

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE SOUTHERN REGIONAL COLLEGE GOVERNING BODY HELD ON TUESDAY 23 MARCH 2021 AT 17.30 VIA TELECONFERENCE.

PRESENT:

Mr Andrew Saunders (Chair)
Mr Brian Doran (SRC CEO)
Mr Scott Alexander
Mrs Teresa Campbell
Mr Arder Carson
Mr Aaron Foy
Mr Gordon Gough
Mr Aidan McCormick
Mr John Nugent
Prof Gregory O'Hare
Mr Tom Redmond
Dr Eileen Stewart
Mr Kieran Swail
Mrs Judith Thompson
Mr Matthew Turner
Mrs Nicola Wilson

IN ATTENDANCE:

Mr Graeme Wilkinson, DfE Director of Skills
Mr Keith Kilpatrick, Director of Curriculum
Mr Terry McGonigal, Director of Finance and Planning
Mr Raymond Sloan, Director of Client Services
Mrs Carolyn Davison, AD HE & Quality Improvement
Mrs Fiona Bradley, AD FE & Training
Mrs Lorraine McKeown, AD Student Services & Marketing
Mr Stephen Todd, AD IT Development & Infrastructure Systems
Mrs Carmel Murray, Head of Faculty HESC
Mrs Elaine Nesbitt, Head of Faculty PRSE
Mr Lindsay Bronte, Head of Faculty BUTE
Mr Stephen Rogan, Head of Faculty CDAC
Mrs Tracy Rice, Head of Business Engagement
Mr Gary Young, Head of Estates
Mr Brendan McGuigan, Boardroom Apprentice
Miss Lindsay Armstrong, Secretary to the Governing Body

The meeting convened at 17.32.

Mr Saunders welcomed Mr Wilkinson and members of the Senior Management Team to the meeting and thanked Mr Wilkinson for agreeing to attend and provide an update on the Economic Recovery Plan and Skills Strategy.

Prof O'Hare, Mr Foy, Mrs Thompson and Mrs Murray arrived at the meeting at 17.36.

A01. ECONOMIC RECOVERY PLAN AND SKILLS STRATEGY

Mr Wilkinson thanked Members for the invitation and advised that NI colleges are the key providers for delivering the recommendations arising out of the OECD Skills Strategy. He informed that consultation on the DfE Skills Strategy is to commence in the next couple of weeks and advised on the importance placed on skills in the Department's Recovery Plan for the NI Economy.

Mr Wilkinson informed that the number of benefit claimants in NI in December 2020 was approximately 58,400, and double that of March 2020. He confirmed that NI is slipping behind the rest of the UK in terms of competitiveness and informed on pre-existing challenges including low productivity, a significant number of the population with low or no skills and an inability to meet the demand in L3 to L5.

Mr Wilkinson advised that NI is recording the highest level of economic inactivity in the UK in excess of 28% and informed on a decline of 24% in monetary terms and a decrease of £23.6m of funding for skills since the last skills strategy produced in 2011.

Mr Wilkinson referred to the emphasis on skills contained within the Programme for Government and the requirement to highlight the importance of inclusion, responsiveness, progression and outcomes. He advised on policy priorities to address digital skills, lifelong learning and the skills imbalance, informing Members that 16% of the population in NI have no formal qualifications. He advised that in comparison, the Republic are performing well in terms of education provision.

Mr Wilkinson spoke to the required response to address governance, investment and policy cohesion. In response to a query from the Chair, Mr Wilkinson advised that financial investment is key to creating a skills eco-system and developing on the good work between colleges and local businesses.

ACTION By whom

Mr Doran referred to the proposed levels of funding to support the DfE Recovery Plan and asked if this was dependent on the NI Executive's support. Mr Wilkinson confirmed that funding required Executive support and advised that monies have been secured against the flexible skills fund and confirmed that a number of business cases are being developed.

Mr Redmond commented on the challenges that have arisen in competing with private organisations and the disconnect in providing school leavers with alternative options on career progression. Mr Wilkinson concurred, stating that a wider societal conversation needs to take place to assist learners in making an informed choice and reiterate that technical qualifications are just as valued by employers.

Mr Kilpatrick thanked Mr Redmond and Mr Wilkinson for their observations, and agreed that more work needs to be done to engage with young learners and introduce the options available for technical progression on career paths.

Mr Wilkinson stressed the significance of getting everyone onto the ladder for skills progression, advising on the results of the skills barometer identifying a lack of skills in levels 3, 4 and 5. He stated that it is important to note that data has revealed a 20% increase in life and health outcomes in advancement from L1 to L2.

Mr Alexander expressed concern that young people may be disengaging whilst in secondary education and advised that proper investment is required to progress with initiatives.

Mr McCormick spoke to the opportunities available to address the 14-19 strategy, and cohesion necessary between educational providers to offer the most appropriate progression routes into careers.

Prof O'Hare addressed the decreased funding and advised that officials should act quickly to make public funds available to increase the opportunity of education. He expressed concern and acknowledged the seismic correlation between a lack of education on health and crime statistics.

In response to a query from Mrs Wilson on sustainability, Mr Wilkinson informed on four growth areas within NI namely, green economy, advanced manufacturing, digital technology and health and life science. He advised that officers are being responsive to sector needs and concurred with Prof O'Hare's recommendation to act swiftly.

Mr Turner shared his observation that the level of accountability for a lack of essential skills in school leavers needs to be addressed.

On behalf of the Governing Body, Mr Saunders thanked Mr Wilkinson for an informative and helpful report. Mr Wilkinson expressed his thanks to the Board and stated he was encouraged to keep the conversation going.

Mr Wilkinson, Mrs Davison, Mrs Bradley, Mrs McKeown, Mr Todd, Mrs Murray, Mrs Nesbitt, MR Bronte, Mr Rogan, Mrs Rice and Mr Young left the meeting at 18.44.

A02. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

No apologies for absence were received.

A03. 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 employee of Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council.

A04. MINUTES OF THE GOVERNING BODY MEETING HELD 16 FEBRUARY 2021

The minutes of the Governing Body meeting of 16 February 2021 were reviewed for accuracy and approved on proposal from Prof O'Hare and seconded by Mrs Thompson.

A05. MATTERS ARISING

None.

A06. CHAIRMAN'S BUSINESS

Mr Saunders informed that six applicants have submitted application templates for the shortlisting exercise for the co-optee vacancy and that they would now progress to the next stage. He thanked the Committee Chairs for their assistance throughout and advised that the panel will put forward recommendations for interview.

In regard to his own tenure, Mr Saunders advised that the Department will likely seek Ministerial approval to an extension beyond July 2021. He informed that the Department are likely to launch a competition to address BIM membership and have indicated that appointments should be made prior to December 2021.

Mr Saunders advised he was seeking Members' approval to participate in the Boardroom Apprentice scheme 2021-2022 and welcomed Mr McGuigan's thoughts on his experience to date. Mr McGuigan stated that although he was disappointed that current circumstances have not allowed for physical meetings, he has learnt a lot from the experience and would encourage the Board to engage in the next programme.

Mr Turner stated that he has greatly enjoyed his tenure on the Governing Body and would be keen to afford the opportunity to willing apprentices. Mr Swail echoed his sentiments and spoke to the benefits of participating in mentoring schemes. All Members indicated their approval to participate in the Boardroom Apprentice programme 2021-2022.

A07. COMMITTEE MINUTES

- **Audit Committee 9 February**

Mr Nugent referred to his previous verbal update on considerations of the Audit Committee meeting of 9 February. He confirmed that Members reviewed various Internal Audit reports, the Corporate Risk Register, approved the Risk Management policy and recommended that the RTTCWG and Annual Account be presented to the full Governing Body for final approval.

- **Staffing Committee 2 March**

Mr Alexander referred Members to the draft Staffing Committee minutes of 2 March and relayed that the Department were not supportive of the proposal for the staff recognition award.

He informed Governors that the Committee have requested a breakdown of data in relation to males and females employed at each level within the College and advised that the gender pay gap legislation is not yet implemented in Northern Ireland.

Mr Alexander confirmed that Members reviewed the KPI in year report, approved two career break requests and were impressed by activities undertaken and recorded within the Employee Development Plan.

He informed that the Committee approved a one year extension to IIP accreditation process and considered that a hybrid model of working may be adopted going forward.

Mr Saunders requested that the data on gender analysis be brought before the full Board at their June meeting after consideration at the next Staffing Committee.

Miss Armstrong

In response to a query from Mr Carson regarding the sickness absence data, Mr Doran advised that sector comparison data will be provided within the year-end report. Mr Alexander advised that remote working may potentially impact on mental health wellbeing and this may be harder to quantify under current circumstances.

Mr Turner referred to the gender pay report and recommended that equal opportunity should be quantified in addition to equality outcome.

- **Finance & General Purposes Committee 9 March**

Mrs Campbell referred Members to the draft minutes of the Finance and General Purposes Committee convened on 9 March and confirmed that Members conducted their regular review of the SRC Management Accounts. She remarked on an excellent account of income and expenditure, and advised that the Committee were informed on restrictions placed on apprentices traveling to complete work assessment in the Republic.

Mrs Campbell reminded Members of the challenges that arise operating within two differing financial years and advised that pay administration is favourable due to a number of vacant posts.

Mrs Campbell confirmed that Committee Members reviewed the Governing Body budget, the Complaints and Compliments report, approved two policies and were informed that all three Covid-19 financial assistance schemes have been approved and the College are beginning to process payments.

Mr Saunders thanked the Chairs for their reports.

The Committee minutes were unanimously adopted by the Governing Body.

A08. COLLEGE DEVELOPMENT PLAN 2020 – 21 ACTION PLAN

Mr Doran presented the CDP Action Plan and advised that enrolments have been impacted by Covid-19 and highlighted any actions that had fallen behind or remained incomplete. He advised that Management are committed to progress those matters rated red where performance is deemed to behind schedule.

In response to a query from Mr Gough, Mr Doran confirmed that students are not travelling overseas at present under Erasmus+ funded projects and informed on impact of a withdrawal of ERAMUS+ programme. He advised on funding to become available under the new Turing scheme and informed on opportunities for delivery in partnership with ROI in 2022-2023.

Governors noted the report.

A09. COMMITTEE AND BOARD MEETING SCHEDULE 2021 - 2022

Mr Doran referred Members to the proposed Governing Body and Committee meeting schedule for the academic year 2021 – 2022 and requested that Governors inform the Secretary of any conflicts at their earliest convenience.

Governors

He advised Members that the Governing Body and Committee meeting schedule informs the timetabling of operational meetings within the College.

A10. COVID UPDATE

- **Resumption**

Mr Doran informed Members that the College is currently in stage 1 of the lockdown restriction roadmap and reminded Governors that all schools pupils are scheduled to return to onsite learning after the Easter break.

He confirmed that no decision has yet been made with regard to FE progressing to stage 2 and advised that the College are awaiting direction from the NI Executive. Members acknowledged the impact this will have on the Schools Partnership Programme, and noted a disconnect in decision making between sectors.

Members recommended that the Principal write to the Department to express Governors' concerns.

- **Alternative Assessment Arrangements**

Mr Kilpatrick confirmed that there has been no clarity with regard to vocational assessment guidance and advised that the sector Curriculum Directors have requested a meeting with Jim Wilkinson to discuss concerns. He informed that A level assessment direction is a little clearer, however confirmed that there will be a number of students unable to complete this year and considerations are ongoing as to the financial ramifications of this.

Mr Kilpatrick advised on the difficulties that will arise in assessing modular provision and acknowledged the impact this will have on the equality of awarding qualifications. He confirmed that curriculum leaders are making as much representation as possible to obtain clarity on the direction of assessment.

Mr Turner remarked on the concerns of lecturing staff required to make teacher assessed grades and thereafter provide reasoning on the decision making without having received direction from awarding bodies.

Members noted the report and were informed that no guidance on appeals has yet been received from the awarding bodies.

A11. PROVISIONAL BUDGET ALLOCATION

Mr McGonigal advised that the College are expecting indicative budget allocation at month's end and informed that the submission of the CDP has been delayed until Autumn at which time the Department will finalise the budget.

He confirmed that the circumstances are similar to the current year and informed on provision in terms of a flatline budget.

In response to a query from Dr Stewart regarding lateral flow Covid tests, Mr Doran informed that there has not yet been confirmed position on the use of tests for staff or students.

A12. COLLEGE OF THE FUTURE

Mr Doran referred to the draft document NI College of the Future and informed that the official launch is to take place on 25 March. He provided details as to the production of the report, input from the Four Nations Alliance and recommendations provided.

Mr Swail spoke to challenges that have arisen due to the global health pandemic and opportunities that may be taken to develop and modernise curriculum provision and ensure the right to lifelong learning.

Mr Doran

Members discussed the similarity of objectives recommended within the Economic Recovery Plan, the Skills Strategy and proposals arising from the College of the Future. Mr Saunders recommended further discussion of the document at the June meeting.

Miss Armstrong

A13. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

Mr Saunders enquired as to the progress on implementing the finance training. Mr McGonigal informed that seven Members have indicated their interest in attending and advised that this will help with procuring either an in-house or bespoke programme suitable for Members' requirements. Members were advised that face to face provision may prove suitable.

A14. DATE AND TIME OF NEXT MEETING

The next meeting of the full Governing Body is scheduled for 17.30 on Tuesday 20 April 2021.

The meeting concluded at 19.46.

CHAIR

DATE