

SOUTH WEST COLLEGE GOVERNING BODY

Minutes of a meeting of the **Finance & General Purposes Committee**
held on Wednesday 21 January 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 (*from item 4.3.2*)
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 PRELIMINARIES AND APOLOGIES

Mr Barnett, Committee Chair, welcomed all present to the first Finance & General Purposes Committee meeting of the 2026 year.

It was noted that Ms McCartan would join the meeting at a later point and agreed that the order of business would be amended accordingly.

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 15 October 2025.

There were no matters arising from the minutes.

4.0 MANAGEMENT REPORT

PREVIOUSLY ISSUED to all members:

- Paper 05 Management Report
- Paper 05.01 April to November 2025 Finance Report
- Paper 05.02 Revised 2026/26 Budget Allocation
- Paper 05.03 2025-26 Budget - 1 August 2025 to 31 March 2026
- Paper 05.04 Budget Preparation Plan 2026-27
- Paper 05.05 Draft Annual Report and Financial Statements 2024-25
- Paper 05.06 Financial Management Report to 30 November 2025
- Paper 05.07 Report on Payments over 50k
- Paper 05.08 Estates Report
- Paper 05.09 PFI Liaison Report
- Paper 05.10 Capital Budget Report
- Paper 05.11 Annual Sustainability Report 2024-25

- Paper 05.12 Energy Management Policy
- Paper 05.13 Fees and Charges Policy 2026-27
- Paper 05.14 IT Services Report.

4.1 Budget Update 2025/26

4.1.1 Finance Report 2025/26

Ref: Management Report Section 2.1 and Papers 05.01 & 05.02

With reference to paper 05.01, Mr O'Donnell confirmed the submission of the latest monthly financial return to the Department for the Economy (DfE) and advised of the balanced out-turn forecast to 31 March 2026. He also highlighted the revised budget allocation received, spoke of the challenge in achieving a balanced budget out-turn in light of the late confirmation of the final budget, and provided assurances on the effective utilisation of the additional funding.

4.1.2 SWC Budget – Eight Months to 31 March 2026

Ref: Management Report Section 2.2 and Paper 05.03

Mr O'Donnell reminded members of the pending change to colleges' statutory year end from 31 July to 31 March and of the Governing Body's approval of the College's budget for the eight months to 31 March 2026 at its November 2025 meeting.

4.1.3 2026/27 Budget Preparation

Ref: Management Report Section 2.3 and Paper 05.04

Referring to paper 05.04, Mr O'Donnell apprised the meeting of the preparations underway for the development of the 1 April 2026 to 31 March 2027 budget, noting the adaptations required to prior year preparations in light of the amended statutory financial year.

4.2 Financial Management / Accounting

4.2.1 Draft Annual Report & Financial Statements 2024/25

Ref: Management Report Section 3.1 and Paper 05.05

Mr O'Donnell reminded the meeting of the issue raised during the audit of the 2024/25 Annual Report & Financial Statements relating to a concern that the high volume of assets held at nil book value on the Fixed Asset Register posed a risk of material misstatement. He went on to advise of the steps taken to address the matter including a revision to the Asset Management Policy, a review of the Fixed Asset Register incorporating the disposal of a volume of assets, and the development of a process to re-assess the useful economic life of assets and make adjustments accordingly.

Mr O'Donnell explained that the Report to Those Charged with Governance has now been received from the NI Audit Office proposing an unqualified audit opinion and that a special meeting of the Audit & Risk Committee will be convened to review the 2024/25 Annual Report & Financial Statements and the Report to Those Charged with Governance.

In response to questions and comments from members on the 2024/25 Annual Report & Financial Statements, management spoke of the comfort to be taken through the satisfactory assurance rating received following an internal audit review of Budgetary Management & Financial Control, advised of the revised structure of the Finance team to include increased resource, and undertook to review the presentation of the financial objectives within the 2025/26 Annual Report & Financial Statements, clarify previous agreements on the evidence that may be offered to the Governing Body to

provide assurance on the maintenance and integrity of the College's website and report on the adequacy of resource within the Business & Industry Support team.

ACTIONS:

Management to:

- **clarify previous agreements on the evidence that may be offered to the Governing Body to provide assurance on the maintenance and integrity of the College's website; and**
- **report on the adequacy of resource within the Business & Industry Support team.**

4.2.2 Financial Management Report – Four Months to 30 November 2025

Ref: Management Report Section 3.2 and Paper 05.06

Mr O'Donnell reported an ahead of budget position at 30 November 2025 and explained that this is largely due to profiling of expenditure, particularly in relation to Peace Plus funded projects.

4.2.3 Payments Over £50k

Ref: Management Report Section 3.3 and Paper 05.07

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

4.3 Estates

4.3.1 Capital Budget Report

Ref: Management Report Section 4.3 and Paper 05.10

Mr O'Donnell drew attention to the minor works projects listed in paper 05.10 and apprised the meeting of the award of external funding for a Photovoltaic Panel installation in the Dungannon campus.

In response to questions and comments from members, Mr O'Donnell explained that, in a change to practice to date, capital funding must be spent in-year and may no longer be accrued into subsequent years.

Ms McCartan joined the meeting at this juncture.

4.3.2 Estates Report

Ref: Management Report Section 4.1 and Paper 05.08

Mrs McGrath reported on progress in relation to the two outstanding actions identified during the Gateway 5 review of the Erne Campus Development Project regarding latent defects and BREEAM certification, noting the expectation of the closure of these items by April 2026.

She went on to provide assurance on the College's ability to deliver planned, preventative and statutory estates maintenance following DfE's approval of a business case for the continuation of existing Integrated Consultant Team and Property Maintenance frameworks pending procurement of providers in the longer term.

4.3.3 Report on PFI Liaison Committee Meeting

Ref: Management Report Section 4.2 and Paper 05.09

Mrs McGrath provided an overview of the PFI Liaison Committee meeting held in December 2025, noting in particular the concerns raised on resourcing and timeliness.

Acknowledging forthcoming final stages of the PFI contracts, the Committee Chair spoke of the importance of ensuring the maintenance of buildings to the highest standard to safeguard their integrity upon transfer of ownership to the College for the benefit of students.

4.3.4 2024/25 Sustainability Report

Ref: Management Report Section 4.4 and Paper 05.11

Mrs McGrath provided an overview of the 2024/25 Sustainability Report during which she confirmed the submission of the previously circulated Climate Change Mitigation Report to the Department for Agriculture, Environment & Rural Affairs (DAERA); reported an overall downward trend in energy consumption; apprised the meeting of the 'gold' rating awarded following completion of the Business in the Community (BITC) NI Environmental Benchmarking Survey; advised of the potential for further renewable energy technology systems; noted the objective of the achievement of an 'A' Display Energy Certificate rating in the Erne Campus; and reminded members of 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.

4.4 Policy Review

Ref: Management Report Section 5.0 and Papers 05.12 & 05.13

Mr O'Donnell spoke of the matters considered in setting fees and charges including affordability, competition and inflation and, in response to a comment from the Committee Chair, acknowledged the importance of the College's modest fee income to its overall budget.

It was noted that the Energy Management Policy will be deferred to the March 2026 committee meeting to facilitate equality screening.

AGREED: that the 2026/27 Fees & Charges Policy is recommended to the Governing Body for approval.

4.5 Other

4.5.1 IT Services Report

Ref: Management Report Section 6.1 and Paper 05.14

Ms McGrath reported on the introduction of an IT Services Progression Pathway to mitigate resourcing challenges in the IT Services team as well as on the procurement of external services to support the team in the interim.

5.0 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
- Paper 04.03 NIFON Budget Sustainability Workshop Presentation.

5.1 Financial Stability

Ms McCartan began by providing a detailed overview of the information provided by DfE at a recent Partnership Meeting covering cyber security, artificial intelligence, the Shared Island Fund, DfE's 2024/25 Annual Report & Accounts, the DfE budget for 2026/27 and beyond, and organisational restructuring within DfE.

She then referenced the draft 2026-2029/30 NI budget currently open for consultation, commenting on the benefits of multi-year budgeting in long-term planning. She confirmed the commencement of the budget preparation process for the 12 months to 31 March 2027 and noted the challenge presented by the misalignment of the financial and academic years. She also reported ongoing sectoral budget pressures as well as NI Finance Officers Network (NIFON) work on budget sustainability.

5.2 Further Education Transformation

Ms McCartan advised of the postponement of a scheduled engagement on FE Transformation by DfE due to slow progress in this area and explained that momentum is likely to build presently following the appointment of a dedicated resource. She went on to note that enhanced sectoral collaboration is likely to be encouraged and spoke of the College's well-placed status in this regard.

Members queried the congruence of the Partnership Agreements between colleges and DfE and the increasing compliance levels required of the sector, and it was suggested that this may be raised at a forthcoming meeting between the Governing Body and DfE officials.

5.3 Sustainability

Ms McCartan referenced the comprehensive update provided on sustainability earlier in the meeting. She went on to apprise members of the ongoing review of the sustainability resource following the promotion of the former Sustainability Officer to another role within the College.

6.0 REVIEW OF OUTSTANDING ACTIONS

PREVIOUSLY ISSUED to all members:

- Paper 06 List of Outstanding Actions.

It was noted that all four actions listed in paper 06 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

The Secretary to the Governing Body undertook to liaise with the Chief Executive to investigate meeting access issues.

The meeting concluded at 10:45 am.

CONFIRMED AND ADOPTED BY THE GOVERNING BODY AT A MEETING HELD ON WEDNESDAY 4 FEBRUARY 2026

GB CHAIRPERSON  _____

DATE 04/02/2026

SUMMARY OF OUTSTANDING ACTIONS

Item	Meeting Date	Minute Ref	Action
1	21/01/2026	4.2.1	Management to clarify previous agreements on the evidence that may be offered to the Governing Body to provide assurance on the maintenance and integrity of the College's website.
2	21/01/2026	4.2.1	Management to report on the adequacy of resource within the Business & Industry Support team.