

MINUTES OF A TELEPHONE CONERENCE MEETING OF THE SOUTHERN REGIONAL COLLEGE GOVERNING BODY HELD ON TUESDAY 24 MARCH 2020 AT 17.30.

MEMBERS IN ATTENDANCE:

Mr Andrew Saunders (Chair)
Mr Brian Doran (Chief Executive)
Mr Scott Alexander
Mrs Teresa Campbell
Mr Arder Carson
Mr Gordon Gough
Mr Aidan McCormick
Mr John Nugent
Prof Gregory O'Hare
Dr Eileen Stewart
Mrs Judith Thompson
Mr Matthew Turner

IN ATTENDANCE:

Mr Keith Kilpatrick, Director of Curriculum
Mr Terry McGonigal, Director of Finance and Planning
Mr Raymond Sloan, Director of Client Service
Miss Lindsay Armstrong, Secretary to the Governing Body

The meeting convened at 17.37.

Miss Armstrong informed that apologies for absence were received from Mr Redmond, Mr Swail and Mrs Wilson.

Mr Saunders thanked Members for attending and advised that the purpose of the meeting was to provide a clear update to Governing Body Members on measures taken to date to address concerns arising due to the Corona virus pandemic.

Mr Saunders informed Members that Governor Redmond has been in contact to say that his wife is currently being treated at Craigavon Hospital for Covid 19. He stated that the Board's thoughts are with him and his family at this difficult time.

Mr Doran remarked that the College is facing its most challenging period to date. He advised that the Critical Incident Management Team (CIMT) revised the College Contingency Plan in early February 2020 and the Senior Management Team (SMT) has been meeting at least twice weekly to develop and revise contingency plans as the situation has evolved over recent weeks. Mr Doran relayed his thanks to the management team and wider staff for all their hard work in organising and adapting in light of the circumstances.

Mr Doran advised that the College Principals met Wednesday 18 March and recommended that all colleges suspend delivery from Monday 23 March. He informed that this position was subsequently endorsed by College Chairs and preparations were made to support the education and training needs of students and staff were to be encouraged to work from home remotely.

Mr Doran advised that it was the College's intention to have all campuses open 23 and 24 March to facilitate skeleton staff in key areas to finalised preparations and for some teams including Finance, IT services and HR to come on site to complete tasks for trialling and testing in anticipation of a complete lockdown. Mr Doran advised that a press release on the move to remote learning had been issued on Thursday 19 March.

Mr Doran stated that the need for immediate lockdown came sooner than planned following the Prime Minister's statement on the evening of 23 March. He informed that following discussion with the Chairman it was agreed the need to shut all campuses and move entirely to remote working, and this was immediately communicated to staff. Mr Doran advised that the rest of the FE sector has followed a similar approach. He advised that SRC has issued laptops to all staff where a requirement has been identified.

Mr Doran set out a summary of key concerns the College is focusing on, including;

- arranging remote working for staff and preparing the student body to move to online learning;
- payment of EMA and weekly training allowances to students; and
- payment for Care to Learn and Hardship.

Mr Doran advised of difficulties in making payment to students with no bank account details. He advised that the issue of remote working makes the process of issuing cheques impossible and that students have again been contacted to provide bank details.

Mr Doran informed of further areas of focus, namely;

- processing staff wages remotely;
- paying suppliers and handling of paper based invoices;
- communicating with students via social media, website and SRC email accounts;
- answering student queries; and
- maintaining IT services.

Mr Doran informed that a frequently asked questions statement is uploaded to the front page of the website and is being updated regularly. He extended his thanks to the IT team who have been working tirelessly to support staff and students.

Mr Doran informed Members that Mount Charles, who provide the College's catering and cleaning services, took the decision (prior to the Chancellor's salary support intervention) to lay off its workforce on 20 March. Mr Doran advised that he continues to work with the sector colleges to ensure that we are in a position to support contractors to cope with the current crisis, resume normal service delivery and fulfil their contractual obligations once the pandemic has abated. He advised that as such and in the absence of any DoF guidance the College has used Cabinet Office guidance and will continue to make payment for the catering and cleaning contract to ensure business and service continuity.

Members noted that the current health and economic crisis has had a significant impact on the Estates new builds delivery. Mr Doran advised that the Armagh site was formally handed over to the College on Monday 23 March and planned delivery for equipment has been deferred. Mr McGonigal advised that the College will ensure that payment for approximately £400k of equipment due to be delivered, will be paid to suppliers. Mr Doran informed that the College is exploring the use of Vesting Agreements to secure the items and informed that security of the site is being provided by G4S.

Members were reminded that the DE Minister has announced that all GCSE and A level exams in the summer will be suspended and it is likely that grading decisions will be based on historical information and predicated grading. Mr Doran informed that there has been an absence of guidance in relation to vocational training and advised that although college principals are in regular contact with departmental officials, there has not been sufficient decision making made to provide critical guidance in this matter. Mr Doran advised of concerns arising from apprenticeship placements and informed that to date 47 apprentices have been made redundant.

Mr Doran advised on a commonality of concerns across the sector and informed that although the colleges have received some high level communications from awarding bodies, colleges urgently require a comprehensive briefing from DfE and CCEA on the likely parameters of any processes being developed by regulators to safeguard student progression. He reminded Members of the diverse array of awarding bodies and assessment types utilised by FE colleges and stressed the need for an agreed position statement to be issued.

Mr Doran informed that HR managers are meeting regularly to provide guidance to staff and advised that the College will honour all existing contractual arrangements.

Members were informed that Principals' Group have raised the issue of potential loss of funding as a result of this emergency and have estimated a potential loss of income between £2,780k and £3,665k. He advised that he continues to work with DfE to support the release of funds to the College.

Mr Saunders recognised that the current position is not easy however remarked that the sector is working well together with management providing support to staff, students and contractors and continuing to support the community.

Mr Saunders acknowledged the importance of addressing any anxiety issues the student body may be experiencing in these uncertain times and the need to ensure appropriate funding for delivery once the current crisis has abated.

Mr Doran informed that the Department has agreed to suspend certain corporate governance returns including the submission of the College Development Plan and Year End Assurance statements.

Mr Doran stated that in addition to problems arising regarding decanting to the new builds and the necessity to delay planned events, new enrolments to the College will be affected and online applications interrupted. He stated that engagement with new applicants and the pre entry process will be significantly affected as there will no longer be via face to face interaction.

Mr Saunders recommended that Governing Body meetings continue to be conducted to enable a return to delivery and ensure that the Board are fully aware of further developments and commitments.

Dr Stewart commended college management on their responsiveness to the many dilemmas that have arisen and enquired about CPD guidance on ongoing maintenance. Mr Doran advised that he is not aware of any guidance but will need to check this.

Mr Gough thanked Mr Doran and the management team and on behalf of the Governing Body offered any support identified. Mr Gough agreed on the approach to continue to pay suppliers and enquired about the ability of all staff to work from home. Mr Doran replied that remote working may not be ideally suited to all staff and feedback from their line managers may identify the need for repurposing of roles. He advised on work surrounding the Armagh new build and installation requirements.

Mr Gough advised on good experience utilising ZOOM for virtual meetings. Mr McGonigal informed that the IT department are currently looking at using TEAMS for facilitating offsite meetings.

Mr Nugent reiterated the Governing Body's thanks to management, offered his view that the Estates Project Team will continue to deliver, voiced attentiveness to any attempted scams or frauds and enquired whether the Colleges buildings or facilities could be repurposed for other needs.

Mr Doran stated that it is incumbent for the Colleges to offer any assistance to the wider community and advised that the Department will take the lead regarding potential use of premises. Mr Doran informed that the contractors may move offsite and the planned demolition of the Banbridge campus may need to be rescheduled.

Mrs Campbell commended the actions of the SMT, emphasised the importance of staff and student health and wellbeing and enquired about security in place for the Armagh new build. Mr Doran advised that the College will continue to monitor the security arrangements provided by G4S and informed that Inspire continues to provide counselling support to staff and students.

Mr Carson applauded management for the speed and quality of their response and asked about any requirements needed from the Governing Body.

Mr Doran advised that the main concern contends with uncertainty around the issue of qualifications and the process surrounding skills competency programmes. Mr Doran stressed the need for engagement and informed that delays will impact on the wider education system.

Mrs Thompson thanked college staff for their resilience in this difficulty time and recommended a continuation of business continuity with an emphasis on student care.

Mr Doran deferred to the Directorate for any additional comments.

Mr McGonigal informed that his team are aware of the potential for attempted frauds and are remaining vigilant.

Mr Kilpatrick advised Members of numbers of audits being performed by the Heads of Faculty and reported positive feedback on student engagement. He stated that the curriculum team will endeavour to ensure that students finish their assessments as far as practically possible.

Mr Sloan advised that he is happy with provision of financial support pledged by the Cabinet Office and advised that good communication practice will be provided via the Marketing Team and Student Services.

Prof O'Hare echoed his colleagues shared adulation in terms of the decisiveness and pre-emptiveness of college management's response to the current crisis, and acknowledged that the vocational nature of education provided by FE colleges adds an extra layer of challenge. Prof O'Hare recognised that colleges do not have the autonomy to make decisions in some circumstances and stressed the need for the many different adjudicating organisations to provide relevant guidance in order to provide comfort, structure and reassurance to the many students navigating a vulnerable period in their lives.

Prof O'Hare drew awareness to the potential ramifications of social exclusion and encouraged the College to take thought leadership in this regard. Prof O'Hare endorsed the repurposing of premises and the utilisation of ZOOM as a virtual tool to support future Governing Body meetings.

Mr Doran advised that the College has promoted and supported the opportunity for any members of staff who wish to work volunteer their services to support the health and care sectors during the Covid crisis.

Mr McCormick reported on positive feedback from the recent ETI level 3 inspection and stated that it was clear that SMT and HOFs had worked extremely hard to address previous concerns. Mr McCormick expressed concern over the serious disadvantages vocational students must endure and equality within the 14-19 space. Mr Doran conveyed unease regarding the decision on implementing the new traineeship scheme highlighting that in light of the crisis this could be delayed.

Mr Kilpatrick relayed complimentary feedback from the recent ETI inspection and advised on strong staff / student relationships and the observation that most students have very good opportunities to develop work ready skills.

Mr Saunders and Mr Doran remarked on uncertain times and thanked the Governing Body for their support.

Mr Alexander asked that the well wishes of the Board be passed onto Governor Redmond.

The meeting concluded at 18.49.
