver, what activities may no longer be affordable, and where effort and resource should be focused to achieve the greatest impact over the next planning cycle.

6) Quality Requirements

Papers previously issued to all members.

The Deputy Principal Curriculum presented a report outlining the scale and complexity of qualification quality assurance arrangements across the college, noting the significant impact of external scrutiny, particularly at Level 2. Members confirmed that this had been considered previously by the internal board and acknowledged that Essential Skills provision has been disproportionately affected by the level and frequency of scrutiny, given its integration across multiple programmes.

Members emphasised the importance of clearly articulating the purpose and rationale for quality assurance requirements, both in terms of regulatory compliance and safeguarding academic standards. In response to questions, it was confirmed that the work underway would inform planning for the next academic year. It was also noted that revalidation activity with the Open University is currently in progress, including consideration of whether there is sustained demand in specific curriculum areas, and that not all areas of study are affected equally.

Members discussed the volume of assurance evidence currently required by the Department and questioned whether there may be opportunities to reduce duplication by building assurance more systematically into programme design, potentially through recognised external frameworks or independent assurance sources. It was suggested that this should be considered within the Internal Audit programme, with a view to making assurance more proportionate and less labor-intensive.

Members noted that awarding organisations vary significantly in their quality assurance and administrative requirements. While there is broad commonality in expected outputs, some awarding organisations require more manual and labor-intensive processes, increasing operational workload across learner and examination registrations, result claims and certification processes.

The Principal advised that the college will continue to apply a critical and proportionate approach to curriculum rationalisation and consolidation, taking account of quality requirements, provider resilience and the availability of suitable alternatives, while ensuring that standards and learner outcomes are not compromised.

7) College Development Plan

Papers previously issued to all members.

a) CDP Update

The Deputy Principal (Planning, Performance and Engagement) presented a summary update on progress against the College Development Plan, based on the January CDR lift submitted to the

Department. It was noted that there had been no substantive change since the last meeting, with the next formal update scheduled to reflect the March CDR lift.

Members noted that, compared to previous years, there had been less challenge from the Department in relation to student numbers. The Deputy Principal advised that the current focus includes adult learners, with ongoing evaluation of what is working well and where improvements may be required. Overall performance was reported as being broadly on track to meet key performance indicators, with recruitment remaining stable and progress against adult participation targets continuing as planned.

b) Applications and Enrolments Report

The Deputy Principal Curriculum presented the applications and enrolments update, providing an overview of recruitment trends and current enrolment levels. Members noted that evening provision continues to be an area of concern and is under active review as part of ongoing curriculum planning.

It was reported that the College has begun tracking applications earlier in the recruitment cycle. Members noted that this data is heavily caveated, as not all applications convert to enrolments. At this stage, applications are approximately 700 ahead of the same point last year. Priority 1 application conversion rates have been reviewed across the past three years, with average conversion rates of approximately 25% observed across schools.

Members noted the routine enrolments update. Full-time enrolments currently stand at 5,158, representing a 4% increase compared to 2024/25. Skills for Life and Work enrolments totalled 175 (-12%), with 59 learners enrolled on the new FE SkillsLink programme. Apprenticeships NI enrolments were reported as seven above the same point last year. Further Education provision at Levels 0–3 totalled 3,036 enrolments (+8%), Traineeships stood at 1,026 (+9%), and Higher Education enrolments were reported as 406 (+14%), exceeding the internal projection of 380 and remaining within the accepted variance against the allocated DfE MaSN of 419.

Part-time enrolments were reported as 7,462, an increase of 323 learners (+4.5%) compared to 2024/25, largely attributable to Business Services provision, which will continue to be monitored. Higher Level Apprenticeship enrolments showed a slight reduction (265 compared with 273 in the previous year). Curriculum efficiency activity remains ongoing, with the average full-time class size reported as 10.78.

c) QIP Update

The Head of Quality Excellence and Development presented the Quality Improvement Plan (QIP) updates, including progress against the Foundation Learning curriculum model. Members noted

that the vast majority of actions across plans remain on track, providing assurance on delivery and impact.

It was confirmed that the Traineeship and Essential Skills elements within the programme were developed at the request of the Department. Of the 73 actions contained within the Traineeship QIP, 70 have been achieved, with the remaining actions primarily linked to attendance and retention. Members noted that current attendance stands at approximately 86% and agreed this will remain a key area of focus.

In response to discussion on GCSE provision, the Principal clarified that the offer of GCSEs emerged from external reviews and is not mandatory; the College's commitment was to make GCSE provision available to a defined number of learners as an option. It was also noted that some learners who initially opted for GCSE provision have since requested to transfer back to Essential Skills pathways.

Members welcomed the summary tables within the reports, noting that while there is some duplication between the Traineeship and Essential Skills QIPs, the format clearly highlights areas of achievement and progress. The Chair commented positively on the structure and queried whether this reporting format could be adopted for Departmental reporting to avoid adding further workload. In response, it was confirmed that the Department is increasingly requesting summary-level information, which is already being provided through dashboards, and that the current format is intended to serve a dual purpose.

Attention was drawn to the increasing reporting burden, particularly the requirement to produce sector-level reports following Easter, which was acknowledged as a significant challenge. It was noted that there are currently multiple individual QIPs alongside a sector plan, all of which are being coordinated centrally, creating risks around duplication and confusion between separate plans.

The Principal commented that recent indications from the Department suggest a preference for more concise, high-level QIPs, potentially in the form of one-page summaries focusing on key issues, rather than detailed narrative reports. Members discussed the growing emphasis on sectoral reporting, noting that while intended to simplify reporting, it often requires colleges to undertake additional collation exercises, which is not an efficient use of resource.

Members agreed that several of the issues raised are systemic rather than college-specific and should be addressed collectively. Reference was made to recent discussions with senior officials, where recognition had been given to the bureaucratic nature of current reporting arrangements and the impact this has on delivery. Members suggested that there may be an opportunity, through forthcoming FE review discussions, to propose a more streamlined and proportionate approach to assurance and reporting.

The Committee discussed whether a more proactive approach could be taken, including setting out a proposed reporting model from a governance perspective. Members agreed that any

correspondence or position on this matter should be led by the Governing Body rather than the College Management Team.

In concluding discussion, members emphasised that the issue is not the level of assurance required, but the duplication and complexity of reporting mechanisms. It was acknowledged that the Head of Quality Excellence and Development is operating under significant pressure and that the cumulative administrative burden poses risks to capacity and delivery if not addressed at system level.

8) Higher Education / Further Education

Papers previously issued to all members.

In presented the HERB minutes for review the DPC highlighted that the approach taken to the “They Said / We Did” items was different to previous practice and had been particularly helpful in surfacing examples of good practice and identifying opportunities to spread effective approaches more consistently across Schools. Members agreed that the discussion provided a rich opportunity to hear directly what learners are saying and to reflect on how feedback is being acted upon at programme and School level.

The Chair also noted the positive increase in UCAS applications and highlighted the widening geographic spread of applicants, which was welcomed as evidence of increased reach and visibility of the College’s higher education offer through the UCAS pilot.

Agreed: The HERB minutes from 20th February were reviewed and approved on the proposal of Nuala Reid and seconded by Alan McCrum.

9) Items for Information

Papers previously issued to all members.

a) Safeguarding Report

The Deputy Principal Planning, Performance and Engagement advised that the report provided a very comprehensive executive summary and thanked the Learner Welfare team for the clarity of presentation. Members noted that the scale of demand described, particularly in relation to Learning Support, is now well rehearsed, with 1,381 learners currently supported, and reflects a sustained increase in complexity across the learner population.

Discussion focused on the rise in behavioural issues, with clarification provided that such concerns are frequently linked to underlying Special Educational Needs. Members acknowledged that this aligns with the wider data contained within the report and noted that the design and implementation of the universal classroom model is already having a positive impact on some cohorts where it has been piloted.

Members commented that the headline figures remained stark and continue to highlight significant pressures within the safeguarding and learner welfare system. It was noted that the College is now seeing the longer-term impacts of disrupted education during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly among more vulnerable learners, which may be contributing to current behaviours and wellbeing challenges.

In response to a question regarding bullying, it was confirmed that reported incidents relate to peer-to-peer behaviour involving students within the College. Members noted this assurance and the importance of ongoing monitoring and early intervention in such cases.

Members noted the update.

b) Business, Innovation and Partnerships report

The Deputy Principal Planning, Performance and Engagement talked to the written report and advised that the report reflected the end-of-year position and confirmed that the full budget allocation for the year had been drawn down. Members noted the overall scale of engagement and funding secured, with figures providing assurance on delivery and impact. The Committee commended the performance of the team, noting it to be very high-performing and the outputs achieved to be particularly impressive.

Discussion highlighted the effectiveness of the Marketing function, with members noting the success of recent campaigns, awards activity and events. The strong attendance at open evenings and the level of external recognition secured through awards were welcomed. Members also noted the positive role played by sponsorship in supporting both the Student Excellence Awards and the newly introduced Staff Excellence Awards.

The Chair sought assurance that the Marketing team's three-year plan is fully aligned with the College's strategic direction. It was confirmed that the plan has been developed explicitly to support the College's strategic objectives and to strengthen visibility, reputation and engagement over the medium term.

10) Policies for Review

a) HE Admissions Policy Review

Members noted the HE Admissions Policy and confirmed that it had undergone a thorough review. Following this evaluation, it was agreed that the policy remains fit for purpose and that no substantive amendments are required at this time.

11) Any Other Business

The Chair welcomed Ms. Stockman to her first Governing Body meeting after her recent appointment, expressing hope that she would enjoy the work, which is both challenging and varied.

Date and Time of Next Meeting

The next meeting will take place on Tuesday 2nd June 2026 at 5.30pm, Lisburn Campus.

The Chair closed the meeting at 7.45pm