



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

held on Tuesday 25<sup>th</sup> November 2025 at 17:30, Lisburn Campus and via Microsoft Teams

### 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 Alan McCrum, Mr Darren Stewart, Ms Majella Corrigan, Mr Derek Wilson, Mrs Carolyn King, Mr Samuel Hagen, Mrs Nuala Reid, Mrs Pauline Leeson, Mr Mark Brashier, Mr Steven Lee, Ms Grainne McVeigh, Mrs Nicola Wilson, Dr Danny McConnell

##### **In Attendance:**

Mr Colin McGuckin (Deputy CEO), Mrs Claire Williamson (Secretary to the Governing Body), Mrs Elaine McKeown (Senior International Development Manager) Agenda item 3 only

**Apologies:** Ms Catherine McKay, Mr Paul Finnegan,

**In the Chair:** Mr John Nugent

Before beginning the substantive items on the agenda, the Chair highlighted the importance of attending meetings in person. He noted that at times it is unavoidable to join the meeting online if a member is unwell or travelling however, he added that we are unable to have the same quality of discussion if all members are not present.

#### 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.
- Mr McCrum declared his wife is employed at ETI.
- 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 7<sup>th</sup> October 2025

*Papers previously provided to members.*

The minutes from the meeting held on 7<sup>th</sup> October were approved on the proposal of Pauline and seconded by Nuala Reid.

#### d) Matters Arising/Action Points from previous Meetings:

*Papers previously provided to members.*

The Chair advised that the suggestion of appointing a senior independent director to the Board was considered, however it was felt at this time it is not necessary to progress this. The Chair added that in discussion at Chairs working group it was felt it would not add any value and that there is a robust governance framework in place. He advised that if any member felt strongly about reexploring this option we can of course re-examine it.

#### 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) Sector Effectiveness Review

*Paper previously provided to members.*

The Chair advised that the Sector is nearing completion with most of the Sector getting approval from their Governing Body's this week and last week. The next steps are sharing the report with the Department for noting.

#### g) Annual Self-Assessment Survey Results

*Papers previously provided to members.*

On the invitation of the Chair, the Secretary presented the results of the annual Governing Body survey conducted by DfE, noting that the outcome was extremely positive.

The Chair commented that while a few observations had been raised and reviewed with the Secretary, one related to the number of Governing Body members. It was agreed that as membership numbers are set in legislation, this cannot be changed.

The Chair further noted that the Board currently has an excellent gender balance and a strong mix of skills, which has contributed to maintaining a high-performing Governing Body.

#### h) Co-optee Member

The Chair asked members to consider any appropriate suggestions for a new Co-optee member. He advised that, in terms of the current skills gap, someone from industry would be beneficial. However, he also highlighted that when considering the cohort of Governors due to leave in 2028, this will create a significant gap in members with strong financial expertise.

**Action:** Members to reflect on potential candidates and submit suggestions for consideration.

### 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 and highlighted an MC was still required for the Excellence Awards in Bangor.

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

#### b) Training/Briefing requirements

The Secretary advised if there are any specific training requirements members should advise the Secretary or the Chair.

#### c) Gifts and Hospitality Register 24/25

Members noted the register for 24/25 which did not contain any entries.

## d) Updated Cycle of Business 25/26

The Secretary advised that some presentations have been rescheduled to ensure alignment with College business priorities and timing.

### Agenda Item 3: International Development

*At this juncture the Senior International Development Manager (SIDM) joined the meeting.*

On the invitation of the Chair, the SIDM presented an overview of the work undertaken by the International Team, including details of their most recent visit to China. In discussion the following points were noted:

- **Ministerial Visit:** Query raised on whether the DfE Minister's planned visit to China is still proceeding. Members noted that there is no indication at this stage that the visit is not going ahead.
- **Translation:** Partner institutions provide all translation services when SERC teachers are in China, costs for translators are fully covered.
- **Sharing Experience:** The team shares experiences through comments, videos, and social media dissemination.
- **In-country Support:** It was confirmed that staff were well supported during visits.
- **Confucius Institute:** Engagement with Ulster University's Confucius Institute noted; a Mandarin course was delivered last academic year. Further collaboration is planned, subject to teacher availability.
- **INI Team:** Potential for support from Invest NI team in China; follow-up contacts planned with help of Ms McVeigh
- **Qualifications Across Borders:** Aligning qualifications is complex; currently exploring individual models.
- **IELTS Testing Centre:** Overview provided – operates as an examination centre for SATs.
- **Future Steps:** A multi-year International Development plan is currently being developed and will be brought to a future meeting for discussion and endorsement.

Members commended the International Team for their work and the successful China visit.

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

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

The Principal talked to the written report provided at 004 and highlighted the current financial performance and enrolment figures.

Members noted draft figures from the October CDR lift for 24/25 showed the highest success rate at SERC for many years at 87%. The Principal highlighted given the flux around staff in 24/25 this is extremely commendable for staff to have succeeded in pushing the rate up.

#### Agenda Item 4: Items for Approval

*Papers provided to members in advance.*

- a) Audit Committee minutes from meeting held on 16<sup>th</sup> September and briefing from meeting on 13<sup>th</sup> November 2025

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 13<sup>th</sup> November.

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.

1. **Strategic Risk Register (SRR) and Management Report**

The Committee noted that two *red* risks remain on the Strategic Risk Register.

The *in year* financial viability position is stable; however, risks relate primarily to *future year* financial sustainability.

Amber-rated risks, including those relating to SEN, had been discussed previously at the Education Committee.

2. **Operational Risk Updates**

The Deputy Principal Planning Performance and Engagement presented operational risks within her area, including issues associated with SEN examinations and project-related risks, particularly those linked to recruitment and resource pressures.

3. **IT Resilience Statement**

An IT Resilience Statement was presented. There were no significant issues to highlight.

4. **AI Update**

Members requested that the AI update include clearer reference to the risk management framework and associated reporting arrangements.

It was further requested that the AI Strategy be reviewed in conjunction with the overall assurance framework.

5. **Internal Audit Plan 2025–2028**

The new internal auditors presented their Internal Audit Plan for 2025–28. The Committee received reassurance that the audit team has relevant experience within the FE sector.

The committee queried whether any deep dive work on SEN could be incorporated into Internal Audit activity. The Principal noted that ETI is currently examining this area. The matter had been discussed during the drafting of the audit plan, and Internal Audit will revisit it later in the year.

**Agreed:** The minutes were adopted on the proposal of Majella Corrigan and seconded by Nicola Wilson.

- b) Education Committee minutes from meeting held on 23<sup>rd</sup> September and briefing from meeting on 6<sup>th</sup> November 2025

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 6<sup>th</sup> November.

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

The FE Director attended the meeting, providing a valuable opportunity for engagement. The Committee formally agreed the first Annual Report, which outlines compliance with the Partnership Agreement.

The FE Director briefed the Committee on several key strategic issues:

- Move to 3-Year Budgets

A consultation is expected in January. While this shift is welcome, it will still not enable the sector to utilise accruals. Of the £700m overall accruals, £230m relates to FE. The Director emphasised the need for a more evidence-based approach to budgeting.

- Demographic Decline

The Director noted the sector must adapt to falling learner numbers and adopt a more targeted approach in identifying and attracting future learners.

- Disability and Outcomes Gap

Highlighted a significant disparity: individuals with disabilities holding a degree are earning the same as non-disabled individuals qualified at Level 2. This underscores urgent systemic issues around equity and outcomes.

Aurla McLoughlin, Head of School of Arts & Sport, delivered an overview that was positive in terms of learner achievement, performance, and success.

They were open about the challenges brought by recent restructuring and noted that the school is still feeling the impact of the loss of Andrew Corbett.

Having the FE Director present for this discussion was regarded as particularly timely and constructive.

A detailed discussion followed on Essential Skills, covering:

- The impact of the recent ETI report on staff morale
- New approaches being trialled, including front-loading
- Ongoing concerns that the contextual aspects of ES are not supporting learners effectively
- Specific challenges around reading demands in certain assessments

- A useful opportunity to highlight the disconnect with the FE Director and ongoing implementation challenges

The Head of Quality Excellence and Development provided an update on the development of SERC's Quality Improvement Plan (QIP) following the ETI review of Traineeships.

The Committee noted that DfE's response to the first drafts of the Traineeship and Essential Skills QIPs was included in the papers.

Members noted the feedback was disappointing.,

The FE Director expressed that the feedback did not meet her expectations and undertook to take this forward within DfE. She highlighted that the QIPs belong to the College and was supportive of the efforts the College have made to address the feedback.

**Action:** The Education Committee Chair agreed to approach Graeme Wilkinson at DfE to issue an invite to a future committee meeting to discuss the research into adult learners in Ireland

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

#### c) Finance and General Purposes minutes from meeting held on 11<sup>th</sup> September 2025 and briefing from meeting on 11<sup>th</sup> November 2025

Mr McCrum, 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 11<sup>th</sup> November.

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

- The Committee noted that the College remains in a positive financial position mid-way through the year. An uplift in funding has contributed to a stable profile, with no immediate concerns identified.
- Members discussed the ongoing requirements relating to climate change, acknowledging that associated obligations, reporting and compliance activities will require continued monitoring and active management.
- HR reported that early-year work had focused on strategic priorities. Staff sickness levels remain a challenge, showing a 1.4% increase compared with the previous year.
- Results from the staff survey were presented, structured around six themed areas. These themes will inform a comprehensive action plan. Progress against the plan will be reviewed at each Committee meeting, and effective delivery was emphasised as critical.
- The Committee received a broad overview of workstreams underway within the Learning Academy area, including the introduction of new AI platforms for staff. A budget allocation of £50,000 has been committed, with ongoing review to be undertaken as implementation progresses.
- Health and Safety arrangements were reviewed, and the remit of the Terms of Reference was enhanced to ensure alignment with corporate governance requirements.

**Agreed:** The minutes were adopted on the proposal of Cathy McKay and seconded by Alan McCrum

#### d) FGP Committee Terms of Reference

The FGP Chair presented the ToR for review and advised it had been enhanced to reflect the committee's role in Health and Safety.

**Agreed:** The FGP Committee Terms of Reference were reviewed and approved on the proposal of Majella Corrigan and seconded by Derek Wilson.

#### e) Committee Annual Reports

The Committee Chairs presented their respective reports for review. Members noted that the reports provided a high-level overview of the function and activity of each Committee and demonstrated how compliance with the relevant clauses of the Partnership Agreement had been achieved.

**Agreed:** The Education Committee Annual Report was approved on the proposal of Pauline Leeson and seconded by Nuala Reid

**Agreed:** The Finance & General Purposes Annual Report was approved on the proposal of Pauline Leeson and seconded by Steven Lee

**Agreed:** The Audit Committee Annual Report was approved on the proposal of Majella Corrigan and seconded by Nuala Reid

### Agenda Item 6: Policies for approval

#### a) Fees Policy 2026-27

The Deputy CEO presented the policy for approval and highlighted the proposed increase to fees.

**Agreed:** The Fees Policy 26-27 was reviewed and approved on the proposal of Nicola Wilson and seconded by Derek Wilson.

### Agenda Item 7: Items for Information

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

#### a) Management Accounts

The Deputy CEO directed members to the written report at 007A for noting. He added that he does not foresee any pressures and IMPMS will continue to closely review all spend and budgets.

## b) Strategic Risk Register

The Deputy Chief Executive directed members to the Risk Register and advised that the matter had already been addressed within the Audit Chair's committee briefing. He confirmed that he was satisfied members had been appropriately briefed on the Register and noted that he would continue to closely monitor the red rated risks.

## c) Staff Governor Reports

On the invitation of the Chair the Corporate Staff Governor presented an overview of her written report at 007C. She advised she was extremely pleased to see the funding had been reinstated for the Skills Competitions since the last meeting of the Governing Body. She provided an overview of the success of staff and students involved in the World Skills Competition.

**Action:** Letters of congratulations from the Governing Body will be issued to staff and students involved in the recent World Skills Competition

The Teaching Staff Governor highlighted staff have been reassured that Human Resources are actively recruiting 11 additional Learning Support Assistants to help alleviate SEN pressures and provide targeted support for students.

## d) Student Governor Report

The Student Governor talked to the written report provided at 007D and provided an overview of the recent activity within the Students Union. Members noted they were very encouraged to see Gambling Awareness included in the initiatives as it is something students may get into difficulty with now with such easy access to gambling sites.

### Agenda Item 8: Any Other Business:

No other business was discussed.

### Agenda Item 9: Confidential Business

A separate note was taken for this item.

### Date of next Meeting:

The next meeting of the Governing Body is scheduled for Thursday 12<sup>th</sup> February 2026, Downpatrick Campus, 5.30pm

Signed:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'John Nugent', is written over a light blue rectangular background. Below the signature is a short horizontal line.

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

**John Nugent**

**Chair of the Governing Body**