

MINUTES OF THE DE BOARD MEETING
Thursday 9 January 2025
Conference Room, Rathgael House

Attendees:

Ronnie Armour (**Chair**)
Linsey Farrell
Neil Palmer
Paul Corrigan
Marcella Phillips
Ray Caldwell (item 6 & 7)

Apologies:

Mark Browne
Heather Cousins
Faustina Graham
Anna Carragher

In attendance:

Bryan Laverty (Board secretary)

Permanent Secretary Update

Ronnie advised the following:

- He had met with SMT to discuss the challenging agenda facing the Department, focusing in particular on the Minister's strategic priorities.
- The budget position remains extremely challenging, and this includes the indicative position for 2025/26. The priority remains to achieve a balanced budget in the current year;
- The Minister announced the outcome of 14 development proposals yesterday.

Ronnie subsequently provided an update on the industrial relations position and planned discussions with Trade Union Side.

Grade 3 Updates

Linsey provided an update on her area.

The Minister announced his response to the Independent Review of Education and the Department is taking forward a number of key policy developments:

- Lucy Crehan began her Review of the Curriculum in November, supported by a small team. She is on track to deliver her report to the Minister in April.
- The development of a new and revised Literacy Strategy will begin once the Review of the Curriculum has reported. Research has been commissioned into international best practice and locally focussed work to inform the Strategy.

- Because of ASOS the Department has no system level data. The Minister has asked that we stand up arrangements for Statutory Assessment this year. Options for the longer term are being developed, with CCEA involved.
- Discussion is ongoing with the Minister on the direction he wants to take on Qualifications Reform. The Minister wishes to focus initially on AS level.
- The Minister wishes to pull together into a coherent narrative an Education Strategy reflective of his priorities for the current mandate.
- An International Ministerial Advisory Panel is being created, consisting of external expertise with a particular interest in a knowledge-based curriculum. The longer-term aspiration for the panel will be to shape qualifications reform.
- Although there is no word yet, she is confident of securing some funding from the Transformation Fund for the SEN Reform bid. The Minister made a statement at the Assembly on Monday setting out the direction of travel for SEN Reform. The focus will be on improving early intervention and building competence of parents and the workforce to identify and support needs other than by a statement, securing placements and revising the statementing process.

HR Report

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

She provided an update on resourcing:

- An internal general service competition for G7 was launched on 2 December 2024 with a closing date of 20 December 2024. The eligibility sift is due to take place from 14 to 28 February 2025, with face-to-face interviews scheduled between 7 and 18 April 2025.
- It is anticipated that an internal general service competition for G6 will launch on 27 January 2025 with a closing date of 14 February 2025. The eligibility sift is scheduled between 7 and 25 April 2025, with face-to-face interviews planned from 9 to 20 June 2025.
- Offer letters have issued to successful candidates from the most recent round of allocations for general service DP, with a start date of 6 January 2025. The last tranche of interviews from the current competition has now concluded and it is anticipated that allocations will take place during January 2025. This will exhaust supply and a new competition, subject to budget availability, will be required.
- 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.
- The last round of allocations from the current general service SO competition has been completed and offer letters issued to successful candidates, with a start date of 6 January 2025. Supply from the current competition has now been exhausted and a new competition, subject to budget availability, will be required.
- A meeting to discuss a number of HR matters is scheduled for 16 January. Should more definitive information become available in relation to Recruitment plans for DP & SO Marcella will report back on the outcome.
- There is sufficient supply at EO1 and the competition has been extended to 31 March 2025, however, there is no date available for a further round of allocations.
- A final phase of interviews from the current EO2 external general service competition has now concluded and the allocation process will take place in the New Year, although a timeframe is still to be agreed. Supply is insufficient to fill all the declared vacancies and a new competition, subject to budget availability, will be required.
- Recorded interviews were completed by applicants for the AO external general service competition in November 2024. Due to the unavailability of panel members the assessment process is continuing and the availability of a merit list delayed as a result.
- Four specialist Inspector posts have been advertised.

- There are currently 90 declared vacancies across DE.

Marcella will liaise with Ray Caldwell to discuss a number of resourcing issues.

Marcella advised that there has been a slight increase in absences but there are no particular issues or hotspots to note. A Learning and Development Sickness Toolkit is available on LiNKS.

Non-validated compliance data extracted from HRConnect on **16 December 2024**, reflects the Departmental position for the reporting year 2024/25:

- **75.54%** of PPA/PDP's have been agreed/progress.
- **48.25%** of In-Year Reviews have been agreed, with **4.66%** in progress and **47.09%** not yet started.

The Board thanked Marcella for her update.

Director of Finance Report

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

- The current estimated deficit for 2024-25.
- The pressures highlighted by the EA.
- A draft submission is ready to go to the Permanent Secretary on upcoming allocations and the budget position to the end of the year.
- Resource bids of £21.8m were submitted in January monitoring. A capital bid of £28m was submitted.

In respect of the 2025/26 budget position Neil advised that the Minister of Finance tabled a proposed 2025-26 budget allocation paper at the Executive meeting of 19 December.

The Minister of Finance's proposals in respect of the initial 2025-26 Resource budget for the Department of Education (DE) include the following:

- An initial baseline allocation, excluding Executive Childcare Strategy, of £3,219m. DE identified a Resource DEL requirement (excluding Executive Childcare Strategy) of c£3,479m. The proposed allocation therefore leaves a Resource funding shortfall of c£260m;
- Included within this allocation, the Executive is providing £75m in respect of Stage 2 of the EA Pay & Grading review (EAP&GR). While it is to be welcomed that the Executive has honoured its commitment to addressing this issue, it is important to note that the Department bid for £142.9m (i.e. £75m for Stage 2 plus c£67.9m for the 2025-26 recurrent impact); and
- The Executive has also committed to provide £50m in respect of the Executive Early Learning and Childcare Strategy. Although short of the £55m requirement identified by DE, it is reassuring that the £5m shortfall on the Childcare Strategy bid will have first call at June monitoring.

Capital

Current indications are that there will be a £28m shortfall in the capital budget for 2024/25. We await the outcome of the bid submitted in January monitoring.

For 2025/26, the indicative capital budget is £380.7m of which £218m is for Strule and Fresh Start projects. Currently, DE is forecasting a £90m pressure on the capital budget based on the indicative figures.

Neil provided an update on:

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

ARAC Update

Paul provided an update on the key areas discussed at the last ARAC meeting on 11 December and particularly:

- The NIAO update;
- Internal Audit Progress Report;
- Fraud and Whistleblowing;
- Teachers' Pension Scheme Accounts;
- 2023/24 Irregular Spend;
- 2023/24 RTTCWG Management Response;
- Risk Management;
- Deep Dive on Corporate Risk 1 – Finance;
- GTCNI Interim Governance Arrangements; and
- EdIS Programme.

DE 2024/25 Business Plan 3rd Quarter Report

Ray provided the Board with the third quarter position against actions contained within the 2024/25 Business Plan.

The Board noted that:

- no actions are rated as 'red', which is the same as at mid-year.
- the four actions rated as 'orange' this is compared to three actions at mid-year.
- no actions are rated as 'amber' which is the same as mid-year; and
- the remaining 51 actions are rated as green.

Work on drafting a new business plan for 2025/26 has now commenced. The Plan will represent Year 3 of Every CHILD and will therefore be structured under its Strategic Priorities. The Plan will reflect the Minister's priorities for education, including its Programme for Government priorities, and will align with the Education Strategy and ongoing Reviews. Every CHILD will be subject to a review in light of the development of a new Education Strategy.

DE's NDPBs have been asked to provide updates in January on the third quarter position for their 2024/25 Business Plans. Once received, the updates will be considered by DE Teams and a response will be provided to each organisation. Where appropriate, the outcome of the third quarter exercise will be reported to the next Governance and Accountability Review (GAR) meeting.

NDPBs' 2025/26 Business Plans were commissioned in December with first drafts due to be submitted to DE around the end of January. As with the DE Business Plan, NDPBs have been asked to consider their contribution to meeting Ministerial and PfG priorities for education and to reflect these as appropriate in their Plans. Also, NDPB's have been asked to assume a 'cash flat' budgetary position for 2025/26 at this early stage. Draft Plans, which are intended to be living documents, can then be updated as required as more information becomes available.

The Board:

- I. Noted the 2024/25 Business Plan third quarter report and the summary position of actions up to 31 December;
- II. Advised that it is content with the ratings and comments provided;
- III. Noted that the Minister has been asked if he is content that the third quarter report be published on the Department's website and shared with the Assembly's Committee for Education; and
- IV. Noted the position regarding NDPB Business Plan third quarter reports and 2025/26 Business Plans.

Risk Management

Ray provided the Board with an update on risk management in the Department since the last report to the Board on 3 October.

A number of amendments have been made to the CRR, particularly to reflect organisational and staff changes, particularly risks 1 & 6 where residual scores have reduced.

The annual DRR/PRR Alignment and Quality Assurance exercise highlighted that improvements in risk management and the use of the on-line Application have continued, to the extent that there are no significant concerns to report in any area of risk management at Directorate level in DE, other than the frequency of risk reviews being carried out.

The exercise found that risk reviews are often not carried out when they are due. The Risk Management Framework states that risks should be reviewed regularly and at least quarterly. The Risk Management Application issues e-mail requests for risk reviews when the most recent review exceeds three months. Six of the nine RRs had risks which were not reviewed regularly, with gaps between reviews of up to 10 months.

The Board agreed a proposal to take a more focussed approach with those business areas where processes aren't being followed.

The Board:

- I. Approved amendments to the CRR.
- II. Noted the Department's current risk profile; and
- III. Considered the findings from the DE Directorate/Programme Risk Registers alignment and quality assurance exercise.

Non Departmental Public Bodies – verbal update

Ronnie reported that:

- The new Chair of the EA, Mervyn Storey, took up post on 1 January.
- The CCMS GAR went well.

Linsey advised that interviews for Chair, and council member positions within CCEA took place in December. A submission is with the Minister with list of those who met the criteria and passed the interview. Linsey noted that CCEA is operating in an uncertain strategic landscape and that there will be a tricky period in terms of building resilience within the organisation while future requirements are unclear.