



SOUTH EASTERN REGIONAL COLLEGE

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

held on Thursday 11th November 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

In attendance: Mr Colin McGuckin (Deputy CEO), Mr Gary Ritchie (Deputy Principal Curriculum) Mrs Emma Carson (Head of HR), Mrs Claire Williamson (Secretary to the Governing Body), Ms Diane Weatherup (Head of the Learning Academy) Item 4C only

Apologies: Ms Catherine McKay

In the Chair: Mr McCrum

b) 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.

c) Minutes of the F&GP meeting held on 11th September 2025

Previously issued to all Members.

Agreed: The minutes of the meeting held on 11th September 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 Nuala Reid.

d) F&GP Action Points from meeting held on 11th September 2025

The Secretary advised that there were no outstanding action points and invited the Head of HR to present the College recruitment documents as had been requested at the previous meeting.

The Head of HR advised members there were three specific recruitment documents for the staff categories. The committee commented they were useful in ensuring consistency across recruitment in the College.

The Chair advised members a discussion had taken place on the Employee Relations report at the recent agenda meeting, and it was agreed that in terms of transparency and updating members on industrial relations the report would continue to be presented at each meeting for noting. The larger report on data and trends will be presented annually rather than bi-annually.

The Head of HR advised the staff survey results and action plan had been presented to JCF as discussed and asked members to note that an update will be given to committee every 6 months on the progress.

e) Committee Annual Report

Members reviewed the annual report and confirmed it accurately reflects the committee's work for 2024/25 and its alignment with the relevant clauses of the Partnership Agreement.

Agreed: The Annual report 24/25 was agreed on the approval of Nuala Reid and Pauline Leeson.

f) Committee Terms of Reference

The Committee reviewed the terms of reference after the Chair advised they had been reviewed to ensure the committee's role in Health and Safety was accurately reflected.

Agreed: The Committee Terms of Reference were approved on the proposal of Derek Wilson and seconded by Nuala Reid.

2) Correspondence:

Previously issued to all Members.

- a) FE Benchmarking Update to all Colleges

Members noted the correspondence and enquired if an agreed methodology has been provided yet for benchmarking, the Principal confirmed there has not been anything formal presented to the College and the details of the pilot are expecting to be provided soon.

- b) Revised Budget Allocation 2025-26

The Deputy CEO talked to the written letter and advised that the revised budget allocation has provided a stable result for this year.

3) Finance Items for approval

Previously issued to all Members.

- a) Annual Report & Financial Statements

The Committee noted the Comptroller and Auditor General proposes to issue an unqualified audit opinion on the financial statements, subject to completion of final review procedures.

- The Deputy CEO highlighted no misstatements or irregular expenditure were identified and the internal controls were considered robust, with no priority one recommendations.
- Two recommendations were noted:
 - Review of fully depreciated assets (Priority 2).
 - Improvement in payment performance (Priority 3).

The Deputy CEO stated this was a fantastic result for the finance team and the committee echoed these comments and commended everyone involved for delivering this result.

Agreed: The Annual Report and Financial Statements were approved and recommended to the Governing Body for adoption on the proposal of Derek Wilson and seconded by Alan McCrum

4) Staffing Items for Information

Papers previously issued to all Members.

a) HR Priorities 2025/2026 plan and status updates and HR Key Metrics Report

The Head of HR advised that the priorities are progressing well, all items are currently on target. Item 3 is temporarily on hold due to the current system provider for the JANE HRMIS withdrawing support for the sector. Discussions are ongoing to extend the arrangement. Once confirmed, there will be work involved in implementing the extension; however, at this stage, it does not involve developing the capabilities of the existing system.

Members queried whether leadership development will be incorporated into this work, the Head of HR confirmed that the Principal's Group has drafted an outline of the programme, which will be referred back to the them and the Chairs' Group for further discussion. Similar to the "Bridging the Gap" initiative, it is anticipated that the final approach will be refined through the agreed strategic priorities.

Moving onto the KPI report the Head of HR highlighted the increase in the staff absence figures.

The overall absence rate at the beginning of 2025/26 has increased by **0.95%** compared to the same point in 2024/25.

- **Short-Term Absence:** There has been a slight increase; however, it remains below the target of **0.8%**.
- **Long-Term Absence:** The most significant rise is in long-term absence, which is up **1.38%** from 2024/25.

The Head of HR advised that with long term absence serious and long term illness are still the main reason for staff being off.

Members discussed the pressures on the curriculum support team as they noted a decrease in the number of staff. The Head of HR advised that a significant proportion of staff in this group are hourly paid, and numbers are expected to increase as engagement grows. However, recruitment remains challenging. SERC is currently paying the highest grade for SEN roles, yet difficulties persist in attracting candidates.

The team is actively engaging with third-party providers as the current model does not suit having permanent staff. Supplementary arrangements are being made to address staffing gaps.

Action: The committee requested a detailed absence report for the next meeting including benchmarks with other Colleges and sectors

b) Employee Relations Update

Members noted the enclosed report, and the Head of HR advised how the cases are progressing. In response to a suggestion to include data on the cases resolved informally the Principal noted that is an integral part of the HR operation and a quantitative approach may be more useful rather than qualitative data.

c) Learning Academy Review

At this juncture the Head of the Learning Academy joined the meeting.

On the invitation of the Chair the Head of the LA presented an overview of the recent work completed by the team and future plans. In discussions the following points were noted:

- The Chair noted that he had limited awareness of the utilisation of certain applications in the College and queried the early sense of value added.
- The Head of the LA highlighted tools such as *TeacherMatic* and *Copilot*, noting that *Copilot* may offer greater benefit for staff lacking digital skills or confidence. Investment in a more generic tool like *Copilot* was considered preferable, although it is more costly. It was suggested that Learning and Assessment could take responsibility for developing staff prompt skills.
- The Principal agreed this approach seemed sensible, focusing on teaching prompt skills rather than specific tool functionality. DW mentioned other products, such as *Nearpod*, which appears polished but is heavily Americanised, and noted changes to *Kahoot*, which now charges for more than 10 learners.
- The Chair of the GB asked about resources for part-time lecturers. The Head of the LA confirmed that modules exist to support pedagogic skill development, but the challenge lies in building a community for these staff, who often have limited interaction. Mentoring is available but unpaid, and the Principal explained that part-time staff are paid an hourly rate that assumes additional duties, so extra work does not attract further payment.
- The cost of an AI pilot was discussed, estimated at £40k. The Chair queried departmental interest, and the Principal confirmed interest was limited to the original bid. The Deputy CEO added that a previous bid for AI licensing was £125k.
- The Deputy CEO highlighted the usefulness of the Teams site for part-time lecturers.
- In concluding the discussion, the Head of the LA reported positive engagement with JISC in Northern Ireland and advised that the College will continue to avail of all resources possible to keep up to speed with AI.

The Chair thanked the Head of the LA and commended the quality of work.

At this juncture the Head of the Learning Academy left the meeting.

d) Equality Annual Progress Report

The Equality Report, covering Section 75 duties, was presented for noting. Feedback from the Equality Commission is expected for the next meeting. The report demonstrates the significant level of equality-related activity within the College.

A Member commended the report as very strong, particularly in relation to disability and carers, and noted the high number of minority ethnic students. The Member queried whether any support networks exist for these students.

It was noted that, on the student side, initiatives are typically run internally. Consideration will be given to this matter, and it will be tabled at the next Equality Working Group meeting.

Action: Check with the Head of Engagement what initiatives are done for students in terms of disability and ethnic minority groups, to be tabled at next equality working group meeting

e) Staff Survey Report

The updated action plan was presented by the Head of HR, with some categories merged in line with survey results. It was noted that setting exact dates is challenging; therefore, it was agreed to add a quarterly target.

A priority matrix has been included as suggested previously by the committee. All trade unions have been briefed, and meetings with JCF have taken place. Updates were provided, and all parties accepted the approach and agreed to a two-year cycle, with touchpoints every six months. The plan will be maintained as a live document accessible to all staff and regularly updated, demonstrating that action is being taken. This approach feeds into the two-year cycle, making it more pragmatic.

The Chair noted that the process is now transparent, with a clear feedback loop, and expressed encouragement at the steps being taken.

The Head of HR outlined next steps:

- Change RAG status and share with JCF.
- Communicate updates to staff.
- Maintain regular touchpoints.
- Report back to this committee.

The Chair stressed the importance of being continually sighted on progress to provide confidence that actions are moving forward and requested that the plan be brought for noting at each meeting.

A member highlighted that the lowest survey score was confidence to raise a concern and stressed the need to keep this as a priority. The Principal agreed and suggested revisiting the qualitative aspects.

The Chair reiterated the importance of building confidence and trust, noting that this was previously lacking and must remain a priority. Members proposed a pulse survey to monitor cultural change.

The Principal confirmed the process is now formalised with regular touchpoints and emphasised the need to articulate engagement frequency and methods.

The Chair concluded by expressing trust that engagement and issue identification will continue, noting the significant transformation over the past 15 months.

Actions:

- Add quarterly targets to the action plan.
- The Head of HR and Deputy CEO to develop a process for ongoing reporting.
- Check confidence-building measures and consider a pulse survey.

5) Financial Items for Information

Papers previously issued to all Members.

a) NDPB Budgeting and Forecasting Submission

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

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

- actual performance for April 2025 – September 2025; and
- forecast performance for October 2025 to March 2026.

This return detailed a resource requirement of 48,041k.

The Department for the Economy's ('DfE' / 'the Department') current budget allocation, within this return, is £47,489k.

b) Management Accounts

Members noted the enclosed management accounts for information.

c) Finance Operational Report

In presenting the report the Deputy CEO advised that supplier payment days are currently at 94% and the target set by the Treasury for payment to suppliers within 30 days is 95%.

d) Estates & Capital Expenditure Report

Moving onto the Estates report the Deputy CEO talked to the report and highlighted the following items to the committee:

- Bangor and Ards: Toilet refurbishments and internal decoration underway, with efforts to incorporate Project-Based Learning (PBL) for student experience.
- Capital Projects: Ballynahinch and Newcastle projects are being commissioned and are almost ready to commence.
- Ards: Both projects remain ongoing.
- Lisburn: Castle House project currently being costed.

Utilities and Carbon Emissions:

- Utilities costs have increased **9% year-on-year** and **23% monthly**.
- Carbon emissions have risen slightly, but no significant concerns were noted.
- Members highlighted the 2030 carbon reduction target. The Deputy CEO confirmed that targets have been submitted and guidance is awaited from DEARA.

The committee noted renewal of PSC and TSC frameworks and were raised as a risk at NIFON. The business case is currently with DfE, who indicated sign-off is expected during the week commencing 17 October.

Action: Deputy CEO to seek clarity on the 2030 carbon emissions targets.

e) Estates Strategy

Members noted the Estates strategy had been reviewed and issued to DfE.

f) Climate Change Post Submission Report

The Deputy CEO presented the report and advised SERC has been identified as part of an NDPB requirement to submit a carbon report. Significant work has been completed by the College Business & Financial Analyst and his team to enable submission by 29 October.

The next stage will involve adoption reporting in March. The report covers three key areas and indicates an outcome of 6,000 tonnes of CO₂. While formal submission will not be required for several years, there may be a recommendation for informal annual reporting.

The committee noted the achievement of including all three scopes in the report and commended the work undertaken.

Discussion:

- The Chair of the Governing Body queried whether staff producing these reports could access relevant training.
- The Principal highlighted there are capacity issues, as the lead member of staff also undertakes business analysis for the College, and suggested reviewing whether a specialist is required.

- The Chair of the Governing Body highlighted that NI Executive publishes carbon intensity factors, which may differ, and recommended confirming which should be used.
- The Principal advised that DEARA workshops aim to ensure comparability and noted the importance of articulating next steps, particularly given reductions in green energy funding this year.

The Chair expressed appreciation for the efforts involved in producing the report.

Action: Check carbon intensity factors and align with DEARA guidance and continue engagement on next steps and funding implications.

6) Health and Safety Update

Paper previously issued to all Members.

The Deputy CEO talked to the written report which provided a summary of health and safety activities across the College, he added that the report aims to ensure the committee are equipped to meet their statutory obligations in terms of Health and Safety.

The Deputy CEO highlighted Martyn's Law, which relates to better protection of the public in the event of a terrorist attack on premises. The law introduces two tiers based on premises capacity, with educational establishments falling under the standard tier.

A Member welcomed the inclusion of data and noted that the digital reporting system will enable visibility of incident types and their impact, such as whether an incident resulted in absence from work.

The Chair acknowledged the significant work undertaken, noting that the report is timely, of excellent depth and quality compared to previous reports, and provides assurance that health and safety has moved to a more central position within the organisation.

The Chair of the Governing Body queried first aid numbers at Ards; no concerns were reported.

The committee discussed whether to continue with HASMAP and when the next update against the HASMAP audit should occur, noting that the current audit is approximately three years old.

Action: Include a summary narrative in future reports.

7) Policies for review

Papers previously issued to all Members.

Members noted the Intellectual Property Policy and Remuneration SOP had been reviewed and no changes were proposed.

An overview of the Fees Policy was provided, including the proposed increase for Higher Education (HE) fees by 7%, which is in line with other colleges. It was noted that this increase is not expected to impact students' ability to pay in instalments and reflects the cost of delivering these courses.

Additionally, part-time fees will change to an hourly rate, aligning with sector practice.

Agreed: The Fees policy was approved and recommended to the Governing Body for adoption on the proposal of Nuala Reid and seconded by Derek Wilson.

8) Any other Business

No other business was discussed.

9) Confidential

A separate note was taken for this item.

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