

SOUTH WEST COLLEGE GOVERNING BODY

Minutes of an online **Extraordinary** meeting of the **Governing Body of South West College** held on Wednesday 08 April 2020 at 5:25 pm

PRESENT:

- Mr Peter Archdale
- Ms Siobhan Breen
- Mr Zack El Marif
- Mr Joanne Lucas
- Mrs Margaret Martin
- Mr Michael McAlister (Chief Executive)
- Mrs Patricia McCaffrey
- Mr Seamus McCaffrey
- Mrs Gillian McDowell
- Mrs Monica McGeary
- Mr Michael McGuckin
- Mrs Joanne Moore
- Mr Gerard O'Hanlon
- Dr Nicholas O'Shiel (Chair)
- Mr Michael Skuce

IN ATTENDANCE:

- Dr Jill Cush, Deputy Chief Executive
- Mrs Sharon McGrath, Head of Services
- Mr Ciaran McManus, Assistant CE Learner Experience & Digital Transformation
- Ms Claire O'Donnell, Secretary to the Governing Body
- Mr Sean O'Donnell, Head of Finance
- Mrs Eimear Rushe, Head of Human Resources

PRELIMINARIES

At the outset the Chair welcomed everyone to this the first online Governing Body Meeting and extended his appreciation to Ms O'Donnell for arranging it. He also extended his appreciation to the Chief Executive for maintaining good communication with him in the fast paced and ever changing environment of an evolving Coronavirus situation. He asked members to note that the meeting would be audio recorded for the purposes of minute taking and that the recording would be destroyed when the minutes were finalised.

The Chair also advised members that a note had issued to staff that afternoon from the Chief Executive and himself, on behalf of Governors and Management, thanking them for all their hard work in recent weeks.

The Chair then asked that members keep contributions focused as the main purpose of the extraordinary meeting was to provide an update to the Governing Body in these special circumstances, allow an opportunity to provide feedback and allow an opportunity to show support for the management team as they worked through the challenges of Coronavirus.

Before proceeding, the Chair then paused to acknowledge the wider context of Coronavirus, where people were loosing lives and jobs on a daily basis, a trend which he noted was likely to continue for some time.

Finally, the Chair advised that the next Governing Body meeting on 29 April 2020 would be as normal as circumstances permitted, and he requested permission for himself and the Chief Executive to use their judgement on how best to manage the meeting.

1.0 APOLOGIES

No apologies were recorded.

2.0 CONFLICT OF INTEREST DECLARATIONS

No declarations were made under this heading.

3.0 CHAIRMAN'S BUSINESS

In addition to his preliminary remarks, the Chair also extended his appreciation to the Chief Executive for his communication in the past number of weeks.

In explaining the format for this extraordinary meeting, the Chair noted he would ask the Chief Executive to provide an update on how the College was managing the Coronavirus situation, following which members could ask any questions. The meeting he explained would then move through each of the committee updates. He explained that while a Finance & General Purposes Committee meeting had taken place that morning, other committees had to be suspended in the current circumstances. In this respect, he advised that committee chairs could rely on managers to provide updates.

4.0 CHIEF EXECUTIVE'S BUSINESS

The Chief Executive expressed his appreciation for the support of the Chair and the wider Governing Body which, he advised, all of the management team felt. He then proposed to look at where we are now, the immediate challenges and medium-longer term planning issues.

4.1 Current Situation

The Chief Executive explained that the College had moved to remote working very effectively on 23 March 2020 which included teaching staff, support staff and business development staff. He explained that the Covid-19 Coordination Team was set up about four weeks ago and met around three times per week. He acknowledged that the effort from staff at all levels was nothing short of amazing. A sector paper was being prepared he advised, looking at what the six colleges were doing. This paper had gone to the Department in second draft format in order to help them deal with press queries. He advised that it could be shared with all governors once it was approved. He also noted that the Department had asked colleges not comment to the media. Referring to the weekly updates governors had been receiving, the Chief Executive then outlined some of the statistics around online learning. He explained that in week one, there were 9,500 students in online classrooms with almost 3,000 training sessions delivered and almost 2,000 registers marked. He commented that an additional 400 registers were to be marked this week and reported 79.68% attendance in online classes. The Chief Executive also advised that 578 tickets had been resolved

on the digital learning helpdesk. He explained that these statistics were fantastic and reflected a great team effort. In concluding he advised that 602 online meetings had taken place across the College in the past seven days.

Mrs Martin commended the Chief Executive and his team on these statistics, adding that the way staff had reached out to students had been exemplary.

4.2 Immediate Challenges

The Chief Executive explained that the biggest issue facing the College at the moment was the assessment of student work and the awarding of grades. In a tweet immediately before this extraordinary meeting, the Department had indicated that they were moving towards a solution on this. They had set up a task and finish group, on the request of the Chairs and Chief Executives, to agree the strategy and the way forward. A second supporting group was set up CCEA and included Elizabeth Shackels from SWC and Keith Kilpatrick from SRC, and was developing and establishing models and solutions to the issue. In terms of the College, teaching and delivery was well up to date he added. The big challenge the Chief Executive explained was that, if this was not resolved satisfactorily, there would be an impact on progression, meaning that Level 2 students wouldn't be able to progress to Level 3 and Level 3 students would not be able to progress to HE programmes. He also outlined the difficulty in terms of having viable cohorts for next year and supporting the economy. The Chair added that the Chief Executives had done a huge amount of work in pushing this up the line, which resulted in the Chairs writing collectively to the Minister. This letter had issued last Friday and today the Minister had issued a statement. This collective work and direct communication between the Chairs and Chief Executives had the sole purpose of looking after the students in the sector he noted. Mrs Moore commended the Chairs and Chief Executives on this approach and she welcomed the response from the Department, however she noted that some universities would not take predicted grades seriously. This was something she noted the College must be cognisant of. In response the Chief Executive advised that the Task and Finish groups would liaise with the universities to find a solution that would provide more assurance moving forward. Mr Skuce then queried if any decision by the Department was open to legal challenge. The Chief Executive advised that there could be difficulties for the Department but that they were working their way through this carefully and with the required amount of urgency. In response to a query from Mrs Martin, the Chief Executive advised that colleges could come up with their own internal decisions on progression for two year courses if necessary and these would likely be similar across the six colleges. Mr O'Hanlon queried if students would have to resit as a result that they couldn't progress and queried who would fund this. This, the Chief Executive explained, was a doomsday scenario and the Department was working hard to mitigate against it. Mr O'Hanlon also expressed concern about the emotional wellbeing of students. The Chair acknowledged that this would be a huge issue and one which would be fully addressed in time. Referring to furloughed apprentices, Mr Archdale expressed concern that this group was being overlooked. He queried through the Chief Executive what was being done to care for furloughed apprentices and further queried through the Chair if there was potential to highlight this group as particularly disadvantaged. In response, the Chief Executive advised that furloughed apprentices would be allowed to continue learning and that the Chief Executives were working through solutions to this issue with the Department. The Chair advised that the communication and relationships between the six Chairs and Principals was excellent and that this issue was at the top of the agenda. Mrs McGeary suggested that it would be useful to get a pulse on students at the right point in time. The Chair and Chief Executive agreed with this

proposal, with the Chief Executive noting that for now the best thing was to keep trying to engage with all students, until a solution had been identified. Mrs McGeary confirmed that she would be happy for the Chief Executive to guide this work and added that a staff pulse would also be useful. Mr El Marif advised that students were generally content with remote learning and that the only stress was how grades would be allocated. In response to a query from Mr McGuckin, the Chief Executive advised that the College needed to finalise students late May or early June, but added that he had taken reassurance from the Ministerial statement today.

4.3 Longer term Planning Issues

The Chief Executive advised that the Department had deferred the College Development Plan, WAPP, MASN targets and the Tribal Action Plan to June 2020. He advised that colleges had yet to receive their indicative allocations as the Traineeship issue had yet to be addressed. It was expected that traineeships would not proceed and that the College would revert to Training for Success.

In relation to the Erne Project, the Chief Executive advised that this had been the last capital project in the sector to close on 27 March 2020, immediately before the Project Board meeting. This project would remain closed for a three week period and would be reviewed at that point. On 27 March 2020, the Chief Executive advised that the project was on programme and on budget. However, due to emerging pressures, previously unallocated monies would now need to be reallocated. Work to dispose of Fairview was progressing but he noted that this facility would likely be needed in September 2020 and for a period of time thereafter. The Chief Executive explained that CPD had advised that this was a compensation event, and as such IST had notified the Project Manager of the suspension, with CPD stating that it was 'reasonable to assume this will change prices and the timeline moving forward'. The Project Manager was therefore required to seek quotations for these changes, initially timebound for three weeks which can be reviewed and extended. The important point the Chief Executive noted was that CPD had said it will be 'assumed all public funders will want to support this action'. The Chief Executive also noted that the contractor was required to sign a C2 contract which was currently being drafted by CPD and which committed the contractor to an open book accountancy approach. Finally, the Chief Executive pointed out that all retention would now be released immediately under this approach. The Chairman expressed his appreciation to the Chief Executive for this positive picture in very challenging circumstances. He also encouraged Mr El Marif to contribute at any point to meetings as the student voice was central to everything the college did.

5.0 **FINANCE AND GENERAL PURPOSES COMMITTEE UPDATE**

PREVIOUSLY ISSUED to all members:

- Paper 05.00 Finance & General Purposes Committee Report
- Paper 05.01 Sector COVID Comms Draft April 2020
- Paper 05.02 Covid Communications Structure 23.03.20
- Paper 05.03 Access Process All Campuses

In introducing this report, Mr McCaffrey, Finance and General Purposes Committee Chair, advised that a committee meeting had taken place that morning with full

attendance and very comprehensive reports. He invited Mr O'Donnell and Mrs McGrath to outline the detail of these reports.

Mr O'Donnell firstly assured members that the Finance Department was working well remotely. He explained that they were about to close out the 2019/20 budget and again assured members that the College was on target to come in on budget, allowing for an approved overspend of £322k. Budget preparations had commenced for 2020/21, he explained, and again noted that indicative allocations had yet to be received. He outlined various pressures the College was facing in 2020/21 and also a renewed focus on supporting curriculum. Mr O'Donnell also noted that the College was monitoring the costs associated with site closure in relation to the Erne Project adding that the expenditure profile remained up to date and accurate. In response to a query from Mrs McGeary about the value of lost income, Mr O'Donnell confirmed that the number of requests for refunds was low but was being monitored closely and also that research and development project funding was stable for the immediate future. Mr McGuckin advised that the committee meeting that morning had provided him with good assurance in terms of current year spend, but he remained cautious about the 2020/21 budget allocation. He then queried how the student laptops were being funded and allocated. Mrs McGrath explained that initially approximately 100 laptops had been provided to staff. A proposal had been put to NIFON for additional funding for student laptops, but this was currently subject to a 10-12 week lead time. In the interim, the College had reconditioned approximately 130 laptops for students. She also advised that a company in Omagh had anonymously donated 17 laptops for students most in need which would be issued the following day. Finally, she advised that the principles for issuing laptops were currently being finalised and it was hoped to issue the laptops before the end of the week. Ms Breen further advised that curriculum teams were liaising with students on a daily basis and were feeding back in terms of need. She paid tribute to the speed at which Digital Learning were able to provide this support in urgent cases. Mr O'Hanlon further queried how usage was monitored. In response Mrs McGrath advised that lecturing staff were best placed to provide this information. Mrs McGeary then suggested that the new batch of laptops recently bid for should be held back for September if secured. The Chief Executive added that a second wave of the virus may mean an extended closure and that all six colleges had bid for this additional funding and would pursue. Mrs McCaffrey queried if part time lecturers and associate lecturers were able to contribute fully, as she pointed out they would be critical in the case of a second wave of the virus. The Chief Executive confirmed that these staff had access to the same levels of support as all other staff. Mrs McCaffrey noted that act of kindness from the anonymous Omagh company.

Mrs McGrath then outlined her report as follows. She explained that Technical Services were constantly working on other ways to make other systems available to staff, for example, e-registers. She added Apps Anywhere had been secured for students and staff for the next 3 years. In relation to student engagement support and wellbeing she advised that all staff were working remotely to provide additional support to students and staff. Mrs McGrath advised that EMA payments had been processed the previous week and that hardship payments had been made into student accounts. She added that the final trawl for hardship had gone out and extra flexibility had been requested in terms of utility bills, etc. The Student Health and Wellbeing Programme she advised was being pushed out through social media. She noted that student attendance monitoring was being carried out in a very supportive way in the current circumstances. Finally, she asked members to let her know if they felt there

was anything more they could be doing to support students. The Chairman suggested that Mr El Marif could link with Mrs McGrath in this respect.

In relation to marketing, she advised that the communications plan was constantly being reviewed. She noted that events and how the College would recruit would change significantly, adding that a small team was looking at HE at Home. She advised that all five college switchboards were currently being operated from receptionists' homes and that building checks continued with access being monitored very tightly.

Mr Archdale commented that with so much information available in relation to Coronavirus, it was important that the College tried to find a way of not repeating what was already out there. The Chief Executive advised that every effort was being made to try to make the information easy to understand and concise, referencing the guidelines for remote learning which was led by the Head of Human Resources in the College and had been adopted by the sector and by the Department.

6.0 EDUCATION, QUALITY & PERFORMANCE COMMITTEE UPDATE

PREVIOUSLY ISSUED to all members:

- Paper 06.00 Education, Quality & Performance Committee Report

In introducing the update of the Education, Quality and Performance Committee, Mrs Moore, Committee Chair, paid tribute to the Chair and Chief Executive for their strong leadership and hard work. She also commended all staff for their flexibility and professionalism.

Reporting by exception as requested by the Chair, Mr McManus then outlined the update in terms of three key initiatives. He explained firstly that the College had invested significant resource in the past ten years in digital delivery and supporting learning. The first component of this, Canvas, saw 3,500 students engaged in week one, with 970 tutors involved in uploading information. The second component, Blackboard, registered almost 9,5000 students engaged with almost 3,000 sessions in week one. He also referenced other systems which were used for monitoring. He highlighted very good feedback on the social inclusion provision and complemented the wraparound support the College provided for all students. Mr McManus explained however that unfortunately 37 apprentices had been furloughed, but added that the College remained in contact with these students.

The second initiative Mr McManus outlined was the support for staff working remotely. He outlined the support provided to staff and explained that Digital Learning were logging and addressing around 160 tickets a day. Microsoft Teams was being well utilised in the College he added and provided a means for managers to meet and support staff. He noted that staff were reporting positively on both technical and managerial support.

The third initiative, Mr Manus outlined, was engagement with external stakeholders. He noted that the College was engaging with a significant number of actors and that these relationships were being managed well. For higher education, work was progressing to move away from end point examinations to case studies and written submissions. An agreement had been reached with the Department in terms of how non employed trainees in work based learning programmes can be retained on

programme and provided with their training allowance. Staff were also working with the Department to reach agreement and contingency plans for furloughed and redundant apprentices. Social exclusion funding was externally sourced he noted, and the College continued to work closely with the funders.

In summary Mr McManus advised that he was very content with where the College was but looking forward, work was progressing to validate Open University courses, progress student recruitment and to ensure the LMS system was embedded by September 2020.

7.0 AUDIT COMMITTEE UPDATE

PREVIOUSLY ISSUED to all members:

- Paper 07.00 Audit Committee Report
- Paper 07.01 Draft Corporate Risk Register – The Impact of Coronavirus
- Paper 07.02 Remote Working Risk Assessment (GDPR)

In introducing the Audit Committee Update, Mrs McCaffrey, Committee Chair, updated governors on recent correspondence received from the sponsor Department. Firstly, the Department had advised that Audit Committee meetings should continue remotely. Mrs McCaffrey also explained that the internal audit contract with Grant Thornton would end in July 2020. Grant Thornton had indicated that they could complete all internal work before then, she advised, but had been asked to consider a short extension to the current contract. Mrs McCaffrey noted that CPD were working to procure a new internal audit service in the interim. Mrs Lucas added that the audit on business continuity was ongoing as a desktop exercise. The student engagement audit which was scheduled for May 2020 may have to be deferred she advised.

Mrs Lucas then reported that the risk register had been updated to reflect the risk of Covid 19 on the 6 strategic objectives and 10 top risks. She advised that while Covid 19 was a severe risk, the College had put a lot of mitigations in place. She advised that three risks remained and seven risks had increased in severity. In particular, she highlighted the risk of data security as a result of remote working and the increase in phishing attacks. To mitigate against these, advice had been issued to staff and two new firewalls had been purchased which increased security.

Mrs Lucas also confirmed that the College was covered by all insurance policies for homeworking. She reported that she had also registered an interest in a business interruption claim. Finally, she advised that all equipment which the College had issued was being logged for audit purposes.

8.0 STAFFING COMMITTEE UPDATE

PREVIOUSLY ISSUED to all members:

- Paper 08.00 Staffing Committee Report
- Paper 08.01 Service Level Agreement

In introducing the Staffing Committee Update, Mrs McDowell, Committee Chair, welcomed the four main initiatives outlined in the paper. She commented that it was

good to see college concentrating on staff at a very stressful time. Mrs McDowell acknowledged the amount of work which was being carried out and commended all staff involved.

Mrs Rushe then outlined these four initiatives in further detail. The first initiative, the remote working guide for staff and students, which was led by the College HR team, had been adopted by other colleges and the Department.

In terms of communication, Mrs Rushe advised that Frequently Asked Questions had been issued and would continue to be refined. She also advised that direct contacts for the HR team had been provided to all staff and that staff were availing of these.

Mrs Rushe advised that the new payroll service went live as of 1 April 2020 with the first payroll to be made at the end of the month. All project milestones had been met she advised and the management team were confident in the process. Mrs Rushe advised that parallel runs would continue for two months and she recommended the Service Level Agreement (Paper 08.01) for approval.

Finally, Mrs Rushe updated on the wellbeing initiative. This had been taken online and two pieces of information would be issued to all staff weekly she advised. HR were actively seeking suggestions for support requirements through various channels, she added.

AGREED: on the proposal of Mrs Dowell, that the confidential Staff Resource Report and Fixed Term Contract Report be ratified by the Governing Body.

In response to a query from Mr Archdale, Mrs Rushe confirmed that the new payroll service was good value for money but did not represent a significant saving. Mr O'Donnell further clarified that the main benefit was operational with significant process improvement for the Finance and HR teams. Mrs Rushe also confirmed that Belfast Met had adequate contingencies in place in the event that staff were affected by Coronavirus.

9.0 ANY OTHER RELEVANT BUSINESS

The Chair acknowledged that Fiona McCauley's father had passed away. The Chief Executive confirmed that a letter of sympathy would issue to Mrs McCauley that day.

The Chair then advised that the next Governing Body meeting on 29 April 2020 would be as normal as possible. Two committee meetings had been suspended he explained, but he proposed that committee and Governing Body meetings should continue as normal as possible unless circumstances dictated that they should be suspended.

Mrs Martin extended her congratulations to the HR Department for their work, noting in particular that work which had been sector leading.

The Chair then expressed his appreciation to those governors who had recently agreed to extend their term.

Finally, the Chair asked the Chief Executive to pass on his appreciation to the IT team who, he commented, could not be more helpful.

10.0 REFLECTION ON EFFECTIVENESS OF MEETING

Members conveyed their satisfaction with the proceedings of the meeting.

Mr Skuce congratulated the Chair for organising and managing the meeting, noting that this was likely to be the new normal.

The meeting concluded at 7.29pm

CONFIRMED BY THE GOVERNING BODY AT A MEETING HELD ON WEDNESDAY 29 APRIL 2020

CHAIRMAN _____

DATE _____