

SOUTH WEST COLLEGE GOVERNING BODY

Minutes of a meeting of the **Finance & General Purposes Committee**
held on Wednesday 12 March 2025 at 9.00 am
via MS Teams

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

1.0 PRELIMINARIES AND APOLOGIES

Mr Barnett, Committee Chair, welcomed all present to the meeting. He reflected on the satisfactory 2024/25 budget position, on the indications of a challenging 2025/26 sectoral budget allocation and on the need to minimise impacts on curriculum provision.

An apology was tendered on behalf of Mrs Isherwood.

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 22 January 2025.

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
- Paper 04.03 Strategic Priorities.

4.1 Long Term Financial Planning

Ms McCartan referenced the previously circulated draft 2025/26 budget allocation as well as the sectoral response to the Department for the Economy's (DfE) request for an Equality Impact Assessment of the proposed budget. She provided an overview of the sectoral response made to DfE highlighting the significant efficiencies already delivered by the sector, the limited scope for further savings on discretionary spend, the impact of further cuts to staff, students and the wider economy, the sector's

commitment to identify opportunities for savings through collaborative working and the significant equality impacts of a reduction in services due to budget cuts. She also reported on the declarations of trade dispute received from trade unions over workload and pay issues, on DfE's assertion of the unaffordability of pay increases and on the potential impact of industrial action on students.

Ms McCartan went on to advise that a sub-group of governors had been kept abreast of developments in relation to the draft budget and that representations will be made in due course on the methodology to be used to apportion any sectoral budget reduction amongst the six colleges. She added that a balanced budget for the year to 31 March 2026 will not be available at the commencement of this accounting period and that any proposal to reduce services will be presented to the Governing Body for consideration prior to any action being taken.

Mr O'Donnell apprised the meeting of the representations made to DfE to baseline the £11.5m funding provided to meet sectoral pay pressures as well as of the College's low share of the funding provided to meet sectoral non-pay pressures and the resultant widening of the efficiency gap within the sector.

With reference to paper 05.06, he outlined the budget preparation process, noting the planned development of an eight month budget to 31 March 2026 due to the anticipated change in colleges' statutory year end from 31 July to 31 March in line with DfE's financial year. He reminded the meeting of the positive impact of externally funded projects on income and of the focus to be placed in the short term on collation of the Accounts Pack and supporting documentation required for the audit of the 2024/25 DfE Group Annual Report & Accounts.

Management provided assurances on the analysis and mitigations being undertaken and the representations being made to protect college services and undertook to keep the Committee informed of developments.

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 since the previous meeting. She reminded members that focus has shifted to a transformation programme involving increased collaborative working and commented on the challenges of significant curriculum collaboration at certain qualification levels.

4.3 Sustainability

Mrs McGrath reported on the College's receipt of first place in the Association of Colleges (AoC) Beacon Awards in 'The Sustainable Energy First Award for Education for Sustainable Development' category and commented on the positive impact of this award on the College's reputation in the sustainability arena.

The Committee Chair extended the Committee's congratulations to all involved in this achievement.

4.4 Strategic Plan

With reference to paper 04.03, Ms McCartan explained that work is ongoing to define the objectives and actions within the Strategic Plan development process and welcomed input from the Committee.

In response to questions and comments from members, Ms McCartan outlined the options under consideration in relation to lecturers' pay increases, explained that an accrual has been made for a pay increase in the 2024/25 budget, commented on the benefits of greater stability in industrial relations matters and undertook to consider the incorporation of industrial relations into the Strategic Plan.

5.0 **MANAGEMENT REPORT**

PREVIOUSLY ISSUED to all members:

- Paper 05 Management Report
- Paper 05.01 April 2024 to January 2025 Finance Report
- Paper 05.02 Draft Budget Allocations 2025-26
- Paper 05.03 FE Colleges Budget Comparison 2025-26
- Paper 05.04 Financial Management Report to 31 January 2025
- Paper 05.05 Payments over 50k
- Paper 05.06 Budget Preparation Plan 2025-26
- Paper 05.07 Estates Report
- Paper 05.07b DAERA Draft Climate Change Mitigation Reporting Guidance
- Paper 05.08 Capital Budget Report
- Paper 05.09 Hardship Fund Report
- Paper 05.10 Banking Review
- Paper 05.11 PPN 04 21 - Procurement Control Limits.

5.1 **Budget Update**

5.1.1 April 2024 – January 2025 Finance Report

Ref: Management Report Section 1.1 and Paper 05.01

With reference to paper 05.01, Mr O'Donnell reported good financial performance in the 10 months to 31 January 2025 with indications of a within budget out-turn for the 12 months to 31 March 2025. He commented on the contribution made to this performance by the Step Up and Higher Level Apprenticeship programmes and noted the College's disappointment in the reduced budget allocation for the former in 2025/26.

5.1.2 Draft 2025/26 Budgetary Position

Ref: Management Report Section 1.2 and Papers 05.02 & 05.03

Mr O'Donnell referenced the discussions held earlier in the meeting on the challenging and uncertain 2025/26 budget position. He drew attention to the detailed analysis provided in paper 05.03 on the allocation of funding within the sector highlighting the variance in the value of funded non-pay pressures as well as the options under consideration for apportionment of any sectoral budget reduction.

ACTION: Mr O'Donnell to circulate examples of historical DfE FE College Health Check Reports to the Committee Chair.

5.2 **Financial Management / Accounting**

5.2.1 August 2024 – January 2025 Financial Management Report

Ref: Management Report Section 2.1 and Paper 05.04

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

5.2.2 Payments Over £50k

Ref: Management Report Section 2.2 and Paper 05.05

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

5.2.3 2025/26 Budget Preparation Plan

Ref: Management Report Section 2.3 and Paper 05.06

Mr O'Donnell explained that a 2025/26 budget is unlikely to be available for the Committee's review at its next meeting and it was noted that a briefing on the budget position will be provided to the Governing Body in June 2025.

5.3 Estates

5.3.1 Estates Report

Ref: Management Report Section 3.1 and Papers 05.07 & 05.07a

Mrs McGrath drew attention to the Department of Agriculture, Environment & Rural Affairs (DAERA) draft guidance on climate change mitigations reporting setting out how public bodies will report their climate change mitigations to DAERA through an online portal as required under The Climate Change Regulations NI 2024.

She also reported on the completion of Carbon Literacy training and the submission of carbon literacy pledges by 44 staff from the IT Services team.

5.3.2 Capital Budget Report

Ref: Management Report Section 3.2 and Paper 05.08

Mr O'Donnell referenced the updates provided in paper 05.08 on the expenditure of the 2023/24 and 2024/25 capital budget allocation. He highlighted the completion of the 2023/24 capital works albeit with budget remaining due to the slow receipt of invoices from some suppliers.

5.4 Other

5.4.1 Student Hardship Fund

Ref: Management Report Section 4.1 and Paper 05.09

The Committee was advised of the continued eligibility challenges affecting the distribution of student hardship funding and of the reallocation of uncommitted funds on meals for all students.

5.4.2 Review of Banking Mandates

Ref: Management Report Section 4.2 and Paper 05.10

The Committee noted the updated authorised payment signatories due to personnel changes.

5.4.3 Procurement Control Limits

Ref: Management Report Section 4.3 and Paper 05.11

Mr O'Donnell explained that Department of Finance (DoF) amended procurement control limits will be implemented by the College as required and noted the consequent need for a review of the Procurement Policy.

ACTION: Procurement Policy to be revised to reflect amended procurement control limits.

5.4.4 Erne Campus Kitchens Update

Mrs McGrath apprised the meeting of the investigations undertaken in the training and preparatory kitchens in the Erne Campus and provided assurance that no health and safety concerns had been identified by relevant authorities or external consultants.

She went on to advise of the relocation of Erne Campus catering provision to the Omagh Campus to facilitate further maintenance and spoke of the related practical arrangements in place.

In response to questions from members, management explained that provision will be returned to the Erne Campus on a phased basis in due course and that communications advice has been sought and a press release prepared.

6.0 REVIEW OF OUTSTANDING ACTIONS

PREVIOUSLY ISSUED to all members:

- Paper 06 List of Outstanding Actions.

Mrs McGrath reported on the review undertaken of the Web Management Policy including the significant revisions proposed to strengthen the security and integrity of the College's website and noted that this policy would be scrutinised by the Audit & Risk Committee at its May 2025 meeting. Members spoke of their satisfaction with the closure of the related action in light of the policy review undertaken.

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 on the volume of the information received during the course of the meeting.

The meeting concluded at 10:30 am.

**CONFIRMED AND ADOPTED BY THE GOVERNING BODY AT A MEETING HELD ON WEDNESDAY
2 APRIL 2025**

CHAIRPERSON



DATE 02/04/2025

SUMMARY OF OUTSTANDING ACTIONS

Item	Meeting Date	Minute Ref	Action
1	12/03/2025	5.1.2	Mr O'Donnell to circulate examples of historical DfE FE College Health Check Reports to the Committee Chair.
2	12/03/2025	5.3.4	Procurement Policy to be revised to reflect amended Procurement Control Limits.