

## **Northern Regional College**

### **Governing Body**

#### **Minutes of the Governing Body meeting held on 31.07.25 on Teams at 4.00pm.**

**Present:** Mr I Murphy (Chair), Mr B Devlin, Dr P Graham, Ms J Hemphill, Mr M Higgins, Mr G McAllister, Mrs C McGovern, Ms D McIlwaine, Mr R McKernan, Mrs P Martin, Mr B Patterson, Mr S Shevlin, Mr D Small

**In Attendance:** Mr S Lavery, Mrs K Wallace, Secretary

#### **129.1 Apologies**

Mr Macauley and Mrs Taggart.

#### **129.2 Declaration of Interests**

No declarations of interest.

Members agreed to bring the following item forward on the agenda.

#### **129.5 Chair's Communications**

Documents shared in advance: Letter from Minister SUB-0533-2025; letter from Head of FE Corporate Governance dated 24.07.25; College Instrument of Governance (the Instrument)

IM reported on a handover meeting with the former Chair (KN) earlier in the day and clarified the circumstances relating to the end of his term. He referred to the attached letters and explained the context on which he had agreed to the Department's request to act as Chair for a short interim period. Members noted that IM's substantive position remained as VC of the GB and he would continue as Chair of Resources.

DS queried the difference between acting chair and vice-chair.

IM expressed his uncertainty on this issue and referred members to the Instrument attached. In this regard, he would seek legal advice to confirm his authority to sign the annual accounts in lieu of KN and to sign off any agreed changes to the Instrument. Legal advice would be circulated when received and a further meeting of GB organised to consider.

MH confirmed that all documents received had been shared and that KN had done the work on the 24/25 accounts prior to leaving. He referred to previous situations when the VC had stepped into the Chair role but agreed that advice will be sought.

DS suggested going back to the Department to ask for absolute clarity on IM's status and authority.

IM advised that he had requested clarity at a meeting with Louise Watson on 28.07.25 and awaited her written advice on the way forward. He commented on the extensive workload involved with the role of Chair.

In response to a question by DMI, IM confirmed that his term with the College would end in October 2026.

PG referred to a recent situation in other FE Colleges when a sift process was carried out and someone from the shortlist appointed.

IM considered this could be a possibility. He reported a very good meeting with KN earlier, who had agreed to complete the paperwork on the appraisals he had carried out. IM had thanked him for his work over the past 4 years on behalf of the GB, invited him to the opening of the Ballymena building and would continue to keep in contact.

**Action: Following the meeting, IM would instruct KW to seek legal advice on his status and authority.**

### **129.3 Minutes of Last Meeting**

Document shared in advance: Draft minutes of meeting 25.06.25

CMG noted a minor typographical error in the minutes, which would be changed.

On the proposal of DS seconded by PM, the draft minutes of meeting on 28.05.25 were approved subject to the change.

DS referred to the reference in the minutes to a skills audit specific to the ARAC in order to inform future appointments and/or training and development. Members discussed this issue and noted the following points:

- At a recent meeting of FE Chairs' they had agreed to take forward a review of necessary skills for members.
- The upcoming organisational review by the Department, details of which would be circulated when provided.
- IM, DS and PG referred to excellent training carried out by NIAO and available to anyone.
- SS queried self-reporting of skills without evidence to back up claims and considered that skills claims should be verified. DS agreed and referred to information specified by the Department/ NIAO on skills requirements to underpin an audit.
- MH referred to the recent self-assessment. He would investigate any specific skills audit across the sector and take this on board.

- The makeup of the ARAC was discussed and the importance of including lay members recognised.
- ARAC's governance responsibilities, current member deficit and need for ARAC VC.
- PM referred to extensive questioning on governance during the governor interview process, training already available and availability of audit reports to allow benchmarking.
- Usefulness of a skills matrix and skills audit to identify training areas.

#### **129.4 Matters Arising**

Members were reminded that a half-day strategy meeting would be held on 08.09.25.

GB feedback on risk appetite and risk classifications had been completed.

#### **129.6 Financial Accounts Improvement Committee**

Documents shared in advance: Draft minutes 24.06.25; GB update paper 04.07.25

The draft minutes were endorsed, the meeting having been verbally reported on previously. The draft minutes of 21.07.25 had been circulated to members earlier in the day and papers from the meeting had been issued w/c 22.07.25.

MH took members through the update paper and reported on developments since the 04.07.25 position including:

- The team are currently working with NIAO to address their request for further information on the July '24 accounts with specific issues on quality of information raised. The critical importance of these July accounts being completed to allow the Department's March '25 audit to commence. Issues had been raised by NIAO on 30.07.25.
- Additional pressure on the team from extensive information requests. Support is being provided through engagement with BMC in respect of income recording.
- Inability to meet the deadline for provision of additional information requested by NIAO had resulted in the March '25 account pack failing the hot review.

IM referred to the number of steps taken and extent of work carried out in an attempt to provide a clear plan and information of a high quality for NIAO inspection, which is the critical and only issue in the College.

CMG acknowledged the importance of steps taken on recruitment, quality reviews and budget. She asked that draft FAIC minutes be provided as early as possible to allow members to be kept informed on the up-to-date position.

**Action: Draft FAIC minutes to be circulated as soon as available.**

DS expressed serious concern at the current position and questioned delays in responding to information requests and lack of quality information provision. He emphasised the need to ensure delivery of any plan put forward and the impact on the College's credibility as a result of the recent failure.

PG endorsed the above comments and concurred with IM that the only issue appeared to be internal processes.

PM noted all comments particularly in relation to the extensive work of officers trying to progress this matter. However, noting the shrinking timelines, she voiced serious concern that problems keep recurring and questioned the communication protocol, checking procedures and availability of a senior officer at all times. She emphasised the GB's responsibility to act to get all necessary support, including reaching out to the Department and to view this issue more strategically.

DS agreed with these concerns and was sympathetic to the idea of engaging extra help.

SL outlined primary issues related to the failed hot review and the impact of increased scrutiny. He advised that work with auditors was ongoing and should be completed in the next few days. Audit would then commence within the next two weeks. He noted good progress with the new lead auditor. He reported on the accountant recruitment process but noted that, given the time needed for a new person to settle in and with the team working all hours possible and work required on a number of other issues over the summer, there was no flexibility to catch up on the audit timeline. SL and MH would review the position in the coming week and it was hoped to conclude the July '24 accounts shortly thereafter.

PM queried whether, given that 4 people were being interviewed for the post of accountant, more than 1 appointment needed to be made. SL agreed that there might be merit in making further appointments.

DMI referred to the earlier query on a protocol for communication. She summarised a number of reported communication issues which could be alleviated through this process. SL advised that the difficulties outlined in the minutes would be addressed through the audit process.

IM reminded members that further conversation would take place under reserved business.

DS queried when the RTTCWG would be issued; level of confidence that the July '24 accounts would be completed within deadline; and how College information was sent to the wrong Departmental folder. SL explained the context for the erroneous submission. In relation to the RTTCWG, he outlined work with the lead auditor over the next 2 weeks and expected that the draft RTTCWG would be provided mid to end of August. He reiterated the reason for the

delay to the July '24 accounts and was as confident as he could be that they would be completed on time.

CMG agreed with PM that a key need was more resources and emphasised having a backfill resource as a top priority to allow SL and MH to return to review and oversight positions. She also stressed the need for good, robust training to ensure people are upskilled to the appropriate level.

MH noted that queries outlined by DS and CMG would feed into the SERC action plan, with current and new staff to get training on the accounts system moving forward. He advised progress on the October monitoring round and the CSR bids. He explained the reasons for missed deadlines on accounts and confirmed that all information was being captured. He agreed having the right resources in place as key to clearing the backlog and referred to bringing in support from an accounting firm to give additional capacity. A lessons learnt exercise was also being carried out.

RMK echoed comments made. He suggested that provision of a short, situation report on a regular basis could be useful. MH referred to members' updates, the most recent of which is provided later on the agenda.

GMA left the meeting at 5.18pm.

#### **129.7 Audit & Risk Committee**

Document shared in advance: Draft minutes 16.06.25

Members noted that a verbal summary of the meeting on 16.06.25 had taken place at the previous GB meeting. The draft minutes were endorsed.

#### **129.8 Finance Update**

Document shared in advance: Members update 24.07.25

Members considered the update, with the majority of the business having been covered under item 129.6 above.

The update was noted.

#### **129.9 Any Other Business**

Members were reminded of the strategy session in Ballymena on 08.09.25.

The timing for the session was queried and the rationale for this clarified by IM and MH. It was suggested that a further half-day session could be held in winter.

Members were content to keep the date, with the agenda to depend on prevailing circumstances.

**129.10 Date of Next Meeting**

Date in August to be agreed.

**Action: KW would survey members to agree a date.**

The meeting ended at 5.25pm.

Mr C McKenna, Chair



Date 24.09.2025

Mrs K Wallace, Secretary

