



SOUTH EASTERN REGIONAL COLLEGE

Minutes of a Meeting of the Financial and General Purposes Committee of the Governing Body (the "Committee")

held on Tuesday 25th March 2025, at 17:30, in Meeting Room D Floor, Lisburn Campus

1. Chairs Business

a) Attendance and apologies

Present: Mr Alan McCrum, Mr Derek Wilson, Mr Tommy Martin (Principal & Chief Executive), Ms. Majella Corrigan, Ms Pauline Leeson, Ms Grainne McVeigh, Dr Danny McConnell

In attendance: Mrs Heather McKee (Deputy Principal Planning Performance & Engagement) 'DPPPE', Mr Gary Ritchie (Deputy Principal Curriculum) 'DPC', Mrs Emma Carson (Acting Director HR & Facilities), Mrs Claire Williamson (Secretary to the Governing Body), Mr Andrew Emmett (Acting Director IT & Finance)

Apologies: Mr Steven Lee, Mr John Nugent

In the Chair: Mr McCrum

b) Declarations of Conflict of Interests

The following conflicts were declared:

- Ms Corrigan declared she is employed by CCMS whose sponsor department is DENI. She is a current member of the Governing Body of Stranmillis College.
- The Principal & CEO declared his daughter is employed as a lecturer at the College.

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

c) Minutes of the F&GP meeting held on 28th January 2025

Previously issued to all Members.

Agreed: The minutes of the meeting held on 28th January 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 Danny McConnell.

d) F&GP Action Points from meeting held on 28th January 2025

Members noted the action the Acting Director of IT & Finance had included the visual graphic within the NDPB forecasting report to demonstrate trends in performance.

The request to include further information in the review of any acting up payments or honorariums will be presented in the next 6 monthly review.

2) Correspondence:

Previously issued to all Members.

a) SERC Draft Budget Allocation 25-26

The Principal directed members to the correspondence that had been received on 5th February from the FE Director, setting out the College's opening position for 25/26. The Principal advised the Committee that the sector was advised of likely funding reductions of £15.7million in 2025/26 which equates to approximately 7.1% of the block grant allocation of £220 million.

The Principal highlighted that the lecturers' pay award is tied up in the budget and the sector are being asked to find substantial savings before the pay award can be agreed. At the request of the Department the sector have submitted a paper detailing not only the detrimental impact of the reduced budget but scenarios where savings could be made. The paper also highlighted the significant savings already made by the sector, that further savings would be minimal in terms of operating costs, that any substantial cost saving would directly impact on provision, and therefore this would ultimately be a policy decision for the Department.

This paper will aid further discussion with the Minister, so the committee were asked to note that the budget could still improve.

In discussion the Principal talked the Committee through the various scenarios proposed and a member enquired if it had been considered that the sector need to match delivery to the Skills Barometer where skills have been defined. The Principal advised members that the recent edition of the Skills Barometer has stated there is a skills shortage across all levels, and so the College would need to increase skills at all levels, and the way to impact on this is to reach out to the economically inactive through our social inclusion engagement, and this ironically is the work that would likely be reduced first.

Members also highlighted the Department of Education policy recently announced to retain all 16–18-year-olds in education and how this would impact on the demand for the sector. Members enquired if the Department were doing any work on core priorities that would inform policy? The Principal advised that the next steps for the sector would be to meet the Minister, and these concerns could be highlighted along with the substantial savings of £20m already made by the Colleges. The Principal concluded that he would be unable to push ahead with any major decisions until he can more fully understand the scale of the cuts.

3) Staffing Items for Information

Papers previously issued to all Members.

a) HR Priorities 2024/2025 plan and status updates/HR Key Metrics Report

The Acting Director of HR & Facilities began by advising that the 8 identified areas are all on target with one completed. The Acting Director provided an update on each of the areas and members noted that the newly formed consultative forums had started to meet, and the meetings have been very positive.

Moving onto the key metrics report the Acting Director highlighted the newly formatted report which now included the rolling average of staff as this is the metric reported to the Department on the Reform to Save scheme. The Chair commented it was helpful for the committee to have this assurance as it demonstrated the methodology is working well.

In response to a question if the 25/26 reduced budget would impact on vacancies and future recruitment the Acting Director informed the Committee that only mission critical recruitment would be conducted in terms of permanent staff at this stage while other vacancies would be filled using temporary staff. The Principal added that it would be difficult to plan any recruitment until the Budget situation is known as we are unsure of what provision will be offered next year.

b) Employee Relations Update

The Acting Director of HR & Facilities outlined a summary of the employee relations cases currently “live” within the College.

c) Staff Survey Questions

Before inviting the Acting Director to present an overview of the staff survey questions the Chair reminded members that this had been the first survey conducted since 2022 and so was important in terms of better understanding organisational culture.

The Acting Director began by advising members the questions had not moved too far away from the previous set to allow analysis and benchmarking to be done. She highlighted the questions had been shared at the recent JCF meetings and the unions had been content with the approach.

Members were content with the proposed questions and suggested that more demographic information was gathered under section 9 to help interrogate the data.

The Acting Director confirmed the survey would be issued to all staff the week before the Easter break and run for two weeks after that, the survey will be hosted by an external provider to allow complete anonymity.

d) Staff Appraisal review

The Acting Director provided members with an overview of the two separate appraisal schemes for staff. In discussion she highlighted that there are planned improvements under way in the non-teaching scheme as part of the HR Strategic priorities for 24/25. These include fixed cycles, training for managers and the development of a digital process.

The Acting Director added that both appraisal schemes are compulsory for employees and neither have any financial incentives linked to them. In response to a member’s question if the quality of the scheme is tested upon completion of the appraisals, she advised that it is not currently done but it is hoped this can be integrated into the new improvements. She added that now CEF has been re-established, the HR sector working group are now working to get some traction on policy development that may aid the lecturer staff appraisal scheme.

The Principal concluded the discussion by advising the Committee that work is needed on the communications piece of the appraisal scheme and highlighting to all staff and managers the benefits of completing the process. He added by putting a focus on it throughout the College will help demonstrate the positivity of the process and aid communications. The Chair commented that this approach reflects the new leadership in the College and the evolving change in culture.

e) Case Management Review 6-month review

Members noted there had been 5 cases instigated in the period September 2024 to February 2025. The Acting Director provided a detailed overview of the cases and advised that dignity at work cases have reduced in this reporting period.

The Committee noted that of the 5 investigations instigated in the 6-month reporting period, 1 is completed representing 20% of all cases instigated in the period. Of the total investigations ongoing in the period (12), 33% have been completed. The Acting Director stated that staff absence remains the reason for delays.

4) Financial Items for approval

Papers previously issued to all Members.

a) Baseline Operational Budget 25/26

The Principal presented the draft budget for 2025/26 and began by reminding members of the earlier discussion at agenda item 2. He advised that this budget details Resource Requirements of **£47,662k**. However, as highlighted at agenda item 2 the Department have not yet confirmed the final budget, and the sector are working through cost saving scenarios.

The committee noted the items that have been targeted for savings such as investment in IT equipment and that this is the first-year full year savings of the Reform to Save Scheme.

The Chair highlighted that the Committee would approve the baseline operational budget with the caveat that the Department will publish the final Resource Allocation later this year and so the operational budget will have to come back to Committee - this will be a rolling piece of work for the Committee to scrutinise.

The Principal advised that as the new financial year begins next week this budget is based on the best-case scenario for the College. He advised that budget holders will be advised that it is mission critical spend only in terms of non-staff costs.

Members noted that the Budget would be presented to the Committee again with further information and as per usual business the Governing Body will approve the Draft Budget.

Agreed: The Baseline Operational Budget 25/26 was approved on the proposal of Derek Wilson and seconded by Grainne McVeigh.

5) Financial Items for Information

Papers previously issued to all Members.

a) NDPB Budgeting and Forecasting Submission

Members noted that the last return, based on most up-to-date accounts, was submitted on 24 February 2025.

The return covered the period April 2024 to March 2025, reflecting:

- actual performance for April 2024 to January 2025; and
- performance forecast for February 2025 to March 2025.

This return detailed a resource requirement of £46,645k.

The Acting Director of IT & Finance highlighted the graph included in the report tracks the Resource Allocation against the Resource Requirements and it is a useful visual to demonstrate there has been no financial in the last 10 months.

b) Period 10 Management Accounts

The Acting Director of IT & Finance directed members to the written report and highlighted the College has a balanced budget as the final resource requirement target is £46,645k for the financial year 2024/25 which is line with the Resource Allocation.

c) Finance Operational Report

Members were asked to note the written report, and the Acting Director highlighted the improvement to supplier payment days and the changes made to procurement limits.

d) Estates & Capital Expenditure Report

The Acting Director of HR & Facilities presented the report at 005D. Members noted the Carbon Omissions data included in the report and the Principal provided an overview of the methodology used to collate the data. He advised that this is the first stage in building a trend base which will enable benchmarking. A more thorough report will be developed to meet legislative obligations and will come to the committee. In due course.

6) Health and Safety Update

The Acting Director of HR & Facilities talked to the written report and provided a detailed explanation of the new processes implemented across Health and Safety. In summary she provided an overview of the current and planned works, including the work from Walter Marks (external consultant) with the Head of Estates to standardize risk assessments, rolling out the 'Managing Safely' course to as many relevant staff as possible, supporting the Principal Lecturers in their roles and the appointment of a SHEQ officer.

The Chair commented that it is important for the Governing Body to have a level of assurance around Health and Safety in order to meet the governance obligations around it. He added that he appreciated the focus on risk assessment and the appointment of the SHEQ officer will provide another layer of assurance to the Governing Body. He concluded by endorsing the staff structure put in place and noted he was conscious there was a focus to integrate as many staff as possible into the health and safety roles.

At this juncture the Chair advised members that the Applications and Enrolments report was removed as a standing item from the agenda. He advised that to avoid duplication of work it was agreed this report sits more with the Education Committee and added little value being presented twice. Members agreed this was a sensible approach.

7) Policies for review

Nothing to note.

8) Any other Business

9) Confidential

A sperate note was taken for this item.

With no other business being discussed the meeting concluded at 8.00pm