

SOUTH WEST COLLEGE GOVERNING BODY

Minutes of a meeting of the **Finance & General Purposes Committee**
held on Wednesday 11 March 2026 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, Principal & Chief Executive
Dr Lynsey Quinn

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

1.0 **APOLOGIES**

It was noted that all members were present.

2.0 **CONFLICT OF INTEREST DECLARATIONS**

Dr Quinn declared her employment with the Open University.

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 21 January 2026.

There were no matters arising from the minutes.

4.0 **KEY STRATEGIC ISSUES**

PREVIOUSLY ISSUED to all members:

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

4.1 **Financial Stability**

Ms McCartan spoke of the planned meeting between governors and the Permanent Secretary of the Department for the Economy (DfE) later in the day where an update on the future budget position will be provided, noting the expectation of budget reductions.

She went on to report on progress in the development of the College's 2026/27 budget, advising of the unlikelihood of the availability of a balanced budget for the Governing Body's review at its April 2026 meeting in light of the absence of a budget allocation from DfE, and of the need for authorisation to commit expenditure pending approval of the budget.

Mr O'Donnell then provided an overview of the draft budget developed to date highlighting the assumptions made, the protection of funding for health & safety and

statutory compliance costs, and the budget gap remaining. The meeting was also made aware of forthcoming briefings with budget holders to further progress the budget preparation process following clarity on project overheads and staff, estates and IT requirements.

In response to a query from the Committee Chair, management outlined the parameter of the overheads contribution made by externally funded projects.

4.2 Further Education Transformation

Ms McCartan advised of forthcoming engagements in relation to Further Education (FE) Transformation including the Economy Minister's Launch of the FE Reform Programme. She spoke of the dual focus on curriculum and resourcing, of the potential for sectoral streamlining of curriculum, and of the need to nominate a college representative to progress associated actions.

In response to questions and comments from members, Ms McCartan reported on progress in relation to the Mid Ulster Productivity Centre project and spoke of the additional costs associated with STEM programmes as well as the College's high volume of delivery in these areas.

4.3 Sustainability

Ms McCartan spoke of the ongoing implementation of the Green Accelerator Skills Project (GRASP).

5.0 MANAGEMENT REPORT

PREVIOUSLY ISSUED to all members:

- Paper 05 Management Report
- Paper 05.01 April 2025 to January 2026 Finance Report
- Paper 05.02 Revised 2026/26 Budget Allocation – February 2026
- Paper 05.03 Financial Management Report to 31 January 2026
- Paper 05.04 Report on Payments over 50k
- Paper 05.05 Bad Debt Write Off Proposal 2026
- Paper 05.06 Estates Report
- Paper 05.07 Capital Budget Report
- Paper 05.08 DfE Letter on Approved Capital Overspend
- Paper 05.09 Hardship Fund Report
- Paper 05.10 Contracts Report
- Paper 05.11 Banking Review
- Paper 05.12 Energy Management Policy
- Paper 05.13 Hospitality & Gifts Policy.

5.1 Budget Update 2025/26 & 2026/27

5.1.1 Finance Report 2025/26

Ref: Management Report Section 2.1 and Papers 05.01 & 05.02

Mr O'Donnell confirmed the submission of the financial return to 31 January 2026 to DfE, noting the balanced out-turn forecast to 31 March 2026.

With reference to paper 05.02, he also detailed the additional resource allocation received in relation to the Rural Economic Accelerator Programme (REAP) and the Winter Warmer Scheme.

In response to a query from a member, Mr O'Donnell spoke of the challenge in achieving a balanced budget in light of the inability to accrue costs into subsequent accounting

periods, and of the work underway to ensure costs incurred are expended in-year.

5.1.2 Budget Preparation for Year Ended 31 March 2027

Ref: Management Report Section 2.2

Mr O'Donnell reminded members of the update provided earlier in the meeting on the preparation of the 2026/27 budget and undertook to update the Governing Body on progress at its April 2026 meeting.

5.2 Financial Management / Accounting

5.2.1 Annual Report & Financial Statements 2024/25

Ref: Management Report Section 3.1

Mr O'Donnell confirmed the finalisation of the audit of the College's 2024/25 Annual Report & Financial Statements with an unqualified audit opinion received from the Comptroller & Auditor General. He advised of the two recommendations made within and of the actions taken to implement these recommendations.

5.2.2 Financial Management Report – Six Months to 31 January 2026

Ref: Management Report Section 3.2 and Paper 05.03

Mr O'Donnell reported an ahead of budget position at 31 January 2026, explained that this is largely due to profiling of some elements of income and expenditure, and noted the expectation of a balanced budget at the year end.

In response to questions and comments from members, Mr O'Donnell explained that expenditure has been impacted by delays in recruitment to positions in the PRISM project and advised of efforts made to accurately profile income and expenditure throughout the year.

5.2.3 Payments Over £50k

Ref: Management Report Section 3.3 and Paper 05.04

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

5.2.4 Bad Debt Write Off Proposal

Ref: Management Report Section 3.4 and Paper 05.05

Mr O'Donnell reported the bad debt write off of £9k by the Chief Executive.

In response to a query from a member, he detailed the debt recovery process in place including the sanctions imposed on students with outstanding debt, outlined the payment arrangements available for larger fees and explained that the majority of student debt relates to withdrawals.

5.3 Estates

Ref: Management Report Section 4.1 and Paper 05.06

With reference to the Estates Report, Mrs McGrath:

- commented on her satisfaction with financial management within the estates cost centres;
- advised of the College's inability to accept external funding for a photovoltaic panel installation in the Dungannon campus due to the lack of DfE approval to accrue the expenditure into 2026/27;

- noted the pending recruitment of a Sustainability Officer as well as the change to the structural position of this post from the Development & Support Directorate to the Corporate Services Directorate;
- undertook to circulate the Public Body Climate Change Adaptation Report when submitted;
- reported good progress in the Erne Campus BREEAM assessment process;
- confirmed the resolution of all latent defects within the Erne Campus and advised of engagements with the Integrated Supply Team for reimbursement of associated costs;
- apprised members of the decision taken to directly commission building surveys in the College's two PFI campuses in light of continuing defects and insufficient investigations by the PFI provider; and
- reported on progress in relation to procurement of sectoral Integrated Consultant Team and Property Maintenance Frameworks.

ACTION: Mrs McGrath to circulate the College's Public Body Climate Change Adaptation Report when available.

5.4 Capital Budget Report

Ref: Management Report Section 5.1 and Papers 05.07 & 05.08

Management noted the expectation of a significantly decreased capital allocation for 2026/27 and sought the Committee's endorsement for prioritisation of any available budget as follows:

1. Health & Safety and Statutory Compliance Works;
2. Business Critical Projects;
3. Sustainability Initiatives;
4. Other Projects.

AGREED: Endorsement of the prioritisation of any available 2026/27 capital budget as listed above.

5.5 Student Hardship Fund Report

Ref: Management Report Section 6.1 and Paper 05.09

Mr O'Donnell drew attention to the underspend in the Student Hardship Fund budget and confirmed DfE's approval for the re-allocation of surplus funds to support all students through the sectoral Winter Warmers Scheme.

In response to questions from members, management advised of an ongoing DfE review of student support and acknowledged the opportunity presented by the change to the College's financial year to convert surplus funds to support all students earlier in the Winter season.

5.6 Contracts Report

Ref: Management Report Section 7.1 and Paper 05.10

Mr O'Donnell drew attention to the list of live contracts provided in paper 05.10.

5.7 Review of Banking Mandates

Ref: Management Report Section 8.1 and Paper 05.11

Mr O'Donnell confirmed the lack of amendments to authorised bank signatories since the most recent presentation of Banking Mandates to the Committee.

5.8 Policy Review

Ref: Management Report Section 9.0 and Papers 05.12 & 05.13

Mr O'Donnell outlined the proposed amendments to the Energy Management Policy and the Hospitality & Gifts Policy.

At the suggestion of the Committee Chair, management undertook to review the maximum limit for hospitality for internal meetings defined within the Hospitality & Gifts Policy and to inform the Committee Chair of the outcome of this review.

ACTION: Management to review the maximum limit for hospitality for internal meetings.

AGREED: that the Energy Management Policy and the Hospitality & Gifts Policy are recommended to the Governing Body for approval, subject to the Committee Chair's endorsement of the latter following review.

6.0 REVIEW OF OUTSTANDING ACTIONS

PREVIOUSLY ISSUED to all members:

- Paper 06 List of Outstanding Actions.

Mrs McGrath explained that arrangements for oversight of the College's website are set out in the Website Management Policy and undertook to schedule annual reports thereof to the Audit & Risk Committee.

ACTION: Mrs McGrath to schedule annual reports on oversight of the College's website to the Audit & Risk Committee.

She also confirmed the adequacy of resource within the Business & Industry Support Team following some movement of staff to other positions within the College.

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 conveyed their satisfaction with the proceedings of the meeting.

The meeting concluded at 10:30 am.

CONFIRMED AND ADOPTED BY THE GOVERNING BODY AT A MEETING HELD ON WEDNESDAY 15 APRIL 2026

GB CHAIRPERSON 

DATE 15/04/2026

SUMMARY OF OUTSTANDING ACTIONS

Item	Meeting Date	Minute Ref	Action
1	18/03/2026	5.3	Mrs McGrath to circulate the College's Public Body Climate Change Adaptation Report when available.
2	18/03/2026	5.8	Management to review the maximum limit for hospitality for internal meetings.
3	18/03/2026	6.0	Mrs McGrath to schedule annual reports on oversight of the College's website to the Audit & Risk Committee.