

MINUTES OF THE DE BOARD MEETING
Thursday 14 November 2024
Meeting room 3, Rathgael House

Attendees:

Heather Cousins (Chair)

Linsey Farrell
Ronnie Armour
Faustina Graham
Neil Palmer
Paul Corrigan
Anna Carragher
Marcella Phillips
Paul Brush (item 1)
Kim Martin (item 7)

Apologies:

Mark Browne

In attendance:

Bryan Lavery (Board secretary)

Update on the Children and Young People's Strategy

Paul presented his paper which provided an update on the implementation of the Children's Service Co-operation Act (NI) 2015 (CSCA) and the Executive Children and Young People's Strategy (CYPS) 2020-2030.

Paul set out the background to both the CSCA and the CYPS. Paul explained that CSCA requires the Executive to prepare a report on its operation, with the first report due not more than 18 months after the date on which the Executive adopts the CYPS and thereafter during the lifetime of the Strategy at intervals of not more than 3 years. The Executive adopted the CYPS on 10 December 2020. The first report was therefore due by June 2022.

Paul provided an update on:

- The publication of the Executive's first report on the operation of the CSCA in July 2024.
- The establishment by the Department of a cross-departmental CYPS Monitoring and Reporting Board, chaired by Ronnie Armour and comprising senior officials (Grade 3 level) from across NICS departments.
- The development of the 3-yearly delivery plan for 2024-27.

Internal Audit will be conducting an assurance review of the CYPS which is scheduled to commence in January 2025. This will provide independent assurance in respect of implementation of the CYPS.

Any recommendations which emerge from this review will be considered in due course.

Strule Update

Heather presented her paper which provided a general Strule Shared Education Campus (SSEC) update.

Heather reported on progress since the award of the construction contract for the SSEC to Woodvale Lowry Joint Venture Limited on 7 August, including:

- The commencement of siteworks; and
- The reconfiguration of programme management structures to establish two major projects, the Campus Construction Project and the Campus 'Go-Live' Project.

On the current programme timetable full campus opening is planned for September 2028.

A Programme Gateway Review took place in May 2024. The review is positive and has made a small number of recommendations across several areas including risk evaluation and management, net zero, governance, resources and reporting. None has been designated as critical.

Permanent Secretary Update

Heather advised that the PSS last Friday had been a meeting focused solely on pensions.

Grade 3 Updates

G3s provided updates on their individual areas.

Ronnie:

- The Executive met to allocate the Barnett consequential received as part of the Budget process. DE received an additional £170m, which has reduced the current estimated shortfall in the 2024/25 year to £20m. The Minister is keen to see where the estimated shortfall can be reduced further.
- The Teaching Unions have balloted members regarding strike actions. The unions have submitted a bid for 13.5%. Unions in England and Wales have settled for 5.5%.
- The Minister has published his response to the Independent Review of Education. A full update will be provided to the Board at the appropriate time.
- The competition to appoint the new Chair of the EA is ongoing. An outcome is expected by the end of November.
- Ronnie confirmed to the Board that he is currently acting as Accounting Officer for the Department.
- The first stage of the Pay and Grading Review will be paid to staff at the end of November. Stage 2 will be paid in April 2025.

Heather:

- A stop has been placed on construction at Strangford College due to issues with the contractor. Discussions on the future of the project are ongoing with the EA and Council. This could entail a loss of funding in the current year. Clawback options from the contractor are being considered.
- The Minister will be undertaking a visit to a campus in Brussels in the new year which has similar pupil numbers to Strule. Officials will be undertaking a pre-visit to plan the event with Belgian colleagues.

Faustina:

- The ETI is launching two reports today:
- Special Education Provision in Mainstreams Schools.
- Special Educational Needs – Statementing.
- The event is being attended by 200 SENCOs.
- The ETI has delivered several events regarding its phase reports. Due to their popularity the ETI will be rerunning the events.
- The New Inspection Framework has been introduced and feedback has been positive.
- The ETI's Empowering Improvement events have had a good uptake.
- The ETI is still waiting to go to advertisement on four approved specialist Inspector posts. There is currently no specialist SEN Inspector and a colleague for the ROI is on loan to help. There is also an issue around FE inspection. The ETI is currently working at half capacity.
- The ETI has received a successful accreditation for Customer Service Excellence.

Linsey was late in joining the meeting due to other commitments which is why a Grade 3 update isn't included from EPCSG.

HR Report

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

She provided an update on 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.
- Allocations from the current general service DP merit list is currently in process with 3 successful candidates being allocated to DE. Interviews are underway for the remaining candidates which exhausts the current competition and a new competition, subject to budget availability, will be required.
- Supply from the general service SO competition has now been exhausted and a new competition, subject to budget availability, will be required
- There is sufficient supply at EO1 and the competition has been extended to 31 March 2025. At present, it is not known when a further round of allocations will take place.
- A survey of the remaining successful candidates from the current tranche of the EO2 merit list is underway to ascertain continued interest in posts, before the allocation process progresses. It is anticipated that supply will be insufficient to fill all vacancies at this stage and a final phase of interviews has been scheduled for mid/end November 2024.
- Panel members have been secured for AO interviews during December 2024, with a merit list anticipated in February 2025.
- NICSHR continues to liaise with the ETI regarding the development of the competition for four G6 Inspectors.
- A series of meetings with G3s and G5s will take place shortly regarding needs and supply of resources. The Board will be updated.

At 30 September 2024, 84 members of staff were temporarily promoted which equates to 16.15% of DE's total substantive workforce. NICSHR encourages G3s to consider the position on long-term TPs in their Groups.

Marcella advised that 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.

On Performance Management Marcella advised the Departmental position for the reporting year 2024/25:

35.63% of PPA/PDP's have been agreed and 13.60% are in progress.

32.76% of In-Year Reviews have been agreed, with 9.58% in progress and 57.66% not yet started.

NICSHR would encourage line managers to remind staff of the need to complete PPAs/PDPs as soon as possible.

Marcella provided an update from the Cross-Departmental Learning and Development Forum:

- Consideration is being given to running a G3 12-month strategic leadership course.
- A workshop is taking place with Directors across the NICS to consider the L&D requirements for G5s.
- Four new leadership products will be available from the start of 2025.
- Revised induction processes are being developed at corporate level presently, after which NICSHR will look at how to roll these out across departments.
- A line Managers Brochure will be launched shortly, aimed at new managers.

Director of Finance Report

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

- As outlined by Ronnie the current estimated deficit for 2024-25 has reduced to £20m with the further allocation of £170m to the Department.
- There is an emerging pressure around maintenance of £10m. It is being managed.
- The NJC pay agreement has been reached. Funding has been set aside for this.
- There is a capital pressure of £38m for 2024/25, however there is flexibility in the system.
- There is the possibility of pressures on Fresh Start funding due to allocations made by TEO elsewhere this year.
- Next year there is an anticipated pressure of £660m on the education resource budget, 50% of which is pay related, and £650m on the capital budget.

Neil provided an update on:

- Classification of status of VG & GMI schools;
- Accounts;
- High risk EA IT projects;
- DACs/Contracts; and
- Prompt payments.

DE People Plan 2024-26

Kim spoke to her paper and provided the Board with a background to the development of the DE People Plan 2024-26 and the priority areas identified by the Staff Engagement Forum for the associated Action Plan.

Kim added that the Action Plan is already being delivered, an example of which is the launch of the online Edlines this week.

Ronnie praised the bottom-up approach to the development of the Plan and thanked members of the Forum and DBST for their contributions to its production.

The Board agreed the lifespan of the Plan and endorsed it for publication and circulation to all staff.

Non Departmental Public Bodies – verbal update

Linsey advised that the sift of applications for Chair, and council member positions within CCEA is ongoing and the GAR is upcoming.