

MINUTES OF THE DE BOARD MEETING
Thursday 22 August 2024
Conference Room, Rathgael House

Attendees:

Linsey Farrell (Chair)

Ronnie Armour

Faustina Graham

Heather Cousins

Paul Corrigan

Anna Carragher

Marcella Phillips

Kim Martin

Stephen Van Houten

Michelle McGoldrick (PPE item)

Apologies:

Mark Browne

Neil Palmer

In attendance:

Bryan Lavery (Board secretary)

Observers:

Cameron Wilson – Staff Officer, Special Education Team

Matters Arising

Kim presented her paper relating to the matter arising on the effectiveness of PPEs. She provided an update to the Board on EAU's 2024 PPE Compliance Exercise, which indicated a low completion rate of 32%, and the recommendations from the 2022/23 Test Drill that are still applicable for all DE Directorates and NDPBs/ALBs.

The Board noted and agreed actions that will now be implemented:

- Presentation and discussion at SMT to highlight the importance of PPEs and the responsibilities SMT members have.
- EAU will write to DE Directorates and NDPBs/ALBs asking them look at the relevant findings and recommendations issued from the 2022/23 Test Drill.
- EAU will write to teams with specific findings and recommendations where non-compliance has been identified and completion rates of PPEs are low.
- EAU will write to all DE Directorates and all NDPBs/ALBs to stress the importance for timely completion of PPEs.
- EAU will write to all DE Directorates and all NDPBs/ALBs to stress the importance of recording PPEs on databases and for timely completion of PPEs.
- EAU to write to all DE Directorates and all NDPBs/ALBs to stress the importance of timely completion of PPEs, and to stress that sufficient resource should be allocated to the completion of PPEs on time to the deadline required.
- EAU to provide advice as required.

EAU will consider whether a centralised team should undertake PPEs and provide advice to ARAC.

Permanent Secretary Update

Linsey advised that the key issue for PSS remains the budget position in the current year. HOCS is undertaking a piece of work with DoH, DE and DoJ as the departments facing major budget pressures. The Minister continues to engage with DoF on budget issues and decided that schools needed to be advised of their budgets for the current year, doing this on 18 August.

The development of the programme for Government is ongoing. TEO is engaging with departments and DE has provided significant input on SEN and Early Years policy areas.

Jayne Brady will be chairing the Board overseeing the Transformation Programme. The volume of bids has significantly outstripped the capacity of the budget for the Programme. DE continues to input to the process and has made a number of bids, including the most significant being for SEN transformation.

Grade 3 Updates

G3s provided updates on their individual areas.

Ronnie:

- Positive position on the Pay and Grading review and agreement with unions.
- Successful launch and allocation of funding for the Childcare Subsidy element of the Early Learning and Childcare Strategy.

Heather:

- The contract for Strule Shared Education Campus has been signed. Diggers will be onsite by spring 2025. Minister is having an event with stakeholders on 12 September. A Programme Director and Construction Director from SIB are being put in place.
- The School Uniform Grant consultation is ongoing. A number of consultation events are coming up and the Minister is meeting with the Youth Assembly. Work on the regulations and guidance is proceeding.

Faustina:

- Following the end of ASOS all follow-up inspections have been completed.
- Pilot work undertaken in seven primary schools and 2 post-primaries. Providing good feedback for the Inspection Strategy.
- Full programme of inspection in place for the Autumn term.
- Impacts of the pandemic evident in the confidence of young teachers newly appointed from teacher training colleges.
- Empowering Improvement 2 – successful online programme delivered for more than 300 school leaders and EA staff. Youth element will be delivered face to face.
- Recruitment of four specialist inspectors underway, including one for SEN.

Linsey:

- Update on the Data Breach – NEBMs heard about it on media – alert system to be put in place.
- SEN Placements – as of 12 August 98.8% of children had places. Much better position than last year. Significant programme of capital work ongoing but EA has advised that all places will be available by end of term 1.

- Civil unrest and race attacks – PSNI has raised concerns about the return to school of children in some cases. Contingency work ongoing with stakeholders.
- Exam results – return to pre-covid standards. Excellent work undertaken by CCEA and DE Qualifications Team. NI top of the league table for A levels across UK.

Strategic issues for the Minister on Linsey's side:

- Qualification Reform;
- Curriculum Review;
- Transformation Programme;
- Standing up of Statutory Assessment;
- Tackling Education Disadvantage – contract for RED Programme being signed next week. Delivered with funding from Shared Islands.

Director of Finance Report

Stephen provided members with an update on the current key financial issues.

As a result of the June monitoring round, an allocation to address the EA Pay and Grading Review, and a number of technical transfers and allocation from central funds the Department is estimating an overspend position of £221.3m for 2024/25.

The Minister has initiated an exercise in which the Department and its ALBs must identify 10% savings across budgets. The EA has identified £4.1m of what are considered achievable savings as part of this exercise. The Minister has asked that the EA revisit the exercise with a view to identifying £15m of achievable savings. The Minister continues to engage with the Executive on pressures in the education system.

DoF has instigated a September Monitoring round. While DE will have no reduced requirements it provides an opportunity to raise the pressures faced by the Department and the education system again.

Schools were notified of their budgets on Friday 16 August.

The current position indicates an overcommitment of £13.9m of the Capital Budget. This is considered manageable in terms of slippage and additional allocations during the year.

A paper has been provided to the Minister seeking his approval to the release of £32m of earmarked funding to schools.

The Minister has agreed to release funding to early learning providers to ensure capacity for the Childcare Subsidy.

Concerns were raised regarding the implementation of the Education Information Solutions (EdIS) Programme. It was noted that the migration of all schools to the new system is unlikely to happen by December 2024 when the current contract ends. Ronnie agreed to look into the issue and bring back to the Board an outline of the contingency arrangements to address this situation.

HR Report

Marcella provided an update to the Board on the HR report.

She provided an update on resourcing including:

- An SO merit list will be published shortly – currently 13 vacancies in DE.
- DP interviews have concluded – insufficient supply to meet demand.
- It is anticipated that a G7 competition to launch at the end of September.
- It is anticipated that a G6 competition to launch at the end of November.
- EO1 allocations underway – DE has three vacancies.
- EOII interviews are ongoing.
- AO competition launched on Monday 19 August.
- 71 vacancies in DE, including 10 non-general service posts.
- A process to launch 4 G6 inspector competitions is underway.
- DE currently has 84 temporary promotions. Discussions ongoing with G3s with a view to reducing this number.

No issues or hotspots to note regarding absence management.

Still 22.9% of 2024/25 PPAs not started on HR Connect. Need action to remedy this position.

Marcella provided an update on new and refreshed E-learning products, and particularly a new table of materials relating to managing sickness absence – supporting line managers and staff.

Marcella reported on:

- The work being progressed to make available a NICS Health and Wellbeing Framework;
- The request from People and Organisational Development seeking support – Intergovernmental Placements Working Group (DE had a nil return); and
- The launch of a new leaflet aimed at supporting staff who had suffered a bereavement.

Marcella advised that it was her intention to convene meetings with G3s to discuss current and arising HR matters within their area.

Linsey advised that there has been an excellent response from the Interchange system regarding recruitment for the RAISE Programme.

ARAC Update

The Board was provided with ARAC Annual Report 2023/24 and the updated ARAC TOR to note.

Paul advised that the next meeting of ARAC takes place in September.

The terms of appointment of the independent members of ARAC are due to end soon. Kim will check with ARAC secretariat the process for replacing them.

Non Departmental Public Bodies – verbal update

Ronnie reported:

- No issues noted at the CCMS GAR. Like others the organisation is under pressure but coping well; and
- Richard Pengelly is undertaking a piece of work on structures within the EA.

Linsey advised the recruitment of substantive directors for CCEA will begin shortly.

Heather reported that the new NICIE CEO has taken up post.