

MINUTES OF A TELEPHONE CONERENCE MEETING OF THE SOUTHERN REGIONAL COLLEGE GOVERNING BODY HELD ON TUESDAY 2 JUNE 2020 AT 17.30.

MEMBERS IN ATTENDANCE:

Mr Andrew Saunders (Chair)
Mr Brian Doran (Chief Executive)
Mr Scott Alexander
Miss Hollie Burton
Mrs Teresa Campbell
Mr Arder Carson
Mr Gordon Gough
Mr Aidan McCormick
Mr John Nugent
Prof Gregory O'Hare
Mr Tom Redmond
Dr Eileen Stewart
Mr Kieran Swail
Mr Matthew Turner
Mrs Nicola Wilson

IN ATTENDANCE:

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

The meeting convened at 17.33.

Mr Saunders thanked Members for attending and advised on the potential of scheduling further Governing Body briefings should the need arise.

A01. APOLIGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Mr Raymond Sloan and Mrs Judith Thompson.

A02. DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

The Chair reminded those present to declare at the commencement of the meeting any conflict of interest held in matters to be discussed. Mrs Wilson declared an interest as an employee of Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council. The interest was noted.

A03. CHAIRMAN'S BUSINESS

Mr Saunders asked that all Members complete their committee self-assessment questionnaires and return to the Secretary at their earliest convenience.

He requested that should anyone wish to question or make comment throughout the briefing, to alert him using the 'hands up' icon.

A04. QUALIFICATIONS UPDATE

Mr Doran informed Members of the measures that are being taken to provide qualification outcomes for students. He advised that the extraordinary regulatory framework being used by the exams regulator categorises qualifications as; calculated results, adaptive assessment and delayed qualifications.

Mr Doran informed that a substantial number of qualifications will be awarded through calculated results and advised on the on-going difficulties in seeking awarding organisation guidance on adaptive assessment.

Mr Doran advised on engagement with the Department and expressed hope that the Minister will provide clearance on measures to be taken to permit some students to return to college to undertake simulated assessment. He informed that the College are carrying out appropriate risk assessments and applying governance guidance. Mr Doran informed that the Principals' Group are meeting with the regulator CCEA on 3 June to request an extension on the submission of adaptive assessments to the end of August.

Mr Redmond noted the many difficulties of demonstrating practical skills outside the workshop setting.

Mr Doran confirmed that competency based validation is affected in the areas of construction trade, engineering, motor vehicle, hairdressing and beauty.

Mr Kilpatrick advised on the added burden on lecturers to assess calculated results, and informed that the College's Awarding Panel are striving to help staff feel comfortable. Members discussed the requirement to rank students in order to support CCEA with the sifting process, to produce equalising and normalised results.

Mr Kilpatrick informed on the heavy workload of the Awarding Panel and confirmed that A levels, GCSE and Essential Skills for literacy and numeracy have been assessed. He advised that the panel have been working with the School Partnerships Project and informed on a good degree of reassurance provided by the schools.

Mr Kilpatrick advised on challenges arising in processing centre assessed grades in some vocational areas and informed that he has requested that the deadline from Pearson be extended to 8 July. He reminded Members that the College are making representations directly to the awarding organisations as the regulator was ineffective in ensuring awarding organisations' guidance was clear, timely and consistent. He advised that many organisations have furloughed staff and informed on the corresponding difficulties that have arisen due to a lack of responsiveness.

Mr Turner informed on his experience in providing evidence on calculated results to the Awarding Panel and remarked on an understanding environment, with a good level of challenge to provide assurance on practices. Members were advised that student attendance attributes a minor weighting and work submitted prior to the March lockdown will provide reassurance in respect of past evidential information. Governors were informed that examinations will not be taking place remotely.

Mr Kilpatrick advised on challenges arising within Work Based Learning and informed that the sector are working with the Department to enable approval to be provided from the awarding organisations for simulated assessments for trade and health and beauty programmes.

Members remarked on a disappointing lack of engagement with the regulator and an apparent failure from them to acknowledge the advice provided. The Governing Body noted a perceived unwillingness from the regulator to assert themselves to provide challenge and guidance to the awarding organisations.

A05. BUSINESS PREPAREDNESS

Mr Doran referred Members to the Covid-19 Staff Workplace Guide and informed Members that the Department have confirmed their intention to establish an advisory and oversight group that will develop guidelines on the safe resumption of onsite educational provision in colleges and private training organisations. He informed that the plan requires Ministerial approval.

Mr Doran referred Members to the document setting out the College's approach to reopening the campuses and preparing for curriculum delivery in the new academic year. Mr Doran stressed that the approach will be subject to change, reflecting PHA advice and best practice guidance.

He informed on the likely requirement to extend remote working, changes to be made to curriculum delivery, student service, key business processes and premises. Mr Redmond recommended that particular attention be focused on ventilated areas and the quarantine of goods.

Mr Doran advised on the key assumptions used in the College's planning processes and consideration given to government guidelines, social distancing and remote working. He advised that campus opening will be based on the need for students and staff to access facilities to undertake adaptive assessment, to make preparations for the new academic year, to prepare the building for the new Covid-19 measures including personal hygiene and social distancing, and to undertake business functions that cannot be conducted remotely.

Mr Doran informed that work to 'fit out' the Armagh campus is being prioritised, with other campuses reopening in an ordered manner based on need. Mr Gough enquired if courses may be required to move location and considerations given to staff with shielding letters. Mr Doran stated that he did not see the need currently to move provision and advised that attention will be given to class sizes and availability of rooms and informed that at this point he would not be asking staff with shielding letters to return to campus. Governors were advised that the current guidance states that individuals with shielding letters should stay at home and avoid face to face contact for 12 weeks. Members acknowledged that attention should be dedicated to the mental health of staff and further consideration given to transport, childcare obligations and policing social distancing.

Mr Doran advised that efforts are focused on providing the maximum curriculum offer and ensuring that the service supply chain is not impacted.

He informed on the guiding principles applied to health and safety, and preparing staff to return to work. He advised on consultation with the trade unions and the need to provide a platform for staff to raise concerns.

Mr Doran advised on planned increased cleaning and reduction of touch points, use of PPE and a more flexible approach to delivery models. He advised that staff will be supported in developing new, or adapting current material for online delivery, that new learners entering the first year of study will receive a full induction and all students will be given guidance to support their effective engagement through virtual learning environments.

Mr Doran stated that the College recognises that many students may be unable to participate in remote learning from home due to a lack of access to IT resources, including broadband access. He acknowledged that some members of staff are also unable to perform their duties for the same reasons. He informed that the College is assessing the requirements and considering plans to provide a dedicated space within the campuses. Mr Nugent enquired about financial assistance in place to provide IT equipment to students. Mr Doran confirmed that he has raised the subject with the Department, having noted the additional funding granted to schools. He informed that the FE Director is committed to obtaining additional funding to support this provision in Colleges.

Members noted plans relating to effective infection prevention and control and considerations being given to social distancing including screening, desk spacing, circulation within campuses, queue control, office seating, travel, meeting and shared spaces, canteen seating and student activities.

Mr Doran informed that the College is asking staff and students to be responsible for repository etiquette, hand hygiene, and to adhere to signage and room management. He advised that staff will be asked to complete a health declaration before returning to campus buildings.

Mr Doran provided detail on the new admissions and enrolment process on the assumption that the College campuses will be open in August and advised on the proposed approach to curriculum delivery using face to face, online learning and adopting an alternating model. Members noted proposals to the delivery of level 1, 2, 3, HE, WBL, accredited evening, recreational evening and essential skills programmes.

Mr Doran informed that a well thought-out and orchestrated change management communications strategy will be developed for the transitioned return to campus. He advised that communication will be focused on why groups and individuals are chosen to return to work, how the College is following government guidelines, and reinforcing the steps that staff should take if someone is exhibiting symptoms or is confirmed as having Covid-19. Mr Doran informed that communication will emphasise measures taken to ensure health and safety, and the need for shared responsibility from all staff across a number of areas.

Mr Doran referred Members to the Directorate responsibility for different work streams including staff training, legal compliance, teaching and learning, finance, IT infrastructure and student support.

Prof O'Hare expressed concern over fiscal repercussions perhaps reflective of reduced student numbers, the altering of infrastructure as a requirement of health and safety considerations and increased staff contact hours. Mr Doran advised that early indications are that the sector will face considerable financial strain if no additional funding is provided. Mr McGonigal stressed the need to decouple student numbers from the block grant and advised on the potential of significant financial hardship in forthcoming years. Mr Saunders remarked that the College has underwent substantial streamlining in recent years and advised that the situation will need to be closely monitored by the Finance Committee.

Governors noted that the plans are based on current assumptions and stressed the need for immediate clarity and guidance from DFE and Public Health Authority. Mr Doran advised that he will provide further updates to the Governing Body as necessary. Members were asked to review the documents provided in detail and relay any comments to the Secretary to convey to relevant parties.

A06. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

Mr Doran informed that Principals would be presenting to the Economy Committee on Tuesday 9 June.

Mr Saunders confirmed that he has grave concerns on matters relating to accountability and leadership and advised that he will confer with the other Chairs to address matters.

The meeting concluded at 19.31.
