



SOUTH EASTERN REGIONAL COLLEGE

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

held on Tuesday 27th January 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. Cathy McKay, Mr Steven Lee, Mr Mark Brashier

In Attendance: Mrs Heather McKee (Deputy Principal PPE), Mr Gary Ritchie (Deputy Principal Curriculum), Mrs. Claire Williamson (Secretary), Mr. Paddy McShane (Item 3 only) Head of School Engineering and Science

Apologies: Mrs Pauline Leeson, Mr Sam Hagen.

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.

No action was taken in relation to any of the declared conflicts. 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 minutes of the meeting held on 6 November 2025 were proposed by Derek Wilson and seconded by Nuala Reid and approved.

d) Matters Arising

No outstanding actions were noted.

2) Correspondence

Papers previously issued to all members.

a) Traineeships (Level2) NI, academic year 2024/25 briefing slides

The Committee received an update from the Deputy Principal Curriculum on the recent DfE briefing regarding Traineeships.

A briefing was provided by the Department for the Economy (DfE) regarding the traineeship statistics they intend to publish.

The Department reported 3,000 starts for 2023/24, of which 800 were SERC learners. Starts for the current year have exceeded 1,000, with 974 trainees enrolled at the time of reporting.

Attention was drawn to final year performance. Vocational performance remains strong; however, the Department highlighted Essential Skills (ES) achievement. ETI is measuring the proportion of learners required to achieve Level 2, and SERC's figure was 20%. It was noted that Slide 16 shows a significant discrepancy between what colleges were asked to report and the metric applied. DfE referenced 83% literacy and numeracy, although this does not align with the metric used in SERC's ETI evaluation. Vocational performance remains strong; however, the Department highlighted Essential Skills (ES) achievement. ETI is measuring the proportion of learners required to achieve Level 2, and SERC's figure was 20%. It was noted that Slide 16 shows a significant discrepancy between what colleges were asked to report and the metric applied. DfE referenced 83% literacy and numeracy, although this does not align with the metric used in SERC's ETI evaluation.

The Principal emphasised that SERC had previously disputed ETI's measurement approach, noting that the statistics were overly harsh and based on a different methodology.

A Member queried whether any further action was required regarding ETI and whether the methodology and reporting should be formally aligned. The Principal confirmed this action had already been taken. Meetings had occurred with departmental statisticians and SERC had clearly raised the issue.

A Member asked whether SERC measured outcomes in the same way as other colleges. The Principal confirmed that all colleges use the standard retention, achievement and success measures.

The Chair referenced the substantial body of work carried out by the Head of Quality, Excellence and Development and his team in producing a detailed set of actions in response to ETI feedback previously presented to the previous FE Director. Concerns had been raised at that time, and the Chair sought an update on whether the feedback submitted after the last meeting had gained any traction.

The Deputy Principal Planning, Performance and Engagement reported that a very detailed Quality Improvement Plan (QIP) had been prepared. The FE Director had commented that such detailed plans were not required and that college-level documentation should be more succinct. She had requested an amended, simplified version; however, following further internal discussion within the Department, SERC was instructed in early January to submit the original detailed QIP. As a result, significant streamlining work completed by the Head of QED was rendered redundant, and the original, detailed QIP discussed with the Committee has now been submitted.

The Principal noted that, while the Department had now reverted to the detailed version, the overall process had not been managed well and had caused confusion. The Principal expressed hope that future evaluations would not be as intensive, noting that this particular evaluation was an outlier compared with others.

Members recalled that this matter had been discussed extensively in November and felt the Governing Body had been making progress at that time. Members stressed the importance of pursuing the issue, particularly with regard to numeracy attainment rates, which may indicate wider issues with the current assessment model.

The committee suggested this would be a useful matter to discuss with the new Further Education Director.

The Principal confirmed that a new FED was now in place. The earlier confusion regarding the previous FE Director's position had been clarified, and there was now acceptance within the Department that Essential Skills is not fit for purpose. Proposals are being developed regarding how SERC believes the process should move forward, and good progress is being made.

3) Head of School Presentation – Engineering & Science

The Head of School joined the meeting and provided an overview of the school including staffing, curriculum, employer engagement and pharmacy provision. Key discussion points included:

The Head of School, Paddy McShane, presented an overview of activity within Engineering and Science, noting the strong professional, pastoral and dedicated staff team. During the presentation the following points were discussed:

Pharmacy Provision

- SRC and Belfast Met are seeking to expand into Pharmacy Technician training; SERC hopes existing sector contacts will support learner retention.
- All learners are employed, but employment is conditional on passing the qualification.
- Engagement continues with community pharmacists; the qualification is intensive.
- SRC holds a direct link with Almac.
- Members noted upcoming skills demand through Belfast Region City Deal and QUB investment and suggested exploring alignment.
- Opportunities remain in primary care, and discussions with PHA have been positive.

School Management and Staffing

- The Head of School advise the committee of staffing challenges and advised gaps in the School Management Team are due to VSS.
- The Principal confirmed strong commitment to departmental constraints regarding the VSS process, which restrict recruitment and create workload pressures.
- A review has been completed within the school, and improvements are being implemented.
- Staffing numbers are monitored by the Department; further planning will take place once the three-year budget is confirmed.
- The Governing Body reiterated the need to protect core delivery and maintain oversight of the review.

ETI, Workload and Observations

- Concerns were raised regarding ETI-related workload and classroom observations.
- The traineeship issues have been raised with the FED, and engagement will continue with the new Directorate.

Programme Areas and Learner Feedback

- Low student feedback scores in certain areas were acknowledged. Actions are underway, particularly relating to tutorial access.

- Members suggested exploring external CPD sources; links with relevant contacts will be developed.

Workload Pressures and Reporting Burden

- The Principal highlighted significant pressures due to reduced staffing structures and unchanged reporting expectations.
- Staff continue to operate beyond capacity; without increased funding, reporting requirements must be reduced or reprioritised.
- This will be raised with the new FED.

Action: Add staffing and reporting pressures to the agenda for the meeting with the new FED.

Action: Share workload and reporting data (including duplication of reporting spreadsheet) at the next meeting.

4) SERC Strategy

Papers previously issued to all members.

The DPPPE reported that the Strategy Document had been submitted to the Department for review in October 2025. On 6 January, the Department provided comments by email, and a summary of the key points was included in the cover note.

The DPPPE noted:

- Most comments were minor narrative changes.
- Some suggestions were useful and have been incorporated.
- Several comments relating to ministerial priorities were not appropriate for inclusion.
- As with previous CDP submissions, it appeared the Department's response had been collated from multiple internal sources.

The DPPPE reviewed both the Department's suggestions and their own proposed adjustments and updated the document accordingly. The developer reformatted the revised version. Minor typographical errors have been identified and will be corrected.

The DPPPE outlined the main changes:

- Inclusion of an introductory section as requested.
- Additional narrative on consultation processes (page 5), which was considered helpful.
- The Department requested further narrative on the Minister's four priorities; however, the DPPPE emphasised that the purpose of the Strategy Document is to set out the how the

College will deliver on the Minister's priorities and therefore not all suggested changes were accepted.

Agreed; The committee reviewed and approved the requested changes to the Strategy document on the proposal of Grainne McVeigh and seconded by Cathy McKay.

5) College Development Plan

Papers previously issued to all members.

a) 25/26 November CDP Progress Report

The Deputy Principal PPE provided updates on KPIs, recruitment, enrolment trends and ETI feedback. The Committee noted strong progress in Full-Time and Apprenticeship provision and positive ETI outcomes.

b) Applications and Enrolments

The Deputy Principal Curriculum provided an update on recruitment, noting that full-time enrolments remain very positive. Across almost all areas, full-time recruitment is ahead of the same point last year. The only exception is Skills for Life and Work; however, the introduction of the new Skills Link pathway has moved approximately 59 eligible learners into this provision, resulting in a positive overall position.

The DPC highlighted the following information to members:

- Apprenticeship performance remains a strong area for the College.
 - Although employer support for apprenticeships is falling regionally, learner demand continues to rise.
 - Despite this challenging landscape, SERC continues to grow year on year, demonstrating strong employer relationships across the catchment area.
 - The College is currently seven enrolments behind the same point last year; however, a significant number of Level 2 completers will progress to Level 3 in February, and it is expected that enrolments will exceed last year's total
-
- Part-time enrolments are currently 570 higher than at the same time last year.
 - This increase is primarily due to unfunded business-purpose provision.
 - Part-time evening provision continues to decline, reflecting shifts in market demand.
 - As the College develops the new three-year plan, consideration is being given to market requirements, including the development of micro-credentials and suites of credentials with EY.

The DPC advised that the next update onwards, applications for September 2026 entry are expected to begin appearing.

The Principal advised that discussions had taken place regarding improving the clarity of enrolment reporting and strengthening its links with the CDP. Some classifications and timelines differ across reporting structures, and work is underway to reconcile these.

Action: The Deputy Principal Curriculum will bring forward a more user-friendly, clearly linked reconciliation showing how application and enrolment data aligns with departmental reporting.

c) Verbal update on inspection

The DPC provided a verbal update on the ETI report for Skills for Life and Work, noting that the feedback was very positive overall.

The Department recognised the benefits of the College's approach. While there are always areas for improvement, the overall findings presented a strong and positive picture.

The Chair noted that the next stage will be publication of a sectoral report. No timeline has been provided, but the updated report will be brought back to the Governing Body once available.

A Member commented that the feedback was powerful and reflected the strong teamwork within the School. Learners' voices were strongly represented, including a substantial increase in learner participation and the inclusion of parent feedback.

The Committee highlighted comments in the report regarding leadership and communication, it was noted that sharing feedback widely can help staff feel valued and bridge communication gaps and members

6) Higher Education / Further Education

Papers previously issued to all members.

Action: The HERB Minutes (14 November 2025) were approved on the proposal of Paul Finnegan and seconded by Nuala Reid.

7) Items for Information

Papers previously issued to all members.

a) Safeguarding Report

The Committee noted safeguarding updates, increased learner complexity, progression data to HE, enrichment activity and funding achievements.

The Committee noted that the number of Cause for Concern referrals continues to rise. While overall trends remain similar to previous periods, the volume and complexity of cases have increased significantly. Many students are now presenting with multiple overlapping issues, such as autism combined with family or financial difficulties, all of which are affecting behaviour in class and increasing the workload for support staff.

Campus Managers continue to be the first point of contact for staff and report that their role is increasingly taking on elements of site-based mentoring. Staff do not always know how to reach their Deputy Head of School, which places further pressure on Campus Managers to provide immediate support. Work is ongoing to develop a training suite for academic staff through Academic Staff Development, with the aim of providing additional scaffolding and support to help staff manage complex and sensitive student matters.

It was reported that nine students have presented recently with suicidal thoughts or self-harm concerns. Questions were raised about the appropriate procedures for responding to immediate risk, including whether staff have access to expert advice and what actions should be taken while awaiting police or Social Services involvement.

The DPPPE provided an overview of the current support mechanisms which include First Aid Rooms on each campus and Mental Health First Aiders, who primarily support staff but often intervene when students present in crisis. All Campus Managers are trained in safeguarding, and Cause for Concern cases are monitored by them to ensure consistency. Staff are encouraged to bring students to the First Aid Room, where phones are available for immediate contact with Inspire for mental health support. Overall, the group agreed that monitoring arrangements are robust, with further work underway to strengthen support for staff and students.

b) Engagement Report

The Engagement Report was presented, offering a succinct overview within the Executive Summary and highlighting the wide range of activity across the Students' Union, Enterprise Team, Peace Plus and Careers. Attention was drawn in particular to the penultimate page, which outlines UCAS destinations for 2025 entry for SERC students. It was noted that while the College would like to retain more of its own students, it is still very positive that over 230 students have been supported and enabled to progress to higher education. The top ten destinations include 96 students progressing to Ulster University and 63 to Queen's University Belfast.

This data links to the ongoing review of widening access to higher education. The College reiterated the argument previously raised during the review: that performance measures had focused solely on the number of students from deprived communities (quintiles 1 and 2) entering higher education, without acknowledging that many of these students reach Ulster University and Queen's University specifically because of the College's work in supporting their progression. The College highlighted that without its input, a significant proportion of quintile 1 and 2 students would not be represented in those institutions. As a result of this argument, the measurement framework has now changed to better recognise the impact of the College's support and the efforts made by staff to ensure strong progression pathways.

c) Business, Innovation and Partnerships Report

Moving onto the final report the DPPPE highlighted the report is a testament to the work being done across the College with particular emphasis on the wide range of enrichment activities, bursaries and programmes delivered. Much of this work is driven by the programme development function within Business Support, which continues to secure significant external funding. This includes almost £44,000 in bursaries and scholarships and close to £14,000 to support science workshops. A number of enrichment activities, including those delivered by the hospitality team, have also benefited. Business Services regularly seek small grants that can be used to support food poverty initiatives and a range of PBL activity, and this was noted as an important aspect of their contribution.

The team also continues to submit high quality award applications, and it was confirmed that the College has been shortlisted as a finalist in the Bacon Awards under the Education for Sustainable Development category. Judging took place at Holywood Campus on 13 January, with very positive feedback received. The panel responded well to the Living Lab concept, the sharing of good practice across sectors and the contributions of industry and community sector partners, several of whom attended, and were highly complementary of the College's work. Results will be announced in March, and the team remains hopeful of a strong outcome.

award applications, and it was confirmed that the College has been shortlisted as a finalist in the Bacon Awards under the Education for Sustainable Development category. Judging took place at Holywood Courthouse on 13 January, with very positive feedback received. The panel responded well to the Living Lab concept, the sharing of good practice across sectors and the contributions of AFE partners, several of whom attended and were highly complementary of the College's work. Results will be announced in March, and the team remains hopeful of a strong outcome.

Overall, the report provided a comprehensive overview of the work of Business Services, which continues to leverage substantial external funding and deliver a wide range of impactful activity. Significant achievements were noted, particularly around green skills development, with

Stephen McGreevy highlighted for his leadership in this area. Members commented on the impressive volume of activity and the continued ability to secure funding opportunities.

8) Policies for Review

Papers previously issued to all members.

The Committee noted the Safeguarding, Care and Welfare Policy had been reviewed and no substantive changes had been made.

9) Any Other Business

Papers previously issued to all members.

a) Consultation Review of approach to widening participation in Higher Education

The Committee noted the consultation and briefly discussed the sector approach.

Action: Sector-wide policy alignment updates will be returned to the Committee once agreed.

Date and Time of Next Meeting

The next meeting will take place on Tuesday 31st March 2026 at 5.30pm, Lisburn Campus.

The Chair closed the meeting at 7.45pm.