



## SOUTH EASTERN REGIONAL COLLEGE

### Minutes of a Meeting of the Financial and General Purposes Committee of the Governing Body (the “Committee”)

held on Thursday 11<sup>th</sup> September 2025, at 17:30, in Meeting Room D Floor, Lisburn Campus and via Microsoft ‘Teams’

#### 1. Chairs Business

##### a) Attendance and apologies

**Present:** Mr Alan McCrum, Mr Derek Wilson, Mr Tommy Martin (Principal & Chief Executive), Mr John Nugent (Chair of the Governing Body) Mrs Pauline Leeson, Mrs Nuala Reid, Ms Catherine McKay

**In attendance:** Mr Colin McGuckin (Deputy CEO), Mrs Emma Carson (Head of HR), Mrs Claire Williamson (Secretary to the Governing Body), Mrs Heather McKee (Deputy Principal Planning Performance & Engagement) Mr Gary Ritchie (Deputy Principal Curriculum) Mr Andrew Emmett (Chief Technology officer)), Mr David McCullough (Head of Finance), Ms Maureen McKay (HR Business Partner) Item 4a only

**Apologies:** Mr Michael McQuillan

**In the Chair:** Mr McCrum

##### b) Welcome to the Deputy Chief Executive

The Chair welcomed Mr McGuckin to this first meeting of the Governing Body and congratulated him on his appointment on behalf of the committee.

### c) Declarations of Conflict of Interests

The following conflicts were declared:

- The Principal & CEO declared his daughter is employed as a lecturer at the College.
- Mr McCrum declared his wife is employed as an inspector at ETI.
- The Deputy Principal Curriculum declared his wife and sister-in-law are employees of the College and his son is a student.

No action was taken in relation to any of the declared conflicts and no conflicts were declared regarding the presented agenda.

### d) Minutes of the F&GP meeting held on 10<sup>th</sup> June 2025

*Previously issued to all Members.*

**Agreed:** The minutes of the meeting held on 10<sup>th</sup> June 2025 were reviewed, members agreed they were a true and accurate reflection of the meeting. The minutes were adopted on the proposal of Derek Wilson and seconded by Pauline Leeson.

### e) F&GP Action Points from meeting held on 10<sup>th</sup> June 2025

The Chair noted the updates to the College's recruitment documentation was not available for this meeting and would be presented in November. Members confirmed they were content with this approach.

### f) Committee Annual Report

The Secretary advised members that as part of the Governing Body's role in ensuring we are compliant with all aspects of The Partnership Agreement, each committee will produce an annual report. The report will be presented to the committee for approval in November and will form part of an overarching Governance report.

The Secretary provided a brief overview on the proposed format of the report and asked members to confirm if they were content with the approach. Members confirmed that the proposed format was sensible and agreed to feedback on the draft report.

### g) Committee Terms of Reference

The Committee reviewed the terms of reference and suggested that a reference was inserted regarding the Annual Report and that the references to the MSFM was updated to the Partnership Agreement.

**Agreed;** Subject to the proposed amendments being made the Committee Terms of Reference were approved on the proposal of Pauline Leeson and seconded by Derek Wilson.

## 2) Correspondence:

*Previously issued to all Members.*

- a) SERC Revised Budget Allocation 25/26 June 2025
- b) FE Accounts Direction

The Head of Finance directed members to the correspondence. Members noted the Resource allocation following the June monitoring round is confirmed for £46,893k.

## 3) Finance Items for approval

*Previously issued to all Members.*

- a) Draft Annual Report & Financial Statements

The Head of Finance presented an overview of the Draft Annual Report & Financial Statements for the year ending 31<sup>st</sup> July 2025. The HoF began by advising that the accounts are being presented with a £1.7k deficit however the College's true financial performance target, as set out by the Department for the Economy, is the delivery of an actual Resource Requirement in line with its approved Resource Budget Allocation over the Department year, i.e., from 1 April to 31 March.

SERC's Resource Requirement target, for the Departmental year (April 2024 – March 2025), was £46,645k, as confirmed by DfE on 3 February 2025. For the twelve months ending 31 March 2025, the College delivered an actual Resource Requirement of £46,645k. As such, the College met the target allocation for the Departmental 2024-25 financial year.

In concluding the update, the HoF reminded members that these approved draft reports will now be presented to the NIAO for auditing and the final draft brought back to November's Committee

**Agreed:** The committee approved the Draft Annual Report and Financial Statements for the year ending 31<sup>st</sup> July 2025 on the proposal of Derek Wilson and seconded by Nuala Reid

#### 4) Staffing Items for Information

*Papers previously issued to all Members.*

##### a) Health and Wellbeing Update

On the invitation of the Chair, the HR Business Partner presented an overview of the Health and Wellbeing work. She highlighted the key focus and delivery for 2024/25, and members noted the success of the recent events including the Cancer focus sessions which were well received. Members noted the areas for development in 2025/26 and the plans to undertake an effectiveness review on the programme to measure the impact it has on staff.

The Chair thanked the HR Business Partner and commended the work of the team this year. He noted that the work is exceptional and was particularly impressed that mental health awareness for managers had been completed as the committee were informed last year it was an objective, and it was good to see it actioned.

In response to a question from a member on the healthcare scheme for staff with UK Healthcare and if there is an incentive for the company to renew, the Head of HR confirmed that there is one year remaining with the existing contract, and it is clearly beneficial for staff. The Head of Finance added that another College is currently in a tender process for a similar contract and that responses have been positive, so there is still interest in the market.

##### b) HR Priorities 2025/2026 plan and status updates

Members noted that the priorities are all amber as is expected at this time of the year and are progressing well.

The Head of HR advised that in terms of the Leadership Development work, there is a change in direction with a new focus on staff profiling as a more effective starting point.

The leadership and implementation group will be relaunched to better serve its intended function. Mrs Reid suggested that a 360 approach to focus on strategic priorities and identify individuals' strengths and weaknesses. may be more impactful.

##### c) HR Key Metrics Report

The Head of HR advised that all key metrics are currently on target. In terms of sickness absence, there has been a reduction compared to last year; however, the rate remains above the long-term target of 3%. The primary cause continues to be long-term sickness.

The current headcount is below the RTS Cap and below the budgeted staffing levels. Rolling averages confirm that there is capacity to increase staffing, providing flexibility for future planning.

A brief discussion on staff utilisation and workload took place, the following points were noted in discussion:

- **Measurement Concerns:** There is an ongoing discussion around how staff utilisation is measured, with concerns raised about its sustainability.

- **Workload Pressures:** Staff are consistently working beyond contracted hours, particularly in areas with staffing shortages. This issue is being monitored at Head of School level, with the Head of HR confirming that GR is actively overseeing this.
- **SCT Compliance:** There are instances of staff either not meeting or exceeding SCT expectations. Under-utilised lecturers are being considered for additional hours to balance workloads.

#### Strategic Workforce Planning

- **Planning Review:** As discussed in June, there has been a strategic shift in approach to curriculum delivery and workforce capacity. Historically, the aim was growth at any cost. However, this year marks a deliberate change in strategy, recognising that the current model—where staff consistently work additional hours—is not sustainable.
- **Targeted Recruitment:** The focus is now on identifying specific posts that need to be filled and methodically recruiting to meet delivery needs. Decisions are being made about which cohorts will be delivered this year based on available capacity.
- **Curriculum Efficiency:** The Deputy Principal Curriculum highlighted that recruitment is only one part of the solution. There is a need to review the efficiency and relevance of the curriculum being offered. Questions are being raised about whether the current offering meets industry needs and whether the organisation is attempting to deliver too many programmes.
- **Class Size Adjustments:** Average class sizes have been increased by two learners per cohort. This adjustment is expected to free up staff capacity and contribute to more efficient delivery.

#### d) Employee Relations Update

Members noted the enclosed report.

**Action:** At the request of the Chair, the committee agreed that the frequency of reporting of the Employee Relations update will be reviewed at the next agenda meeting

#### e) Case Management Review

Members noted the report and the Head of HR highlighted there has been a reduction in case numbers, this can be attributed to the work that has gone into industrial relations over the last year, working to resolve cases informally and targeted training for managers.

The Chair commented that it is very encouraging to see the reduction in cases and is consistent with the culture adopted across the College.

## f) Annual Staff Survey Report

The Head of HR began by reminding members that the staff survey was completed at the end of the last academic year, and this was the first survey since 21/22. The Head of HR provided a summary of the main themes of the report. Members added that as this report had been received late, they had not had time to consider it fully. The Chair acknowledged that the report had been received late and that this was a timing factor due to staff availability for focus groups in the Summer months, however he agreed that it was sensible to bring the report back to committee for review in November. Members advised that this also provides an opportunity to put timelines within the report and to reduce workload for the HR team they advised that some of the work streams could be merged as there was a lot of cross over.

**Action:** Staff survey report will be reviewed again in November

**Action:** The Staff survey action plan will be presented to the JCF and the status of the report will be emphasized to JCF

## 5) Financial Items for Information

*Papers previously issued to all Members.*

### a) NDPB Budgeting and Forecasting Submission

The last return, based on most up-to-date accounts, was submitted on 22 August 2025.

The return covers the period April 2025 to March 2026, reflecting:

- actual performance for April 2025 – July 2025 (draft accounts); and
- forecast performance for August 2025 to March 2026.

This return detailed a resource requirement of £48,268k.

The Department for the Economy's ('DfE' / 'the Department') current draft budget allocation, within this return, is £46,918k.

The budgetary pressure presented in this return is £1,350k. £120k is a temporary pressure related to the adjustment in allocation (June 2025) and is expected to be removed in the next forecast return. £1,230k of the pressure is related to bids/pressures not currently covered by DfE.

### b) Management Accounts

The Head of Finance presented the latest set of accounts and highlighted the following information to members:

FGP Minutes  
Date: 11 Sept 25  
Version: 01

For the four months ending 31 July 2025, the College has an actual Resource Requirement of £13,586k compared with a budgeted Resource Requirement of £14,716k; the year-to-date result is therefore £1,130k below than the original target.

Total Income (excluding Grant-in-aid) of £4,868k is £198k under than budget due to profiling of DfE income, offset by increases against budget in grant income.

Total Expenditure 4 months to 31 July 2025 is £1,328k below budget. £1,213k of this positive variance relates to the holiday pay accrual at 31 July 2025, which is a temporary positive variance that will largely be reversed at 31 March 2026.

### **Full Year Forecast**

The £47,038k forecast Resource Requirement shows a pressure of £145k, as per the reduction of allocation. It is expected that this pressure will not be present after the next IMPMS (September 2025).

### **c) Finance Operational Report**

Members noted the enclosed report and enquired if staff resources have been resolved to increase supplier payment days. The Principal advised that while staff levels have started to regularise the targets set for NI Public Sector are exceptionally challenging for an organisation such as SERC which operates a devolved budgeting methodology.

In concluding this update the HoF provided an overview of capital funding and advised it is unlikely the College will receive any further funding.

### **d) Estates & Capital Expenditure Report**

Turning to the Estates report the committee discussed the utilisation figures and the following notes were recorded in discussion:

#### **1. Overview of Estate Utilisation Metrics**

Two alternative approaches to measuring estate utilisation were discussed:

- **Preferred Metric (m<sup>2</sup> per FTE):**  
This method compares student numbers against the total square meterage of estate space. A higher m<sup>2</sup> per FTE indicates lower efficiency. This metric is clear, scalable, and provides a direct comparison across sites.
- **Alternative Metric (Room Usage by Time/Day):**  
A more complex model that analyses room usage patterns across specific days and times. While detailed, it is less intuitive and harder to benchmark across the sector.

## **2. Site-Specific Updates and Strategic Considerations**

### **Newcastle Campus**

- Strategically repositioned as a community hub and includes a creche.
- These functions do not contribute to utilisation scores, creating challenges in benchmarking.
- The site offers a distinctive and individualised provision, which may require tailored evaluation metrics.

### **Ballynahinch Campus**

- Previously designated as a corporate hub pre-COVID.
- Historically had low teaching space allocation.
- Post-pandemic, many teams are no longer office-based, suggesting a need to reassess space usage and strategic purpose.

### **Downpatrick Campus**

- Identified as the most challenging site in terms of estate efficiency.
- The Deputy Principal Planning, Performance and Engagement has been actively engaging with external partners to pilot a creche initiative similar to Newcastle.
- The proposal was submitted under the Local Economic Partnership (LEP) and, although not selected initially, is currently first on the reserve list.
- Senior departmental officials have expressed support, particularly regarding social inclusion objectives.
- Additional efforts include repurposing empty spaces into workshops, such as carpentry, joinery, and electrical training areas.
- There is a strategic focus on dual-purpose utilisation to meet employer demand.

### **Benchmarking and Sector Comparison**

- There is currently no confirmed target for estate utilisation.
- Benchmarking is based solely on the sector average, which limits strategic planning and performance evaluation.
- A formal target or framework would enhance clarity and accountability.

## **7)Health and Safety Update**

### **a) Hasmap Briefing Update**



The Head of HR talked to the written report at 007 and advised the following in regard to Hasmat auditing:

### **1. Overview and Progress Update**

Following the outworking of Walter Mark's review (SHEQ.Point Ltd) , a further update was provided on outstanding actions and governance developments:

- Outstanding Items:
  - 2 minor issues and 6 observations remain open.
  - Of these, 2 minor issues and 2 observations relate to the locking off of equipment and the need for a consistent approach across sites.
- Specific Observations:
  - Hair & Beauty Department: Two aerosol containers were found on open shelves. A formal policy is required to address safe storage and handling of such items.

### **2. SHEQ and Risk Management**

- SHEQ Professional Services:  
The College has engaged SHEQ.Point Ltd to provide professional services, including:
    - Support with risk assessments.
    - Delivery of training programmes.
    - Oversight of HASMAP audit processes.
  - New SHEQ Officer:  
A new officer has been appointed and will ensure that all outstanding audit actions are closed off in a timely manner.
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### **3. Estates Staffing and Operational Oversight**

- Lead Technicians:  
The appointment of Lead Technicians has now been confirmed. These roles carry specific responsibilities for health and safety compliance and operational oversight.
- Audit and School Engagement:  
The new structure includes a commitment to regular audits and school-level engagement, led by the Lead Technician and Senior Technicians as part of their core duties.
- SHEQ.Point Ltd. Role:  
Walter continues to provide professional support to the Head of Estates on an as-needed basis.

The Chair noted that this support provides a quality assurance to the committee in terms of the overall work.

### **4. Governance and Policy Framework**

- **Governance Development:**

A recommendation was made to develop a formal governance framework to ensure statutory responsibilities are met and monitored effectively.

- **Statutory Responsibilities:**

- Members highlighted the importance of monitoring statutory duties, noting that this is a legal obligation for the Governing Body and College
- The Chair referenced 15 items under the current policy for which the Governing Body holds a legal mandate.

- **Policy Reference:**

Members queried the source and date of the current policy, suggesting a review of the DfE 2015 guidance to confirm its validity and relevance.

## 5. Monitoring and Reporting

- **Reporting Frequency:**

The committee discussed reporting and proposed a six-monthly reporting cycle to ensure regular oversight and accountability.

- **Dashboard Development:**

The Deputy CEO will lead the design of a new dashboard to support the revised governance structure. External advice will be sought to ensure robustness and usability.

**Action:** The Chair requested that there is a triangulation of the policy, the Governing Body's mandate and the framework documents

## 8) Policies for review

*Papers previously issued to all Members.*

a) HR Policy Review

b) Finance Policy Review

Members noted the HR and financial policies had been reviewed with no substantial changes recommended.

## 8) Any other Business

a) Northern Regional College Finance Project

The Principal addressed the committee and advised that Northern Regional College (NRC) has recently experienced challenges with its financial closure processes, particularly around the March year-end. In response, the Head of Finance in agreement with the Department provided direct

support during May and June, assisting NRC in resolving key issues and ensuring compliance with reporting timelines.

The matter has been formally discussed at the NRC Audit Committee, and the minutes are now in the public domain.

Following an internal review, NRC's management team met with representatives from SERC and agreed to undertake a restructuring of their finance function.

As part of this programme, NRC will review and consider adopting SERC's financial policies and processes, effectively mirroring a number of our working practices.

This collaboration represents a significant vote of confidence in our College's financial governance and operational standards.

The programme of alignment and restructuring at NRC is expected to be led over the next year, with ongoing engagement and support from our team.

In terms of next steps, the committee noted:

- Continued liaison with NRC to support their transition and ensure consistency in financial governance.
- Monitor progress and provide updates to the Governing Body as the programme develops.
- Consider opportunities for wider sector collaboration and sharing of best practices.

## 9) Confidential

A separate note was taken for this item.

**No other business was discussed and the meeting concluded at 8.26pm**