

MINUTES OF THE DE BOARD MEETING
Thursday 3 October 2024
Conference Room, Rathgael House

Attendees:

Linsey Farrell (Chair)
Ronnie Armour
Neil Palmer
Paul Corrigan
Anna Carragher
Marcella Phillips
Kim Martin

Apologies:

Mark Browne
Faustina Graham
Heather Cousins

In attendance:

Bryan Lavery (Board secretary)

Observers:

Leanne Johnston – DP, GTCNI Interim Sponsorship Team

Matters Arising

Ronnie spoke to his paper regarding the matter arising from the previous meeting on the Education Information Solutions Programme (EdIS) Contingency and Communications Arrangements. The Board noted the paper and the remedies available. Ronnie committed to keep the Board updated.

INTEGR8 Programme Presentation

The Board received a presentation from Paul Duffy and Kirstie Murray (DoF) on the purpose of, and the current position on the development of the INTEGR8 programme which aims to transform how Finance and HR services are delivered within the NICS.

Permanent Secretary Update

Linsey reported the following:

1. Consultation events are ongoing on the daft Programme for Government. Early Years & Childcare and SEN are the priority areas for DE within the Programme.
2. DE has one successful bid, the SEN Project, through to the next stage of the Transformation funding process. The Teacher Professional Learning bid was not successful at this time.

3. Following a Budget workshop (attended by the Minister, Mark Browne and Ronnie Armour) the Executive has released a Budget Sustainability Plan. Barnett consequentials from the Chancellor's budget are expected, however there are difficulties receiving additional allocations this late in the year.

Grade 3 Updates

Ronnie:

- The Minister will make a statement on the way forward for the Independent Review of Education in the Assembly on 14 October (copy of the statement to be provided to Paul and Anna). This will be a precursor to the development of a wider Education Strategy.
- Positive engagement continues with TUS side. A return to industrial action is not anticipated, but this could change. Discussions on pay will begin next week with the intention of releasing a joint communication by half-term in relation to the Workload Reviews.
- The deadline for applications for the post of Chair of the EA has been extended until the end of next week.
- A TP opportunity has been circulated to colleagues in the Executive Information Service seeking for a Grade 6 to support communications.

Linsey:

- SEN Placements remains an issue. The EA continues to add capacity in the system with 1000 additional places made available. However, the provision of further new provision is being hampered because of necessary capital works. 143 children have not yet been placed, however contingency arrangements have been agreed with parents and commitment is in place to have all children placed by the end of term 1. Work has commenced with the EA to ensure additional capacity is in place for next September. Work is underway with SIB to examine how the SEN budget of £600m is currently spent.
- The post of Chair of CCEA is being advertised from today with a deadline for applications of 24 October.

HR Report

Resourcing:

- The launch of the external general service competitions for both G7 and G6 is paused pending the outcome of the Whitley Central Executive committee meeting.
- There is insufficient supply from the DP merit list to meet existing demand. NICSHR Resourcing is liaising with HRConnect regarding dates for the final interviews of approximately 200 candidates.
- Supply from the general service SO competition has now been exhausted with remaining supply insufficient to fill all declared vacancies. Therefore, the Department has been afforded the opportunity to prioritise their allocations.
- Allocations from the current general service EO1 merit list are complete with successful candidates commencing employment week commencing 7 October onwards.
- A merit list for the general service EO2 competition is expected in late September. It is anticipated that supply will be insufficient to fill all vacancies at this stage. NICSHR Resourcing is liaising with HRConnect regarding dates for a final round of interviews.

- The closing date for applications for the new general service AO competition was 6 September 2024. NICSHR has issued a note to the Finance and HR Advisory Group (FHRAG) requesting panel members. Volunteers to sit as panel members for this competition should expect to commit to a minimum of 5 days.

In addition:

- The development of the competition for four G6 Inspectors continues;
- The trawling of two G6 posts within Early Years, Childcare & Children and Young People's Strategy Directorate is being considered; and
- An on-loan position is being explored by Raising Aspirations, Supporting Learning, Empowering Improvement Directorate.

Most departments have seen an increase in absence days. While staff in DE lost fewer days on average compared to the NICS as a whole, there was an increase from 10.2 days in 2022/23 to 11.6 lost per staff year in 2023/24. All departments have seen an increase due to mental health issues and a Mental Health Forum is being created with volunteers from departments sought for the Forum.

No issues or hotspots to note regarding absence management.

67.12% of 2024/25 PPAs have been agreed which is an improvement from the last meeting.

Director of Finance Report

- DE is currently forecasting an overspend position of £192.2m, of which £180.4m is the current EA forecast position.
- DoF has indicated there will be a November monitoring round following the Chancellor's October statement.
- For future years the current estimate is a pressure on the education budget of £700m (more than half of which relates to pay) in 2025/26 and £1b in 2026/27.
- The Capital budget estimate for this year indicates a pressure of £65m – this should be manageable in year.
- For 2025/26 the estimate is a pressure of £650m on the Capital budget, including £100m for Strule and £60m Fresh Start programmes.

Neil provided an update on:

- Accounts
- The High Risk EA IT Projects.
- Prompt Payments.
- Earmarked budgets.

ARAC Update

Update on the meeting of the ARAC on 10 September:

- An update from Ian Gallagher on progress made in GTCNI since his appointment – Paul passed on his thanks to Ian and the Team for the progress delivered.
- Strule
- NIAO update
- Internal Audit
- DE Data Breach

- Fraud and Whistleblowing.
- DE Teachers' Pensions Annual Scheme Statements 2023-23
- Risk Management - deep dive on Corporate Risk 6 on effective programme management from Suzanne Kingon.
- Key issues from GARS.

The Annual ARAC Workshop with ARACs in ALBs will take place on 28 October. Mark Browne and Tracey McCavigan will be speaking. The event will include a session on cyber risks.

Performance

Now that the Department is aware of the Minister's priorities for the year and final budget decisions for 2024/25 have been made, the Business Plan has been subject to a final review by Directors.

Regarding overall progress, the Board noted that:

- no actions are rated as red (not achieved);
- 3 actions rated as orange (not likely to be achieved);
- no actions are rated as amber (likely to be achieved but with some delay); and
- the remaining 52 actions are rated as green (achieved or on track for achievement).

The Department has been unable to develop a comprehensive set of suitable Performance Measures for 2024/25. The PMs have significant quality issues and there are several gaps in coverage. In many cases, where data is available, it only reports annually, with a significant delay in its availability. As the Department is developing a new Education Strategy, further development work on PMs has been paused to enable a fresh look at how we report on measures of success against that Strategy. Further consideration of PMs will be taken forward by the Data Strategy Group.

Following feedback from Top Management Group, the EA provided a revised Business Plan at the end of September, which is under consideration. Once finalised, the Minister will be asked to approve the Plan.

The Board:

- i) agreed to the proposed amendments to the 2024/25 Business Plan actions;
- ii) noted the 2024/25 Business Plan mid-year report and the summary position of actions up to 30 September 2024;
- iii) advised that it is content with the ratings and comments provided;
- iv) advised that it is content for the mid-year report to be shared with the Minister, published on the Department's website and the Assembly's Committee for Education informed;
- v) noted that development of performance measures has been paused and further work on this will be progressed through the Data Strategy Group; and
- vi) noted the position regarding NDPB 2024/25 Business Plan mid-year reports.

Risk

The Board:

- i. approved the amendments to Risks 2 and 3 to better reflect the EA delivery risk;
- ii. approved the other amendments to the CRR;
- iii. noted the Department's current risk profile; and
- iv. noted the findings from the ALB Risk Registers alignment and quality assurance exercise.

Non Departmental Public Bodies – verbal update

Ronnie reported:

- GARs with the EA and CCMS will take place in the coming weeks.
- The review of the EA's structure is ongoing.

Linsey advised that the post of Chair, and council member positions within CCEA have been advertised. Consideration of filling senior posts within the organisation is ongoing.

AOB

Linsey advised a joint formal launch of the RAISE programme will take place on 16 October, attended by the Minister for Education from Northern Ireland and The Republic of Ireland.

Paul advised that together with Anna he had visited Blossom Sure Start last week. It had been a very positive visit and he noted the engagement of both leadership and staff.

Tomorrow he and Anna will be visiting an early years setting in both north and east Belfast. He added his thanks to the Early Years Team for organising the visits.