

Northern Regional College

Governing Body

The meeting was preceded by a tour of the building at 4.15pm.

Minutes of the Governing Body meeting held on 25.06.25 in Farm Lodge campus at 5.00pm.

Present: Mr K Nelson (Chair), Mr B Devlin, Dr P Graham, Ms J Hemphill, Mr M Higgins, Mr A Hoey, Mr G McAllister, Mr D MacAuley, Ms D McIlwaine (online), Mrs P Martin, Mr I Murphy, Mr B Patterson, Mr S Shevlin (online), Mr D Small (online), Mrs J Taggart

In Attendance: Mrs C Brown, Mr S Lavery, Ms F McClelland ICS, Mrs K Wallace Secretary

128.1 Apologies/Welcome

SL was welcomed back from leave. Apologies were noted for Ms McGovern and Mr McKernan.

128.2 Declaration of Interests None.

128.3 Minutes of Last Meeting

Documents shared in advance: Draft minutes of meeting 28.05.25

On the proposal of IM seconded by PM, the minutes of meeting on 28.05.25 were approved.

DS referred to DMI's suggestion, recorded in the minutes, on risk in relation to policies and procedures. He stated that inadequate and out of date policies had been raised in a recent disciplinary case.

MH advised that a workstream was looking at points for inclusion through conditions within the pay offer on industrial relations and this would be picked up through that process.

128.4 Matters Arising

No matters arising. CEF and CDP related items were covered under agenda items.

128.5 Chair's Communications

Documents shared in advance: Appointment of CEF Convenor update; Draft 2025/26 GB meetings schedule; Draft Composite Report of the GB Effectiveness Review 2025

Presentation by ICS

KN welcomed FMC who was in attendance to share sectoral findings and learning points from the composite sector report of the GB Effectiveness Review 2025.

FMC summarised compilation of the report and stated a number of common themes for

recommendations and observations across all colleges. She advised work being finalised on optics and highlighting positives and noted a mainly positive report overall.

MH queried whether recommendations had been shared with the Department as the Department was referenced within recommendations. FMC stated that as the reviews were commissioned directly by colleges, it would be up to the sector to decide on sharing the report.

KN advised that this issue would be picked up at the Chairs meeting on 10 July.

In relation to benchmarking, FMC advised the use of NIAO guidance as a benchmark and suggested that benchmarking with other organisations might be useful for colleges to explore.

Members welcomed a good and positive report in most respects, which could provide the GB with some reassurance. A number of themes were welcomed including: in relation to the skills matrix, it was thought that a skills audit specific to the ARAC would be useful; the recommendation on maintaining focus on a long-term strategy; and suggestion for set up of a strategy committee.

KN thanked FMC for attending the meeting and the draft composite report was noted.

FMC left the meeting at 5.25pm.

Chair's Update

KN referred to the risk workshop on 02.06.25 when it was reported that the Department had noted too little detail in college minutes to reflect level of challenge. More detail would be provided in future minutes of GB and committees.

KN reported on a successful Ballymena campuses closing event on 29.05.25 and good discussion at the risk workshop on 02.06.25. Gordon Milligan had been appointed as CEF Convenor and Jacqueline Dixon had been appointed as the new Chair of BMC. He noted that a number of governor assessment interviews had taken place on 23.06.25, with the rest to take place in July. He referred to a meeting with the Permanent Secretary on 24.06.25, which would be picked up by MH later in the meeting.

The draft meetings schedule 2025/26 was considered and it was agreed to add an additional meeting of GB in September to consider strategy.

Action: KW will poll members on a suitable date for a meeting w/c 08.09.25.

The meetings schedule was agreed subject to the above inclusion.

Members heard that DMA's first term as Staff Governor would end on 10.07.25. On the proposal of KN seconded by PG, it was agreed that DMA be re-appointed for a second term.

AH provided an update on his year in office, paying tribute to students, staff and GB for providing him with the opportunity. MH referenced AH attendance and support at recent student award presentations.

128.6 Principal's Report

Documents shared in advance: Principal's Report; DfE Partnership Event 17.06.25 presentation

Members noted the presentation supplied and that the Department business plan 25/26, which had previously been shared, was also available on the Department website.

MH gave an update on the DfE partnership event on 17.06.25 and elaborated on key areas covered including: fiscal horizon, Department financial planning and preparation for a simulated pandemic test in autumn 2025. He advised the intention to move to a 3-year budget for 2026-29, which would be discussed at the upcoming GB strategy day. In relation to the pandemic test, he noted the need to update all continuity plans and ensure that the College was ready for a live test lasting a number of weeks, based on the areas of emergency, contingency and containment.

In the context of his report, MH highlighted increased admissions from the previous year. He reported feedback on previous minutes where it was felt that not enough focus had been given to traineeship issues. Members noted that most of the detail on issues was contained in reports provided for GB meetings, such as the ETI sector report included under the next item. It was also noted that agreement had been reached to extend the date for submission of an action plan from July to August, to allow prior consideration by the Education Committee.

In relation to WBL, MH reported that bidding for 2025 would progress based on the existing programme, and an increase in average class sizes to 14.

Members welcomed the list of College achievements and the report was noted.

128.7 Education Committee

Documents shared in advance: Draft minutes of meeting 21.05.25; ETI Traineeship Report

PG referred to the draft minutes and refuted the accusation that traineeships had not been extensively discussed. He noted that these comments had been levelled at all college education committees and would ensure that future minutes fully reflected discussion. In relation to the review on traineeships, he noted that the original date of July for submission to the Department had been unrealistic and a letter had been received earlier in the day to agree colleges' request for an extension to 23 August. A short meeting of Education Committee would be held to review the plan prior to submission.

On the basis that all items referred to in the minutes had been robustly discussed and, PG was content that the draft minutes be considered for endorsement by the GB.

CB referred to the timeline for action plans, to include an overall QIP for traineeship encompassing a sub plan for ES, for submission by 26 August. This would feed into a draft action plan to be submitted by 23 September. A number of peer support workshops for ES would be organised by the Department commencing 25.09.25 and all colleges had been tasked with putting forward a case study as part of sharing of good practice.

PG questioned who this would be verified by and who in the Department would pull sessions together.

KN noted his attendance at the Education Committee meeting on 21.05.25 and confirmed it had been a robust and good meeting.

DS thought the minutes reflected a good level of discussion across a number of issues, including the curriculum plan, supported by a very good paper which had informed the discussion. He confirmed that the Committee deals with issues at the right level of detail and through good and informed discussion.

MH referred to a current consultation on the Department view of post-18 education which is being collated by CB. CB noted that this would close on 04.07.25 and encouraged views on legislation change etc. A response would be drafted making the case for a need to consider the impact on FE enrolment and resources and ensure it is not used as a mechanism for schools to retain learners.

The minutes of 21.05.25 were endorsed.

128.8 Resources Committee

Document shared in advance: Draft minutes of meeting on 09.06.25; New Build update on temporary carparking facilities, Ballymena campus

IM summarised discussion at the meeting on 09.06.25 including on leases, business engagement, and HR issues in particular pay settlement and dispute resolution, and training and appraisal levels. He noted that he had withdrawn from discussion on the Larne lease due to paying commercial rent on a plot of land at the location.

The draft minutes of meeting on 09.06.25 were endorsed.

Information on additional temporary carparking facilities at Ballymena was approved and lease arrangements with MEABC for Lamont, Larne lease and disposing of Ballymoney campus were endorsed by the Board.

128.9 Financial Accounts Improvement Committee

Documents shared in advance: Draft minutes of meetings 12.05.25; 27.05.25; 12.06.25; GB Members' Update 09.06.25; Submission to Permanent Secretary 11.06.25; ToR Financial Accounts Review; AAB Approach

Members considered the documents provided.

MH confirmed submission of the Department accounts pack March '25 on 24.06.25. He outlined discussion with the Department Finance Director on 23.06.25 and adjustments agreed which had been submitted within the pack. Lead schedules were currently being finalised and updated and journals then posted into the accounting system. He acknowledged the support provided by the Department and noted a tighter timeframe for submission than last year alongside a significant number of extra checks. Focus would now revert to the July '24 accounts and preparatory work to support submission on 28 July was detailed. It was noted that all component audits had to be with the Department by 22 August. The College would be subject to an increased level of scrutiny due to being deemed as high risk and the implications of any slippage was recognised. MH outlined arrangements for collective checkpoint meetings throughout July to discuss progress and welcomed increased partnership working.

KN noted the key issues as timeliness and quality and recognised significant progress on both, supported by input from SERC.

SL referred to a long, arduous and challenging process and stated resources as the root issue. He noted that the team had been rebuilt and was seeking to add resources, with everything possible having been done. He reported that at the NIFON meeting on 24.06.25 it had been suggested that the requirement for July '25 accounts be replaced with an extended set of accounts to July '26. He also voiced his appreciation for the work carried out by the finance team and MH during his absence.

MH outlined statutory accounts requirements for the Department and the request for a 2-month extension to the submission date for the July '25 accounts. He referred to the meeting with the PS in the previous week, an update on which had been provided to members on 20.06.25, at which his personal responsibilities in his role as Accounting Officer had been clearly conveyed. An overview of discussion was noted by members. KN noted the College's responsibility to demonstrate lessons learned to the Department by way of actions going forward. In this respect MH advised that approaches for increased accounting support will be taken forward with external accountancy firms.

PM stated her appreciation for the work and activity being carried out but was conscious of the very serious position the College found itself in. Referring to the online video of the relevant PAC meeting, she noted relevant comments made by the Comptroller & Auditor

General. She referred to resourcing issues which had been a main point of discussion in the previous year, on top of extra work required as discussed under the earlier Principal's report and stated the need for a realistic and definite way forward. She acknowledged intensive effort and pressure but reinforced the necessity for all possible action to be taken to ensure that the College doesn't find itself in the same position next year.

KN welcomed the point made and confirmed the importance of weekly updates and the continuation of the improvement process, with adjustments for holidays.

PG, DS, SS, DMI, IM and BD endorsed all that had been said previously.

PG reiterated the inadequacy of needing to ask for information. He considered this had been an issue over the past 3-years and was not completely reassured. Referring to requirements of personal responsibility, he noted the possibility of the Board losing members if matters were not resolved.

DS agreed that both GB and ARAC needed assurance that necessary improvements would be made beyond the current situation to ensure the College is in a position to deliver within timeframes. He noted that the Department would have the same concerns.

SS questioned how challenges were being tracked to ensure they could be mitigated against given that there would always be distractions.

DMI questioned whether the review underway could provide a distraction.

IM highlighted the importance of the review in finding out what had gone wrong and pointed out that this had only been discovered in the last 12-months. He noted the importance of giving all resources needed to the team and suggested that, in the event of the pack not succeeding, an emergency meeting be called to decide the way forward.

BD thought it positive that there was an agreed timeline for going forward with the Department and NIAO. He also noted the difficulties associated with regaining the confidence of the Department.

Members noted 28th July as a key critical point for the College. MH restated information on lessons which had been learned to date, including the need for changes on accounts processes, prioritisation of upcoming work, SLT members drawing back from non-essential outside engagement, possible external support provision, outsourcing of College payroll, agreement on extension of deadlines and pre-emptive work for the July '24 audit

DMI asked for clarification on differences in College and Department accounts coding processes and whether staff would be interviewed as part of the review and was reassured by information provided by MH.

KN confirmed that GB were aware of the seriousness of issues faced, what needed to be achieved and what was required to regain the confidence of the Department. He confirmed that work would be carried out collegiately through the GB.

Action: GB to be polled for further meeting at end of July'25.

128.10 Audit & Risk Committee

Documents shared in advance: Risk Appetite and Risk Classification presentation

DS reported the main point of discussion at the meeting was around accounts, with a lot of concern expressed by members, as reflected in earlier discussion. A key point for members was as much information as possible as speedily as possible. He noted these points have since been progressed.

DS outlined discussion on the attached presentation, with work on risk classification to come back to the Committee in due course and onwards to GB.

MH thanked members who had attended the risk workshop. He explained the risk rating system used on the draft report and members were invited to feedback any comments to KW by 04.07.25.

Action: GB Members to provide feedback on Risk Appetite and Risk Classifications

128.11 Finance Update

Document shared in advance: Financial update June 2025

Members considered the update, which had been shared with Resources Committee on 09.06.25.

SL summarised key information on IT work, revised budget, work on efficiency savings and upcoming move to a 3-year position.

AH left the meeting at 6.35pm.

128.12 College Equality Report

Document shared in advance: June 2025 Equality Progress Report

In the context of the report provided, MH noted good progress in areas including Autism Friendly College, cost of living initiatives, mental health charter, wellbeing roadshows and Northern Plus.

He reported positive feedback from the Equality Commission with particular reference made in relation to work undertaken in STEM.

Members noted that a delay in annual presentation of this report was due to leave

arrangements and the cycle will be brought forward in 2025/26.

128.13 Strategic Plan/ CDP Update

MH reported on feedback which had been received on 24.06.25, with submission due on 30.06.25. A minor request for update to particular aspects, including alignment with taking forward city deals and updating to current date, is being taken forward alongside a requirement to meet with Chairs to discuss the position. The completed report would be shared with GB.

MH drew attention to comparison of metrics across the sector. He referred to the impact of non-accredited provision on enrolment, discussion on which would be included as part of the half-day meeting on strategy. The Department would meet with Chairs to discuss direction.

CB confirmed the minor nature of changes requested and noted a link to current press topics.

MH referred to significant, recent change of focus by the Minister in relation to SEN. He referred to the forthcoming ETI review into SEN in 2025/26. CB noted the challenge this represented for the FE sector.

PG reminded members that SEN was the topic for a deep dive by the Education Committee in the new academic year.

128.14 New Build Update

Documents shared in advance: Project Board Summary Report June 2025

SL summarised the contents of the report noting achievement of a green Gateway 4 review and the importance of extra funding provided by the Department.

He reported a minor extension to the phase 2 timeline which should complete within the next 2-weeks after which installation of furniture and equipment would take place. He confirmed there would be no impact on staff and students accessing the building.

128.15 Any Other Business None

128.15 Date of Next Meeting

The next meeting would be the half-day strategy session week commencing 08.09.25. Date of meeting would be confirmed on conclusion of the poll previously referred to.

The meeting ended at 6.43pm.

Mr I Murphy, Acting Chair



Date 31.07.25

Mrs K Wallace, Secretary

