

MINUTES OF THE DE BOARD MEETING
Thursday 10 April 2025
CSSC Offices, Stranmillis College

Attendees:

Ronnie Armour (**Chair**)
Heather Cousins
Faustina Graham
Paul Corrigan
Anna Carragher
Neil Palmer
Marcella Phillips
Suzanne Kingon (Item 1)
Stuart Coulter (Items 5, 6 & 7)

Apologies:

In attendance:

Bryan Laverty (Board secretary)

Education Strategy – TransformED

Ronnie explained that there has been a huge amount of work in a short space of time, the bulk of which was undertaken by Suzanne Kingon alone, leading to the publication of TransformED. Ronnie added that the document is clear, concise and well written, and offered the Board's thanks to Suzanne for her work in its production.

Suzanne advised that the Education Strategy was launched by the Minister on 11 March. The Strategy focuses on the core areas of curriculum, assessment, qualifications, school improvement and tackling educational disadvantage. Reform in each of these areas will be underpinned by significant investment in high-quality teacher professional development. In responding to the Independent Review of Education, the Minister had indicated that these areas would be his core focus during the remainder of the mandate.

Suzanne gave a brief outline of the evidence gathered and key actions included in the Strategy. Of particular importance were a consideration of:

- NI's place in an international context (PIRLS/TIMMS/PISA);
- The correlation between education outcomes and social disadvantage;
- The impact of ASOS;
- The type of qualifications on offer and where they lead;
- A consideration of high performing education systems.

Next steps include:

- The development of an implementation plan;
- Continuation of a series of engagement events;

- A TransformED conference to take place on 8 May, when the implementation plan will be published.

Suzanne explained that an initial £13.8m has been allocated to implement the Strategy. She added that significant numbers of additional staff will be required to take it forward.

Invitations to the conference will be provided to the NEBMs.

The Board discussed:

- TransformED's place in the wider context of the Independent Review of Education, the SEN Reform Agenda, and the CYP Strategy;
- The challenging timetable;
- The identification of quick wins;
- The key role of curriculum reform – the Review of the Curriculum will report in May;
- The impact of various types of segregation at post-primary level;
- The lack of mobility of school leaders and teachers;
- Questions around the quality of support provided to struggling schools;
- Issues around assessment and the introduction of system level assessment of literacy and numeracy at 8, 11 and 14, undertaken by CCEA;
- Key engagements to meet the challenging timetable to publish the implementation plan; and
- Empowerment of parents and issues with school attendance.

The Board thanked Suzanne for her paper, hard copies of TransformED and her update on the way forward.

Permanent Secretary Update

Ronnie advised that he met with the NEBMs last week to discuss a range of issues and provide an update on departmental priorities.

Ronnie reported the following:

- Industrial relations – agreement was reached with the teaching unions on a pay deal last Friday.
- The Minister is appointing an International Ministerial Advisory Panel. A TOR will be submitted to the Minister next week and the Panel should be established before Easter.
- HOCS has published a 5-year NICS People Plan.

Grade 3 Updates

Heather advised the following:

- The Integrated Education Strategy is out for consultation;
- The Covid Enquiry Statement is ready for submission;
- A draft Capital Budget is with Ronnie for consideration;
- The JRs in respect of Rathmore Primary and Bangor Academy are ongoing but at an early stage.

Faustina advised that:

- A range of ETI visits are ongoing, although individual school inspection has not resumed after agreement with the teaching unions as there is only one week of term remaining– they will resume after Easter.
- The programme of inspection work for the third term can now go forward following the pay deal;
- The ETI is still struggling with the slow pace of recruitment competitions within the NICS Interviews ongoing at present for the four specialist posts;
- Another four posts are with NICS HR at present, leading to advertisement;
- The ETI is considering alternative options to address the significant shortfall in the number of inspectors;
- Faustina and her senior team met with the NIAO regarding its report into the quality of education across the system. It's led by Suzanne's Directorate in DE but ETI involved;
- The ETI has been asked for a separate Covid Statement – proving time consuming.

DE 2024-25 Business Plan End Year Report

Stuart spoke to his paper which provided the Board with the end-year position against actions contained in the 2024-25 DE Business Plan.

The Board agreed that the action rated as red, regarding the pay agreement, should now be regard as green, completed.

The Board:

- agreed the 2024/25 Business Plan end-year report and the summary position of actions up to 31 March 2025;
- advised that it is content with the ratings and comments provided;
- advised that it is content for the end-year report to be shared with the Minister, published on the Department's website and the Assembly's Committee for Education informed; and
- noted the position regarding NDPB 2024/25 Business Plan end-year reports.

DE 2025-26 Business Plan

The Board:

- Agreed the DE 2025-26 Business Plan;
- Noted the linkages to IRE recommendations and TransformedED Ten-Point Plan and that the BP will act as the IRE monitoring and reporting mechanism;
- Noted the changes to future in-year monitoring of DE and ALB Business Plans; and
- Noted the update regarding ALB 2025-26 Business Plans.

Risk Management

The Board:

- approved the latest amendments to the CRR, representing the 2025-26 opening position;

- noted the Department's current risk profile;
- noted the targeted action being taken with some Directors in regard to risk management arrangements to improve the frequency of risk reviews;
- agreed the amendments to the DE Risk Management Framework and that the full RMF is not submitted to the Board for annual agreement if only minor amendments have been made; and
- agreed to the CRR and RMF being shared with the Minister and our ALBs.

Update from ARAC Meeting

Paul provided an update to the Departmental Board on the key areas discussed at the last ARAC meeting on 18 March 2025.

The Committee welcomed Richard Logan, who will replace Gavin Patrick as the new ARAC Independent Member, and thanked Gavin for his valuable contribution over the last five years.

EA Update

Dale Hanna, EA Director of Children and Young People Services, and Una Turbitt, EA Assistant Director Pupil Wellbeing and Protection, provided an overview of the Child Protection Support Services (CPSS) and the child safeguarding.

The Committee noted the increased demand for services and the CPSS limited audit opinion and was content that action had been taken to address all recommendations.

No issues were raised, and the Committee was content.

The ARAC received updates on the following:

- NIAO;
- Internal Audit including the 2025-26 Internal Audit Plan;
- Fraud and Whistleblowing;
- Addressing Bullying in Schools' Limited Opinion;
- Deep Dive on risk 4 – Safeguarding;
- Risk Management;
- Key issues and risks across NDPBs;
- Consolidated Accounts; and
- NI Teachers' Pension Scheme Statements.

Finance Update

Resource Budget

Neil advised that he is confident that the 2024/25 resource budget will remain in budget.

The shortfall in the 2025/26 resource budget is currently estimated at £310m. This takes account of inescapable only.

Capital Budget

The proposed Executive Budget provides the Department with a Capital Budget of £388.4m in 2025-26.

For the third year in a row the budget will fail to meet the Department's contractual or statutory inescapable capital requirements. Difficult decisions will again have to be made as

to what can be brought forward within the context of this reduced allocation and could jeopardise key and critical initiatives.

Neil provided an update on the Accounts position and the EdIS project.

HR Report

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

She provided an update on resourcing:

NICSHR is exploring all options to fill priority posts in the Department including secondments, Interchange and using lists in other departments.

Regarding current competitions Marcella advised the following:

- Over 2000 applications were received for the internal general service competition for G7 which closed on Friday 20 December 2024. Online assessments have been completed and initial results issued on Friday 14 March 2025. Interviews commenced on 7 April 2025. FAQs have been developed to address queries on the process.
- The internal general service G6 competition launched on 27 January 2025 with a closing date of 14 February 2025. Online assessment tests took place between 17 and 24 March 2025, with the eligibility sift planned between 7 and 25 April 2025. It is anticipated that interviews will take place from 9 to 20 June 2025.
- Offer letters to remaining successful candidates from the current general service DP competition have issued with an anticipated start date on 14 April 2025. The Department were allocated 4 candidates.
- Supply from the SO and DP external competitions is now exhausted and new competitions, subject to budget availability and consultation with CTUS, The planning assumption for the launch of both competitions is end of the current quarter.
- Successful candidates from the external EO1 competition are due to commence employment from 07 April 2025 onward. The Department was allocated 5 candidates.
- A final phase of interviews from the external EO2 competition is ongoing at present. A new competition, subject to budget availability, will be required and the planning assumption, at present, is to launch a competition in Q2 2025/26.
- Recorded interviews completed by applicants for the AO external general service competition in November 2024 continue to be assessed by panels. A merit list is anticipated in April 2025.

There are currently no sickness hotspots in the Department.

There remains a significant issue with the completion of mid-year performance reviews for the 2024/25 year which then has a knock-on impact for end year reviews. Marcella will provide lists of outstanding reviews to Ronnie and Grade 3s.

Marcella advised that April is Stress Awareness month.

She noted the publication of the NICS People Plan, which is based on 3 pillars:

1. Skills and Capacity
2. Experience and Environment
3. Leadership and Inclusion.

Non Departmental Public Bodies – verbal update

Ronnie advised that:

- A series of GARs have taken place over the last month. Key issues centred around finance;
- The EA has advised that it is short on 400 SEN places with a particular issue around the number of children in SPIMs classes. A Taskforce meeting is planned for 16 April.