

SOUTH WEST COLLEGE GOVERNING BODY

Minutes of a meeting of the **Finance & General Purposes Committee**
held on Wednesday 22 January 2025 at 9.00 am
via MS Teams

PRESENT: Mr Michael Barnett, Committee Chair
Mrs Maureen Brunt
Mrs Maria Hackett
Mrs Sandra Isherwood
Ms Celine McCartan, Chief Executive

IN ATTENDANCE: Mrs Fiona McCauley, Secretary to the Governing Body
Mrs Sharon McGrath, Director of Corporate Services
Mr Sean O'Donnell, Head of Finance & Governance

APOLOGIES: Dr Lynsey Quinn

1.0 PRELIMINARIES AND APOLOGIES

Mr Barnett, Committee Chair, welcomed all present to the first Finance & General Purposes Committee meeting of 2025 and reminded members of the objectives of increasing enrolments, cost efficiency and enhancing the student experience.

An apology was tendered on behalf of Dr Quinn.

2.0 CONFLICT OF INTEREST DECLARATIONS

No conflict of interest declarations were made.

3.0 MATTERS ARISING FROM MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

PREVIOUSLY ISSUED to all members:

- Paper 03 Minutes of the Finance & General Purposes Committee meeting held on Wednesday 16 October 2024.

There were no matters arising.

4.0 KEY STRATEGIC ISSUES

PREVIOUSLY ISSUED to all members:

- Paper 04.01 Key Strategic Issues
- Paper 04.02 Management Update on Key Strategic Issues.

4.1 Long Term Financial Planning

Ms McCartan reported on the College's good financial position at this stage of the financial year to 31 March 2025 highlighting its increased enrolments to Apprenticeship and Higher Level Apprenticeship programmes as well as its strong performance in efficiency metrics. She also reported on the forthcoming commencement of the Smart Rural Innovation Driven Empowerment (STRIDE) project and the Green Accelerator Skills Project (GRASP) under the Peace Plus Programme, noting their complementarity with core college provision, the contribution made to overhead by such externally funded projects, the related risks and the complex

management arrangements involved.

Ms McCartan then referenced her attendance at a recent Department for the Economy (DfE) Partnership Engagement event and explained that college representatives had been apprised of DfE's challenging future budgetary position and the consequent impacts for the Further Education (FE) sector, of the anticipated reduction in baseline budget allocations for 2025/26 and of the plans for multi-year budgets from 2026/27. She also apprised the meeting of updates provided on DfE's business plan and its commitment to the published Economic Vision as well as on the NI Civil Service Artificial Intelligence opportunities, vacancy analysis and transformation. She commented on the protection afforded to the College through its diversity of income streams as well as on the overall sectoral reduction in student numbers and enrolments in 2023/24 despite South West College's enhanced performance in this area.

In response to questions and comments from members, management highlighted the need for effective in-year management of additional income and spoke of the benefits of multi-year budgets in financial planning.

4.2 Review of the Further Education Delivery Model

Ms McCartan advised that no further update has been received from DfE in relation to the future of the Review of the FE Delivery Model, explained that focus has shifted to a co-designed transformation programme aligned to DfE's Economic Vision and referenced correspondence received from the Permanent Secretary on collaborative working.

4.3 Sustainability

Ms McCartan apprised the Committee of the updates provided on decarbonisation commitments at the recent DfE Partnership Engagement Event and noted the College's well placed position in contributing to the achievement of related targets. She outlined the proposal to commit half of capital budget allocations to sustainability initiatives to include the replacement of the biomass boiler in the Omagh campus and the installation of additional solar photovoltaic panels on college estate. She also referenced the recent assessment visit in relation to the College's nomination for an Association of Colleges (AoC) Beacon Award in 'The Sustainable Energy First Award for Education for Sustainable Development' category.

In response to a query from the Committee Chair in relation to carbon reporting, Management conveyed satisfaction with the recording and reporting of scope 1 and scope 2 emissions data and on the engagements undertaken in relation to data gathering for scope 3 emissions. The Committee was also made aware of plans to incorporate Environmental, Social & Governance (ESG) criteria into future procurement exercises.

5.0 MANAGEMENT REPORT

PREVIOUSLY ISSUED to all members:

- Paper 05 Management Report
- Paper 05.01 April to November 2024 Finance Report
- Paper 05.02 DfE Letter on Revised 2024-25 Budget Allocation
- Paper 05.03 2023-24 Annual Report and Financial Statements
- Paper 05.04 Financial Management Report to 31 December 2024
- Paper 05.05 Report on Payments over 50k
- Paper 05.06 Estates Report
- Paper 05.06a January 2025 Sustainability Newsletter

- Paper 05.06b 2023-24 Sustainability Report
- Paper 05.07 Capital Budget Report
- Paper 05.08 Fees and Charges Policy 2025-26
- Paper 05.09 CCTV Policy
- Paper 05.10 2023-24 FE Hardship Fund Report
- Paper 05.11 Technical Services Report.

5.1 Budget Update

5.1.1 April – November 2024 Finance Report

Ref: Management Report Section 1.0 and Papers 05.01 & 05.02

With reference to paper 05.02, Mr O'Donnell outlined the revisions to the budget to 31 March 2025 and confirmed the College's adherence to the allocation provided. He also referenced the submission made to DfE on forecast pressures over £100k in the forthcoming three year period and undertook to seek an update on the outcome of this sectoral information gathering exercise.

5.2 Financial Management / Accounting

5.2.1 2023/24 Annual Report & Financial Statements

Ref: Management Report Section 2.1 and Paper 05.03

Mr O'Donnell confirmed the finalisation and laying of the 2023/24 Annual Report & Financial Statements and advised of the preparatory work underway in relation to the audit of the College's financial statements to 31 March 2025 for input into DfE's Group Annual Accounts.

5.2.2 August - December 2024 Financial Management Report

Ref: Management Report Section 2.2 and Paper 05.04

Mr O'Donnell provided an overview of variances against budget in relation to the August to December 2024 financial management report and advised of the expectation of the closure of these variances by the year end in July 2025.

5.2.3 Payments Over £50k

Ref: Management Report Section 2.3 and Paper 05.05

The Report on Payments over £50k was noted by the Committee.

5.3 Estates

5.3.1 Estates Report

Ref: Management Report Section 3.1 and Papers 05.06, 05.06a & 05.06b

5.3.1.1 Budget

Mrs McGrath reported on the favourable budget position for the Estates department and commented on the challenge presented by late receipt of invoices.

5.3.1.2 Sustainability

With reference to paper 05.06b, Mrs McGrath took the Committee through the 2023/24 Sustainability Report highlighting the strategic commitment to a greener sustainable college, carbon and ESG reporting exercises, the College's performance in relation to energy consumption and generation, current and planned sustainability initiatives and the receipt of a Gold Award in the Business in the Community (BITC) Environmental Benchmarking Survey.

Members commented on the College's relatively advanced performance in sustainability measures, on the value of staff, student and community investment in sustaining the College's momentum in this area, and on the importance of maintaining the integrity of the Carbon Literacy programme.

5.3.1.3 Health & Safety

Mrs McGrath reported significant progress in the resolution of the health & safety concern in the training kitchen in the Erne campus to include additional testing by the Health & Safety Executive and improvements in communications.

5.3.1.4 FE Capital Projects Steering Group

Mrs McGrath advised of the anticipated formal closure of the Erne Campus Development Project from the remit of the FE Capital Projects Steering Group on 31 March 2025 pending the closure of outstanding actions and consideration at the forthcoming Accountability meeting with DfE.

5.3.1.5 PFI Contracts

Mrs McGrath reported on the topics discussed at the December 2024 PFI Liaison Committee meeting including governance, environmental and sustainability updates, financial concerns and the progress of projects.

5.3.1.6 Sectoral Update

Mrs McGrath apprised the meeting of the likelihood of a gap between Integrated Consultancy Team (ICT) / Property Management Framework (PMF) contracts due to procurement timeframes. She explained that legal advice has been sought on the issue and confirmed its inclusion on the Estates Risk Register for ongoing monitoring in light of the risk posed.

5.3.2 2023/24 Capital Budget Report

Ref: Management Report Section 3.2 and Paper 05.07

Mr O'Donnell referenced the updates provided on the expenditure of the 2023/24 capital budget allocation and the ongoing minor works projects funded by the 2024/25 capital budget allocation. He advised that business cases have been prepared to facilitate the acceptance of any additional capital allocation made available in 2024/25.

5.4 Policy Review

Ref: Management Report Section 4.0 and Papers 05.08 & 05.09

Mr O'Donnell apprised the Committee of the circa 7% increase in fees and charges for 2025/26 confirming the alignment of this increase with sectoral rates.

AGREED: that the 2025/26 Fees & Charges Policy and the CCTV Policy are recommended to the Governing Body for approval.

5.5 Other

5.5.1 Student Hardship Fund

Ref: Management Report Section 5.1 and Paper 05.10

Mrs McGrath provided an overview of the assistance provided to students through the Student Hardship Fund in 2023/24. She reported on the out-turn underspend, on the eligibility constraints affecting up-take and on the use of uncommitted funds on Winter supports for students.

Members welcomed the provision of Winter supports to students and commented on

the need for review of the eligibility criteria for the Hardship Fund.

5.5.2 Technical Services Report

Ref: Management Report Section 5.2 and Paper 05.11

Mrs McGrath referenced the updates provided in the Technical Services Report on budget, staff resourcing and service desk interactions.

In response to a concern raised by a member on the impact of the resourcing challenges on the IT team, Mrs McGrath outlined the mitigations in place including the appointment of student interns and advised of the alternative vacancy awareness raising initiatives piloted by the Human Resources team.

6.0 REVIEW OF OUTSTANDING ACTIONS

PREVIOUSLY ISSUED to all members:

- Paper 06 List of Outstanding Actions.

A brief discussion was held on the means of receiving assurance on the accuracy of the information published on the College's website and it was agreed that this action would be carried forward for further consideration. It was noted that all other actions had been addressed.

A revised list of outstanding actions is included as Appendix A.

7.0 ANY OTHER BUSINESS

No further business was raised.

8.0 REFLECTION ON EFFECTIVENESS OF MEETING

Members commented favourably on the effectiveness of the meeting.

The meeting concluded at 10:30 am.

**CONFIRMED AND ADOPTED BY THE GOVERNING BODY AT A MEETING HELD ON WEDNESDAY
5 FEBRUARY 2025**

CHAIRPERSON



DATE 05/02/2025

SUMMARY OF OUTSTANDING ACTIONS

Item	Meeting Date	Minute Ref	Action
3	16/10/2024	5.2.1	Management to consider the evidence that may be offered to the Governing Body to provide assurance on the maintenance and integrity of the College's website.