



## Minutes of a Meeting of the Governing Body (the “GB”)

held on Thursday 12<sup>th</sup> February 2026 at 17:30, Downpatrick Campus

Agenda Item 1: Chair’s Business:

a) Attendance and Apologies for Absences:

### **Present:**

Mr John Nugent (Chair of the Governing Body), Mr Tommy Martin (Principal/CEO), Mr Darren Stewart, Ms Majella Corrigan, Mr Derek Wilson, Mrs Carolyn King, Mr Samuel Hagen, Mrs Nuala Reid, Mr Mark Brashier, Mr Steven Lee, Ms Grainne McVeigh, Mrs Nicola Wilson, Ms Catherine McKay, Mr Paul Finnegan,

### **In Attendance:**

Mrs Claire Williamson (Secretary to the Governing Body), Ms Catherine Shipman (Head of Engagement and Development) Agenda Item 3 Only, Mrs Heather McKee (Deputy Principal Planning, Performance and Engagement) Agenda Item 3 Only

**Apologies:** Dr Danny McConnell, Mr Alan McCrum, Mrs Pauline Leeson

**In the Chair:** Mr John Nugent

b) Declarations of Conflicts of Interest:

The Chair invited members to declare any known or perceived conflicts of interests.

- 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 is employed as a lecturer at the College.
- Mr Lee declared his wife is employed as a Deputy Head of School at the College.

No action was taken in relation to any of the declared conflicts. Members were reminded that they should declare any potential conflicts to agenda items should they arise during the meeting.

c) Minutes from meeting on 24<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> November 2025

*Papers previously provided to members.*

The minutes from the meeting held on 24<sup>th</sup> November were approved on the proposal of Nuala Reid and seconded by Sam Hagen.

The minutes from the meeting held on 25<sup>th</sup> November were approved on the proposal of Majella Corrigan and seconded by Grainne McVeigh.

d) Matters Arising/Action Points from previous Meetings:

*Papers previously provided to members.*

Ms Corrigan advised that the action to invite Graeme Wilkinson to a future Education Committee meeting has been postponed due to the appointment of the new FE Director. An invite will be issued through the new FED at a later date.

e) Governance Framework

The Chair reminded members that he and the Secretary can be approached at any time with suggestions on how to improve the governance framework and take on any feedback.

The Secretary advised the document will be republished when the Department have approved the new Strategy and CPD documents.

f) Co-optee Member

The Chair presented the CV of Denise Stockman, along with the current Skills Matrix, for consideration. It was noted that under the FE Order, the Governing Body is permitted to appoint two co-opted members. As Michael McQuillan had stepped down in October, the Chair outlined the intention to identify a senior leader from the business sector to fill the vacancy.

The Chair advised that approaches were made to both current and former Board members to identify potential candidates, and two individuals were subsequently followed up. Denise was proposed by Gráinne McVeigh, who had met with her and was wholly impressed. It was confirmed that Ms Stockman is not currently serving on any other boards.

Ms McVeigh provided an overview of Ms Stockman's experience and highlighted her strong alignment with SERC's ethos, particularly her passion for education and her interest in supporting work relating to Special Educational Needs (SEN).

The Chair commented that Ms Stockman would be an excellent fit for the Governing Body and recommended her appointment to members.

**Agreed:** The Governing Body approved the appointment of Denise Stockman as a co-opted members of the Board and asked the Secretary to make the necessary arrangements with the Department to progress the appointment. The decision was approved on the proposal of Catherine McKay and seconded by Nicola Wilson.

#### g) Departmental Engagement

The Chair advised members of recent departmental changes. An interim Further Education Director (FED), Kathryn McCamley, had been appointed in December; however, Janis Scanlon has now taken up the substantive post with effect from 16 February, joining from the Department of Education.

Ms Corrigan noted that she is leaving her role as SEN Reform Director and Area Planning Lead. She highlighted the new FED's departmental interest in duplication of provision, the need to ensure alignment across the sector, and an increased focus on data and evidence-based decision-making.

The Principal advised that the Department had confirmed Ms McCamley would remain in post for a short handover period, and that an introductory call with Ms Scanlon would be arranged as soon as possible.

The Chair reported attendance at a GB Chairs' meeting in Limavady, followed by a meeting with the FE Director. A CEF pre-meeting had also taken place to discuss the forthcoming FE Review, with an emphasis on shaping early thinking on how colleges believe the review should progress.

A meeting with Louise Watson is scheduled for 9 March to discuss the FE Review (FER) in further detail.

### Agenda Item 2: Secretary's Business

*Papers previously provided to members.*

#### a) Activity and Engagement Schedule 25/26

The Secretary directed members to the schedule; she encouraged members to attend the upcoming student and staff excellence awards.

She added that she will alert members of any relevant events as they come through the Marketing team.

#### b) Training/Briefing requirements

The Secretary talked to the written brief provided and advised that a recent communication from the Department had advised there would be no Departmental training provided this year and instead

they have asked a College to commission training on behalf of the sector. This will be discussed at the Chairs Group meeting, and, when approved, an update will be provided once a College lead has been identified.

#### c) AOC Professional Governance Conference

The Secretary directed members to the written briefing and advised she had attended the Association of Colleges Governance Professional Conference, held online on 20–21 January. While not all content directly applies to the Northern Ireland context, it provided valuable insight into governance trends, priorities, and challenges across the wider UK further education (FE) sector.

The Secretary highlighted that she had highlighted several training resources that we can implement around AI and Cyber Security, and she would be taking this forward through the Chief Technology Officer as part of mandatory training for members.

She highlighted that the standout speech of the Conference was delivered by Erika Elisson Norris (CEO, Beyond Governance). She described the evolving role of governance professionals amid rapid policy change, rising regulatory expectations, and digital risk. Erika captured the essence of governance with the statement “Governance is for the student who will never know your name.” The Secretary described how the sessions focus was that good governance is like good architecture, when it works, it is invisible.

#### d) Effectiveness Review Actions Plan

The Secretary directed members to the summary of recommendations for both the SERC and Sector Effectiveness reviews that has been carried out by ICS. Members noted the SERC recommendations have been fully implemented, and the GB Chairs will raise the report with the FE Director at the next meeting, in particular the re-introduction of a formal regular meeting of ARAC Chairs to share best practice.

#### e) June Meeting Dates

The Secretary advised that given the deadline for the March year-end financial reporting some meeting dates need to be amended to ensure the timely sign off of the Annual Report and Financial Statements. Members noted that committee dates have been changed for June with the agreement of the Committee Chairs and the Governing Body in June will now meet on Tuesday 23<sup>rd</sup> June.

At this juncture the Chair advised the Department were keen to confirm a date with members to meet with the Permanent Secretary to hear a briefing on the 3 year Budget, he advised a further poll will be issued and asked members to be as flexible as possible to accommodate the meeting request.

Action: The Secretary will issue a poll to members seeking a suitable date to meet with the Permanent Secretary

### Agenda Item 3: Social Engagement

On the invitation of the Chair the Head of Engagement and Development presented an overview of the Social Inclusion and Strategic Engagement initiatives and the work of the Students Union.

Following the presentation the Head of Engagement and Development highlighted the use of T-Skills and soft skills within real-world settings, as demonstrated through current case studies.

Members emphasised the value of using practical examples as a tool to attract additional students to programmes and commented that the work undertaken is highly inspirational, with wellbeing clearly reflected in both strategy and delivery.

A member enquired whether there were any links with Men's Sheds or similar initiatives to support male engagement.

The Head of E&D confirmed that the College has recently initiated its first project in the Peninsula area with a group of men engaged in Essential Skills. They are undertaking a joinery project piloted this year, and further opportunities will be explored. It was also noted that some participants are involved in Peace Plus activities.

Members encouraged continued engagement with external organisations benefitting from Peace Plus funding.

The Head of E&D outlined that the College actively participates in neighbourhood partnerships and seeks to collaborate rather than compete for funding. The aim is to amplify funding impact, enhance social mobility across services, and support partner organisations in understanding available progression pathways.

The Chair thanked the Head of Engagement and Development for her presentation and commented that her enthusiasm and passion for the work is evident.

*At this juncture the Head of E&D and the Deputy Principal Planning, Performance and Engagement left the meeting.*

### Agenda Item 4: Principal and Chief Executive's report:

***Paper provided to members in advance.***

#### a) CEO's update

Members received an update on student enrolment figures. Overall student numbers are 4% higher than the same period last year, with part-time enrolments showing particularly strong growth at 12%. It was noted that part-time provision will be a key focus area for the forthcoming year.

A quick summary graphic from the CDP was presented, highlighting strong performance across all areas, with progress currently on target.

Financials remain on target for year-end. Year-to-date performance is £1.2m ahead of expectations, although a technical adjustment will be applied at the end of March, which will impact the final reported figure.

The Chair proposed aligning the CDP report and the enrolment report formatting, noting that the CDP reports student figures as individual counts, with no distinction being made between full time

and part time students, while the enrolment report focuses on full-time students, while also considering part time student numbers separately. The Principal confirmed that work is ongoing in this regard, and that the aim is to produce a single, user-friendly graphic for future reporting.

The Principal advised that additional funding of several hundred thousand pounds has been secured. Work is underway to finalise an operational plan to allocate these resources. Funding will be directed to areas demonstrating the greatest need, including school-level equipment and IT refresh requirements.

#### b) FE Colleges Impact Report

Members received an update on the new sector publication, which aims to summarise key good-news stories and developments from the previous quarter. It was noted that the publication will be a useful resource for departmental reporting.

As this is the first edition, feedback has been invited and further refinement will be made for future issues.

Members suggested incorporating a small number of customer statements to strengthen the publication, noting that it represents a good first iteration.

Members further advised the team to consider the primary target audience and to clarify whether the publication is intended to attract prospective students. It was agreed that the overall message and audience should be confirmed. The Principal thanked members for their feedback and noted he would feed back to the Principals Group.

#### c) Activity Bulletin

Members considered the Activity Bulletin and noted that the FE sector has entered a period of sustained growth, as reflected in the Department for the Economy's published data.

Sector-level trends (2020/21–2024/25) were highlighted from the Department's press release, which shows strong recovery and continued upward performance across students, enrolments and qualifications.

The following SERC-specific outcomes, drawn from the DfE bulletin, were noted:

- Students: Numbers increased by a net 10%.
- Enrolments: Increased by a net 5%.
- Qualifications: 5% more qualifications were awarded in 2024/25 compared with 2020/2
- SERC awarded 12,815 qualifications, the highest volume among the six colleges, representing 22% of the total sector awards.

Members acknowledged that although these trends show strong performance, much of this success is not clearly drawn out within the current CDP reporting framework. Discussion followed on whether the CDP's format and emphasis fully reflect the measures that are strategically important for SERC.

Members noted that SERC's strategic focus in recent years has centred on:

- Student headcount ("students") rather than enrolments, aligning with the "individuals" methodology used by CDP.
- Full-time students rather than part-time, with 4,720 full-time students in 2024/25, second only to BMC.
- Regulated rather than unregulated provision, recognising the value of qualifications that lead to recognised outcomes; SERC had the highest number of students achieving regulated qualifications (7,715) in 2024/25.
- Maximising performance in retention, achievement, and success, with sector-leading rates of 93%, 91% and 84%, sustained over five years.

It was agreed that these areas represent significant impact and should be more visibly reflected within planning and performance discussions.

Members observed notable differences in deprivation quintiles, with SERC targeting a high proportion of learners in groups 1 and 2, raising questions about whether SERC's catchment characteristics differ from those of other colleges.

The Principal advised that this issue should be explored further during the forthcoming strategy day, as SERC's operational area shows significant pockets of deprivation, which may influence performance patterns and learner profiles.

The Chair emphasised the need, within development of the Strategic Direction, to consider changing demographics and the implications for future part-time provision.

Members further suggested that the 16-18 Policy should be examined as part of this future planning work.

#### d) Oxford Leadership Programme

The Principal talked to the written briefing on the recent professional development initiative at the Oxford Leadership Programme. Members noted that the programme had been helpful, practical, and instrumental in supporting progression into the next stage of the Principal/CEO role. The success of the initiative was acknowledged, and it was agreed that continued professional development opportunities for Tier 2 staff should be endorsed and supported.

Moving on members discussed the proposed new Sector Leadership Programme, which is open to Tier 2 staff but, in SERC, is likely to be primarily targeted at Tier 3. It was noted that the programme forms an important part of succession planning and the development of talent within the sector.

The Chair commended the positive impact of leadership within the team and the wider College, stating that the response to recent leadership direction had been evident and that credit was due for this progress.

Members welcomed the inclusion of the 360-degree feedback element within the programme, noting its value in leadership growth and reflection.

The Principal highlighted that SERC's own, in-house, Tier 3 leadership development programme aligns closely with the proposed new sector programme. The similarity was viewed as a strong validation of SERC's existing leadership development provision, reinforcing the quality and relevance of the College's internal approach.

### Agenda Item 5: Items for Approval

*Papers provided to members in advance.*

- a) [Audit Committee minutes from meeting held on 13<sup>th</sup> November and briefing from meeting on 3<sup>rd</sup> February 2026](#)

Mr Hagen, Chair of the Audit Committee, presented the minutes for adoption. He asked members to note the written briefing he had provided on the meeting from 3<sup>rd</sup> February

Mr Hagen talked to the written report and highlighted the following points:

The Committee received an update on key matters arising across risk, assurance, and internal audit, the following points were highlighted:

#### **Strategic Risk Register (SRR) – Key Risks**

- Two SRR risks were discussed, with particular emphasis on in-year finances and the draft three-year budget. Members noted the financial pressures and the potential implications for the College.

#### **Cyber Security**

- The cyber threat environment remains significant; however, the College is managing this risk well with appropriate controls in place.

#### **(SEN Provision)**

- Members were briefed on issues arising from the SEN provision This has resulted in complaints from parents and other stakeholders. Much of the process is outside the College's direct control, and members noted the sensitivity of the matter.

#### **Operational Risk Report**

- The DCEO has reviewed risks within his remit. Two key contracts are nearing end of term— one in Estates and one affecting HR support for Jane. Although these issues are not recorded on the SRR, members agreed it would be prudent to continue receiving updates until either resolutions are reached or new contractual arrangements are in place.

#### **AI Scoping**

- Members noted the development of AI-related work, with Objective 2 focusing on training for Governors. While the area is evolving rapidly, the College has a clear plan and Governors will be able to engage with the training as it progresses.

#### **Internal Audit (IA)**

- No audit reports have been issued since the last meeting; however, Internal Audit is content with current progress. Terms of Reference have been agreed for the sector review.
- A member queried whether student recruitment procedures should be reviewed in isolation or linked to CPD and wider organisational processes. It was noted that the Terms of Reference are still being finalised, allowing opportunity to influence the scope. The review will consider processes in the context of the College's strategic aims.

**Agreed:** The minutes were adopted on the proposal of Paul Finnegan and seconded by Grainne McVeigh

- b) Education Committee minutes from meeting held on 6<sup>th</sup> November 2025 and briefing from meeting on 27<sup>th</sup> January 2026

Ms Corrigan, Chair of the Education Committee, presented the minutes for adoption and asked members to note the written briefing from the recent meeting on 27<sup>th</sup> January.

Ms Corrigan talked to the written briefing and highlighted the following:

A detailed discussion took place regarding the recent ETI report and the evaluation process. It was noted that not all providers are counting data in the same way, which is contributing to inconsistencies across the sector.

The Head of School Engineering and Science presented an overview of departmental delivery. While there were many positives, including strong retention, achievement and success outcomes, a number of challenges were highlighted. These included managing SEN requirements, the impact of the VSS restructure on school management, capacity pressures, and the effect of ETI reviews on staff. Members reaffirmed the importance of maintaining a strong focus on staff and student wellbeing.

Staffing challenges were also noted, particularly difficulties in competing with private-sector salaries.

The Strategy feedback from the Department was reviewed, discussed, and approved.

In relation to the College Development Plan (CDP), some red and amber indicators were reported; however, progress is expected over the course of the year.

An overview of the three departmental reports was presented, with particular emphasis on business engagement.

The Departmental Action Plan was reviewed, including proposals to better support learners with low or no qualifications. A co-design approach was proposed to strengthen outcomes in this area.

Under Any Other Business, members discussed the Department for the Economy's Higher Education consultation. While the proposals were noted to be very ambitious, a sector-wide response is being developed and will be shared with the committee. The proposals could be significant in terms of what may ultimately be realised.

**Agreed:** The minutes were adopted on the proposal of Derek Wilson and seconded by Nuala Reid

- c) Finance and General Purposes minutes from meeting held on 11<sup>th</sup> November 2025 and briefing from meeting on 29<sup>TH</sup> January 2026

Mr Wilson, Vice Chair of the Finance & General Purposes Committee, presented the minutes for adoption and asked members to note the written briefing from the recent meeting on 29<sup>th</sup> January 2026

Mr Wilson provided an update on the meeting, which focused on the two key responsibility areas: Finance and HR. The broad purpose of the committee remains to provide assurance across these domains. Members were advised that the organisation is in a steady and stable position, with good progress being made.

### **Finance Update**

- The 8-month financial submission to the end of November is on target.
- The organisation has taken every opportunity to ensure it remains on track for year-end, with no strategic financial risks identified.
- Supplier payment days remain positive, with no concerns in procurement or debt management.
- Capital projects continue to progress well. Additional funding has been secured, and the operational project list is currently being reviewed and prioritised.

### **HR Update**

- An overview of HR priorities and key workforce metrics was presented.
- The annual staff survey remains a critical tool for demonstrating improvement and identifying areas requiring attention.
- The benchmarking report shows expected patterns, with long-term sickness still the highest category.
- Staffing challenges persist, driven largely by competition with the private sector for talent.

### **Health & Safety**

- Health and Safety continues to feature as a detailed and closely scrutinised agenda item for the FGP.
- A new staff member has been appointed to support this function, and the committee recognised the substantial effort being made to strengthen the H&S environment across the organisation.

**Agreed:** The minutes were adopted on the proposal of Derek Wilson and seconded by Nuala Reid

d) SERC Strategy

The Principal presented the Strategy for approval. He began by advising the document had already been reviewed in detail by the Education Committee, which resulted in a small number of minor amendments based on the feedback received on the version previously approved by the Governing Body and submitted to the Department.

The Education Committee confirmed it was satisfied with the College's response to the Department's feedback, noting that some of the proposed adjustments were operational in nature.

The Department has expressed a clear preference for aligning the Strategy with the 2026–2029 period to support the development of three-year budgets. Several other colleges have already adopted this timeline. The College is content to do likewise and will ensure that operational plans are fully integrated with the revised strategic timeframe.

The Chair commented that adopting a three-year approach is sensible and supports longer-term planning.

**Agreed:** The SERC Strategy was reviewed and approved on the proposal of Nicola Wilson and seconded by Derek Wilson.

#### e) GB Annual Report

The Secretary presented the Governing Body Annual Report for review. She began by advising that the report has consolidated the committee annual reports and included information on how the Governing Body has ensured compliance with the Partnership Agreement. Members noted that this is a first iteration of the report, and it is expected to develop further over time.

Mrs Reid highlighted some date inaccuracies within the report and the Secretary committed to rechecking these.

**Agreed:** Subject to the corrections being made to the Governing Body Annual Report 2024/25 it was approved on the proposal of Nicola Wilson and seconded by Majella Corrigan.

#### Agenda Item 6: Policies for approval

The Chair advised there were no policies presented for approval.

#### Agenda Item 7: Items for Information

#### ***Papers provided to members in advance.***

#### a) Management Accounts

The Principal directed members to the written report at 007A for noting.

## b) Staff Governor Reports

On the invitation of the Chair, the Corporate Staff Governor presented an overview of her written report at 007B. Members noted the key points within the report including reduced competitions funding but events progressing; strong staff development week; governance updates shared; active international programmes; staff encouraged to raise issues and access minutes.

The Teaching Staff Governor provided an overview of his written report including 381 UCAS applications submitted; strong staff support activity including popular AI and wellbeing sessions; structured inter-semester week used for marking and preparation; Teaching Staff Governor role and committee work reaffirmed; no staff issues raised to date. He highlighted the importance of the inter semester week for staff and how valued it is in terms time management in preparation for the new term.

## c) Student Governor Report

The Student Governor talked to the written report provided at 007C and provided an overview of the recent activity within the Students Union. Members noted there has been strong student engagement across campuses; active participation in NUS-USI; valuable Class Rep feedback gathered; Big SU Survey launched; successful Christmas activities; clubs and societies relaunched to boost student belonging.

## Agenda Item 8: Any Other Business:

The Teaching Staff Governor advised members of a staff member who is currently undergoing treatment for cancer. He asked if a fundraising page could be circulated to members to support. The Chair confirmed this could be circulated through the Secretary and wished the staff member well in their treatment.

Mr Finnegan advised that his work colleague asked him to report how well supported his wife is in SERC as a staff member as she currently undergoes cancer treatment. In particular the support of Emma Finney and Jeb Berkely was mentioned and how well cared for the staff member felt during her illness.

The Chair thanked both members for sharing these accounts and noted the solidarity displayed among the staff members.

## Agenda Item 9: Confidential Business

A separate note was taken for this item.

No other business was discussed and the meeting concluded at 7.47pm

## Date of next Meeting:

The next meeting of the Governing Body is scheduled for Tuesday 21<sup>st</sup> April, Lisburn Campus, 5.30pm

Signed:

\_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**John Nugent**

**Chair of the Governing Body**