

Northern Regional College

Governing Body

Minutes of the Governing Body meeting held on 6 February 2024 in Hilton Templepatrick, commencing at 3.30pm.

Present: Mr K Nelson (Chair), Mrs L Crilly, Mr B Devlin, Mr T Dornan, Dr P Graham, Ms J Hemphill, Mr M Higgins, Mrs P Martin, Mr G McAllister, Mr D MacAuley, Mrs C McGovern, Ms D McIlwaine, Mr I Murphy, Mr B Patterson, Mr S Shevlin, Mr D Small, Mrs J Taggart

In Attendance: Mrs Brown, Mr S Lavery, Ms J Small

Mrs K Wallace, Secretary

119.1 Apologies

Mr McKernan.

119.2 Declaration of Interests

None.

119.3 Minutes of the Last Meeting

The minutes of the meeting held on 22 November 2023 were approved.

Proposed: Mr Murphy

Seconded: Mr Devlin

119.4 Matters Arising

Members noted that the draft Report To Those Charged With Governance would be circulated to GB after it had been received and considered by the Audit & Risk Committee.

119.5 Chair's Communication/ Correspondence

The Chair congratulated Dr Graham on his appointment to NIAS and Mr Small on his appointment to BHSCT.

Referring to the earlier presentation at the Strategy Day event, the Chair emphasised very engaged and helpful feedback from campus visits, which included a meeting with Trade Unions' representatives. Matters for follow up – including a staff survey – will be addressed by the GB committees as appropriate. He also updated on recent meetings of FE Chairs and subsequently between DfE and GB Chairs.

Mr Higgins reported that the Partnership Agreement, previous drafts of which had been to GB, had been approved by DfE on 1 February and would be brought to the March meeting of GB. Mr Higgins referred to the requirement for a 3-yearly external review of board effectiveness.

This had been discussed at the strategy day in 2023 when it was considered appropriate to allow the 8 new governors to settle into their roles before implementing. Members considered the options available for the review.

Action: DfE Board Effectiveness Team will be asked to take forward the external Board review.

Revision of the College Code of Conduct would also be considered at the March meeting of GB.

Members noted that consideration was being given to sourcing additional training for governors who had been unable to avail of DfE training. The Secretary would also be in contact to arrange dates for mandatory safeguarding training in March.

119.6 Principal's Report and Accountability Presentation

The Principal referred to the forthcoming Accountability Meeting on 9 February and the presentation shared in advance. An update from the Accountability meeting would be provided at the March GB meeting.

Mr Higgins drew members' attention to a number of key issues in his report including the Reform Scheme, which would be discussed under reserved business; submission of the SER/QIP - he commended Mrs Brown on this excellent piece of work with action plans in place to deliver improvements; actions short of strike - with a letter sent by all colleges to the Trade Union advocating this action advising it will be deemed to be a breach in contract; and awards.

During discussion Mr Higgins answered members' queries on the above topics and confirmed that no detrimental impact to the College would occur if criteria for the Reform Scheme had to be widened slightly in a second tranche.

The report was noted.

119.7 Resources Committee

Mr Murphy gave a verbal update of the meeting on 22 January and commended the finance team for preparations in place to enable spend of the capital and budget allocations by the due date. He reported monitoring of the staff absence rate was ongoing; progress of the new builds was on track with lessons learned from the Coleraine encamp to be carried forward to the Ballymena build; £93m funding had now been confirmed subject to completion of a few queries; submission date for accounts would be challenging; and a detailed report on cyber essentials would be considered at the next meeting of the Committee.

The Principal reported that DfE had been asked to do budget modelling for 2024/25 but colleges had not been formally required to do this.

The Chair noted that Resources had been asked to progress a staff survey and bring the results back to the GB for analysis.

119.8 Education Committee

The draft minutes of meetings on 20 September 2023, 14 November 2023 and 17 January 2024 were endorsed.

Dr Graham referred to the extensive work involved in completion of the QIP by Mrs Brown and the curriculum team. He noted the importance of using the document internally to identify good practice, which he considered could be designed better for the College if released from the DfE template. Members heard that % figures in the document relating to retention would, in future, be reported as actual figures.

Feedback on the SER/QIP submission was now awaited and it was hoped to have a future meeting with representatives from the Department to discuss how the information is used.

The SER/QIP submission was endorsed and the update noted.

Dr Graham also highlighted a link to the Teaching and Learning Assessment strategy.

119.9 Audit & Risk Committee

Mrs Martin provided a verbal update of the meeting on 5 February, which was the first meeting since September 2023 due to deferrals related to accounts. She reported a pre-meeting had taken place at NIAO's request, where they gave a general presentation on their role along with specific information on the 22/23 round of accounts. They had also outlined a timeline for the draft Report To Those Charge With Governance and would consider a meeting for 1 March, to be confirmed.

Mrs Martin reported on update to the Committee membership; training issues identified from the Committee self-assessment summary, which would be picked up and addressed; and internal audit progressing as normal. In relation to finance pressures, Mrs Martin noted onerous requirements for the FE Sector from having to produce 2 sets of financial reports, with all required information now provided by the College. She referred to pressure from loss of key College finance staff having impacted the quality of information provided for the Department consolidation pack, whilst audit of the College accounts was now complete and with NIAO for review. Members heard that NIAO would be attaching a short report to the accounts outlining the delay, which would also be referred to in a report to the Department on wider issues. She was content that robust arrangements were now in place, as explained by the Principal and Mr Laverty, to over resource the finance function for the coming year to cope with pressures and ensure no recurrence of difficulties. The GB were advised on a request made through NIFON for a 'lessons learned' sectoral meeting with auditors.

In response to questions from members, Mr Laverty clarified the requirement for 2 sets of accounts for the current year before aligning the College and Department year end at March 2025. He also updated on the wider FE Sector / DfE / NIAO actions to address their learnings, with a focus on moving forward.

Dr Graham commented on a lack of information and transparency in relation to staff resignations and sickness. He stressed the importance of keeping the Committee informed of any developments which could impact on future delivery.

Mr Devlin suggested that any future responses to NIAO be outlined to members before finalising.

Mrs McGovern commended the SLT for coping with the pressures reported and queried any impact on monitoring of budgets.

Mr Laverty apologised to members for any delay in communication due to workload pressure and advised a review of the finance department would be undertaken in April when the new Head of Finance takes up position and a managed service is in place. He emphasised addressing staff morale as the key issue for moving forward.

Mrs Martin agreed the need for the temporary managed service, which would result in some additional cost to the College.

Mr Murphy expressed his support for the finance team in dealing with issues experienced and highlighted that there had been no qualification to previous accounts and actions were in place to address issues for the coming year.

The Principal accepted responsibility from a College perspective, for actions taken and lower standard of delivery. He reassured GB that recommendations had been taken onboard and would be addressed and welcomed news that DfE would be providing training on revised processes to complete the March year-end reporting pack, something that was not provided in 2023, especially with new finance staff taking up posts in the College.

119.10 Safeguarding Policy

The Principal presented this College document which had been updated in line with the revised sectoral Safeguarding Policy Framework for 2023/24, before being submitted to DfE in December 2023.

In response to a comment by Mrs McGovern, Mr Higgins advised that a comparison document showing key points was available.

Action: The comparison document would be forwarded to Mrs McGovern.

Members noted that safeguarding issues were taken through the Education Committee. Mrs

Crilly, College Safeguarding Governor, confirmed that feedback had been provided to Mr McCartney in relation to pages 8 and 9 of the report.

The GB noted the updated report.

119.11 College Development Plan

Ms Small presented the CDP which, having been submitted to the Department on 18 December 2023, had now been updated with feedback received. She advised minor changes to the report which was being presented to GB for approval due to a tight submission timeline.

Mr Higgins had asked DfE to be mindful of the College's meeting schedule and hoped for better ordering of future submission timelines.

The Chair thanked Ms Small for her input and members were content to note the CDP.

119.12 Any Other Business

The Chair had spoken to the Deputy Secretary of DfE who was content that the College write to the new DfE Minister individually. Members also noted that he had spoken with Joe Kennedy III who was open to an invite to the new Causeway College building.

Action: The Chair would progress opportunities in line with the Department. A letter to the Minister to be drafted.

119.13 Date of Next Meeting

The next meeting will be held on 20 March 2024 online. The meeting on 24 April will take place in Farm Lodge and it was hoped to hold the meeting on 19 June in the new Causeway Campus, Coleraine.

The Chair thanked everyone for their attendance.

The meeting ended at 4.40pm.

Mr K Nelson



Chair

Date 20 March 2024

Mrs K Wallace



Secretary