



SOUTH EASTERN REGIONAL COLLEGE

Minutes of a Meeting of the Education Committee of the Governing Body (the "Committee")
held on Tuesday 6th November 2025 at 17:30, Lisburn Campus

1. Chairs Business

a) Attendance and apologies

Present: Mr John Nugent (Chair of the Governing Body) Mr Tommy Martin (Principal & CEO) Mr Samuel Hagen, Mr Alan McCrum, Ms Majella Corrigan, Mr Derek Wilson, Mr Steven Lee, Mrs Nuala Reid, Mrs Pauline Leeson (via Microsoft teams) Items 1-4 only, Ms Grainne McVeigh, Mr Paul Finnegan, Mr Mark Brashier

In attendance: Mrs Heather McKee (Deputy Principal Planning Performance and Engagement) Mr Colin McGuckin (Deputy CEO), Mrs Claire Williamson (Secretary to the Governing Body), Mr Gary Ritchie (Deputy Principal Curriculum), Mr Noel O'Hare (Head of Quality, Excellence and Development), Ms Louise Watson (FE Director, DfE), Ms Aurla McLoughlin (Head of School Arts and Sports) Item 4 only

Apologies: Ms Cathy McKay

In the Chair: Ms M Corrigan

The Chair welcomed the FE Director to the meeting and thanked her for taking the time to come to the meeting.

b) Declarations of Conflict of Interests

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 Education Committee meeting, held on 23rd September 2025

Minutes previously issued to all members.

The committee reviewed the minutes from the meeting held on 23rd September 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 Nuala Reid.

d) Matters Arising

The Secretary highlighted there were no outstanding actions from the previous meeting.

e) Committee Annual Report

The Chair referred to the report and reminded members that this was the first report of its kind to demonstrate how the committee are compliant with the relevant clauses within the Partnership Agreement. She highlighted the key areas within the report and asked members to indicate if they were content to approve the report which will then feed into the overarching Governance report.

Agreed: The committee reviewed and agreed the annual report for adoption by the Governing Body on the proposal of Alan McCrum and seconded by Steven Lee.

2) Correspondence

Papers previously issued to all members.

a) Review of College Traineeship Improvement Plan

The Chair asked members to note this correspondence will be discussed in detail under agenda item 5C.

3) Director of Further Education Update

At this juncture on the invitation of the Chair, the FE Director addressed the committee and provided a brief verbal update on the Departmental strategies, current priorities and the ministerial agenda, the following points were highlighted:

- **Economic Performance:**

Economic input has increased by 12.1% above pre-pandemic levels, with cross-border trade showing a positive trend.

- **Skills and Education Challenges:**

Employers continue to face challenges in the skills space. The Department is preparing for a three-year budget settlement:

- Public consultation will run for 12 weeks (December–January).
- Some uncertainty remains regarding the Chancellor's November budget.
- An additional monitoring round will take place in December.

- **Corporate Planning:**

First opportunity to adopt a three-year approach to corporate planning, enabling longer-term prioritisation. Funding pressures will require difficult decisions on priorities.

- **Budget Overview:**

- Annual budget: £700m, with approximately £200m allocated to FE colleges.
- Emphasis on evidence-based collaboration.
- Department under significant scrutiny: Audit Office report on skills, departmental accounts, and internal processes.

Skills and Labour Market Update:

- **Key Statistics:**

- Inactivity rate: 26% – implications for FE colleges.
- 63,500 students enrolled in FE colleges in NI.
- 61,000 students enrolled in higher education institutions.
- Apprenticeships have grown significantly over the past four years.

- **Challenges:**

- Persistent disability employment gap.
- Degree-level qualifications correlate with employment parity for individuals with disabilities compared to Level 2.
- Lifelong learning remains a priority.

Forward Look:

- Alignment with Ministerial priorities and significant effort required.
- Opportunities for FE sector:

- Increased apprenticeship uptake.
- Addressing diversity challenges.
- Implementation of Green Skills Action Plan.
- Future skills development and employer engagement.
- **Regional and Sectoral Considerations:**
 - Magee campus and sub-regional presence critical to meet locality needs.
 - SEN provision review.
 - Collaboration on curriculum development post-16 in line with DE and Transforming Education agenda.

In summary the FE Director advised that the Department faces a positive economic outlook but significant challenges in skills provision, funding prioritisation, and addressing long-standing inequalities. Strategic planning and collaboration will be critical to delivering ministerial priorities and supporting FE and HE sectors.

The Chair thanked the FE Director for the detailed update and enquired what is the Department's long-term strategy to address the significant demographic decline projected post-2028?

The FE Director advised that ETI's current review of college provision is timely. DfE are aligning this with forward priorities, moving beyond the previous SEN focus to ensure robust post-16 pathways that meet learner and employer needs.

The Director added the Transforming Education agenda is progressing rapidly. DfE are actively engaging with Department of Education colleagues to ensure alignment, particularly around curriculum planning and progression routes from post-primary into FE and HE.

The Department recognise the projected decline in post-16 numbers post-2028. Work is underway to model the impact and develop a longer-term planning cycle that addresses capacity, funding, and curriculum flexibility.

The Director further added that lifelong learning and micro-credentials will play a critical role in mitigating demographic pressures.

4) Head of School Presentation

At this juncture the Head of School for Arts and Sport joined the meeting.

On the invitation of the Chair the Head of School (HoS) provided an overview of the school including the structure, the schools performance and current challenges.

In discussion after the presentation the following points were noted:

- The Committee noted the challenges associated with the recent restructure and acknowledged that, after a year, the changes are beginning to embed, providing greater stability. It was reported that Programme Leaders have demonstrated resilience and a positive, solution-focused approach. Managers now have increased time and space to develop curriculum, which has strengthened the position of the organisation.
- The Committee discussed the impact of staff reductions on educational quality. It was noted that, despite these changes, results indicate no adverse effect on the quality of provision. Staff have shown flexibility and taken on additional duties, and morale has improved as opportunities have arisen from the changes.
- The Committee considered approaches to improving Level 2 numeracy outcomes. It was confirmed that best practice has been reviewed and confidence remains in the pedagogy skills of staff. Level 1 achievements continue to be strong. Strategies include front-loading Essential Skills numeracy to address lost learning, collaboration with Awarding Bodies to deliver short blocks for GCSE repeats, and sharing best practice among colleagues. Concerns were raised regarding inequity for SEN learners in Essential Skills examinations compared to GCSE, where additional support such as scribes and readers is available.
- The Committee discussed whether current assessment models are appropriate for Essential Skills learners. It was agreed that broader consultation with employers, learners, and regulators is required. It was noted that higher education institutions are moving away from exam-based assessment. The potential to modularise exams and explore vocational integration was highlighted. Awarding Organisations' defensive stance was noted, and the need for analysis of exam papers to identify variance in difficulty was raised.
- The Committee noted that the sector-wide Quality Improvement Plan will require each college to identify two vocational areas to embed numeracy, ensuring contextualised learning without creating excessive workload. Feedback will be gathered through induction and trainee surveys.
- In response to a member's question the Principal advised of opportunities to collaborate with NI Screen and Studio Ulster to strengthen links between curriculum and industry needs through City Deal initiatives.

At this juncture the HoS left the meeting.

5) College Development Plan

Papers previously issued to all members.

- a) CDP 24/25 Progress Report

The DPPPE presented the draft College Development Plan and highlighted the Executive Summary for the Progress Report and ERC. It was noted that the report highlights areas of strong performance alongside underperformance. KPI measures 2.1–2.6 were impacted by the late receipt of the Peace

Plus letter of offer, which affected overall student numbers. All other KPIs were met except for MASN. A table was included showing October CDR lift figures, with the highest success rate recorded at 87%. Figures will be verified through RAS checks. Members welcomed the positive data, noting the improvement compared to previous reporting periods.

The Committee discussed the timing of reporting cycles. It was explained that final figures are consolidated in October, and there is ongoing discussion with the Department regarding the removal of the September report to avoid discrepancies between CDR lift figures.

B) CDP 2025/26

The Committee reviewed the 2025/26 plan (Version 4), which includes updates following receipt of letters of offer and revisions to the finance table. KPI 1.1 delivery targets were queried, and it was confirmed that reductions were linked to budget changes at the time, which have since been adjusted following additional funding. KPI 2.3 was highlighted for its breakdown of individuals engaged in social inclusion programmes, aligning with strategic priorities. Staff utilisation pressures were noted, particularly in light of increased enrolments, and the move to allow increased management time across Schools was welcomed as a measure to support teams.

C) Applications and Enrolments report

The Deputy Principal Curriculum talked to the written report and highlighted the current enrolment figures. Further discussion focused on Full-Time provision, which remains positive, showing 3% growth compared to the same time last year and 8% growth compared to two years prior. Areas of concern include Skills for Life and Work, primarily due to new provision under Skills Link. Apprenticeship NI figures are currently below target but are expected to exceed projections following February Level 2 progressions. Micro-credentials are being aligned with industry feedback and ministerial priorities to ensure responsiveness to learner needs.

The Committee noted a 5% decline in FE enrolments, primarily in engineering within the Downpatrick campus. While Level 2 learners progressing to Level 3 will provide some uplift, broader employer engagement and upcoming Apprenticeship NI Week are expected to drive interest for future cycles. The importance of maintaining capacity while managing headcount reductions was discussed, with recognition that pinch points may arise. The next delivery plan will span three years, with a focus on resource sharing across the sector and maximising estate utilisation to anticipate future trends.

Examples of practical engagement were shared, including carpentry students producing theatre doors, and the Committee emphasised the need to monitor staff utilisation to avoid over-reliance on goodwill. Recruitment strategies were discussed, including enhanced use of social media and promotion of vocational pathways as equal alternatives to academic routes. Marketing efforts were commended, with acknowledgment of challenges in engaging younger audiences and the need to target parents. A revised social media strategy is being implemented, and compliance with the College's regulated social media policy was confirmed.

c) QIP update

The Committee received an update on the Quality Improvement Plan (QIP) from the Head of Quality, Excellence and Development. He began by advising that papers were submitted late to the committee for review, he was appreciative of the committee's patience so that he could provide the most recent version.

The Head of QED advised that feedback was received from the Department on 20 October. Initial disappointment was expressed given the significant effort invested in the plan. Concerns were raised regarding governance comments, as no prior negative feedback had been received from ETI or the Department on governance structures, which remain robust and supported by strong IMPSM processes. The feedback contained factual inaccuracies, including a reference to 20% retention being below sector average, whereas current retention is 65%. ETI visited 12 classes, with 11 reported as highly effective, representing 92.5% positive feedback, which was confirmed verbally during ETI discussions.

While some valid points were acknowledged, particularly regarding KPI setting, it was agreed that additional KPIs could be included. Care must be taken to ensure KPIs are not perceived as attributing blame to staff. The QIP has been restructured and updated to reflect feedback, including the addition of a column for RAG status as requested by the Committee, and mapping of criteria in the appendix. Objectives now include employer satisfaction measures, and a phased approach to learner profiles has been proposed following discussions with Lorna Warren. The revised plan incorporates additional measures and addresses all feedback received.

The FE Director addressed the Head of QED and expressed her disappointment in the feedback that had been provided. She assured the Head of QED that this is entirely the College's plan and she would pick it up with Departmental colleagues.

The Committee expressed disappointment at the nature of the feedback and reiterated that the purpose of quality planning is to support organisational improvement rather than impose unnecessary requirements. Concerns were raised regarding expectations placed on teams to resolve systemic issues without financial support, which was considered an overreach. It was emphasised that the plan remains the College's own and should serve to motivate staff and drive improvement.

Members commended the plan, noting its relevance and alignment with strategic priorities. It was acknowledged that some activities contributing to improvement may not be formally measured but are recognised by the Governing Body and Education Committee. The importance of continuous improvement and sectoral learning was highlighted, alongside the need for consistency between verbal and written feedback from ETI. The FE Director advised that discussions have taken place with ETI, and further discussions with the Department are planned to ensure alignment on priorities and approaches.

The Committee noted that colleges are being asked to address issues relating to qualification design rather than delivery and agreed that greater clarity is required on roles and responsibilities between colleges, delivery partners, and the Department. Actions will be undertaken within the quality improvement space to address these concerns. The Committee reaffirmed its commitment to improving Essential Skills provision for learners and welcomed constructive feedback to support this

goal. It was noted that the revised QIP was available be submitted on 21 November. However, the Director of FE advised she would revert to the College on this.

6) Higher Education/Further Education

Members noted the next HERB meeting will take place on 14th November 2025.

7) Items for Information

Papers previously issued to all members.

a) Safeguarding report

The DPPPE highlighted the executive summary to members and advised that Cause for Concern reports remain consistent with the same period over the last 2–3 years, indicating a steady state.

Members noted that currently, 2,447 students have disclosed learning support needs and are being assessed, which represents a 40% increase in demand from 24/25. The DPPPE further added that over 1000 student have support in place with the remaining students eligible for support having it in place by the end of November.

In response to a member's question asking about implications of increased demand, what support looks like, and whether this impacts the quality of core learning. The DPPPE explained that in schools, support may include a full-time classroom assistant, but this is not feasible in the current context. Instead, support is provided through a mix of measures including

- Limited one-to-one hours based on need
- Assistive technologies
- Learning Support hubs in libraries
- Group sessions encouraged

The Principal advised that due to pressure on resources, the team is actively pursuing subcontractors as the core team cannot manage the demand. Permanent staff cannot be increased due to cost and demographic risks.

b) Engagement report

Members noted the report and the DPPPE highlighted the excellent work of the Student's Union delivering wellbeing initiatives across the College.

- c) Business, Innovation and Partnerships report

The DPPPE talked to the written report and asked members to note the three elements reported that fall under the remit of the Head of Business, Innovation and Partnerships.

- d) DfE Skills Action Plan

On the invitation of the Chair the FE Director advised that this document will be used to inform sectoral thinking at the upcoming meeting with Principals and Curriculum Director's.

Members highlighted the demographics and the need to focus on life long learning. The Principal referenced the success of life long learning in Ireland and added that there are initiatives that can be used that are more user friendly.

In response to the discussion the FE Director advised that she would take this back to her colleagues and explore if there are opportunities to progress lifelong learning.

9) Policies for review

Members noted the following policies were reviewed and no changes had been recommended:

- a) Student Performance, Behaviour and Disciplinary Management Policy
- b) Safeguarding, Care and Welfare Policy
- c) Interim Policy for Students with Learning Difficulties and Disabilities
- d) Library Policy
- e) Student Carer Policy
- f) Intellectual Property Policy
- g) Higher Education Admissions Policy
- h) FE Admissions Policy

10) Any other business

No other business was discussed.

No other business was discussed, and the Chair closed the meeting at 8.30pm.