

MINUTES OF THE DE BOARD MEETING
Thursday 29 May 2025
1st Floor Conference Room, Rathgael House

Attendees:

Ronnie Armour (Chair)
Linsey Farrell
Heather Cousins
Faustina Graham
Paul Corrigan
Anna Carragher
Neil Palmer
Marcella Phillips
HOCS (Item 1)
Janine Fullerton (P&OD) (Item 1)
Jennifer Morgan (Item 2)
Claire McClelland (Item 3)
Michael McGinley (Item 3)
Stephen Creagh (Item 4)
Ray Caldwell (Items 7, 8 & 9)

Apologies:

In attendance:

Bryan Laverty (Board secretary)

Strule Update

Jennifer advised that the programme is ahead of schedule.

Jennifer updated the Board on the following:

- The Campus Go-Live Project;
- The Integrated Working Groups;

She advised that:

- Any emerging best practice (TransformED, SEN etc) will be implemented as part of the Strule Project;
- The Project will be a trigger for reform and innovation;
- There continues to be rigorous project profiling for the financial side and she is confident on both cost and timing;
- The Project will be scrutinised by ARAC twice yearly and ARAC will be invited to undertake a visit to the site.

Presentation on the Five-Year People Strategy

HOCS provided the Board with a background to the development of the Strategy and advised that it is aimed at equipping Departments to deliver the Executive's ambitious agenda for change.

HOCS and Janine updated the Board on:

- consultation undertaken to date
- the design and purpose of the Strategy;
- the centrality of Integr8 to its delivery;
- the aim to have the Strategy implemented from March 2026 supported by a one year action plan;
- the importance of the health and wellbeing strand and a consideration of the impact of trauma across the workforce;
- ensuring the applicability of the Strategy to a wide range of job types across the NICS; and
- the development of an NICS culture.

Ronnie emphasised the importance of the staff development piece and the role that will be played by the Staff Engagement Forum within DE.

RAISE Programme

Claire outlined the background to the development of the Programme and advised that bespoke Strategic Area Plans are in development for each RAISE locality identifying what is needed to support delivery against the strategic objectives of the programme and proposing actions based on research and evidence of what works.

Plans will include high level proposals on what is needed to address the identified gaps and how to raise the aspirations and achievement of children and young people in the locality.

An announcement of the initiatives to be taken forward within the Programme will take place in the next few days with implementation beginning in September.

The Board had a brief discussion around the governance and tailoring of the Programme and thanked the Team for the significant amount of work to bring the Programme to this point.

Minor Works Policies and Procedures

Stephen provided an overview of the broader works to school buildings and grounds and particularly the Minor Works Programme, including the role of the Education Authority.

Stephen advised that in October 2017 the Department increased the EA's capital delegation from £500k to £1m. In February 2025 the Minister agreed that the EA's capital delegation, in respect of SEN projects only, has been increased to £2m, as an interim measure.

He reported that the Department's Internal Audit Team have recently commenced a review of Minor Works in accordance with the established 2025/26 audit plan.

Stephen advised that he had presented to ARAC yesterday and he had provided assurance to the Committee regarding the Minor Works processes in place, while acknowledging that there is learning from recent events, particularly on external communications.

DE Governance Statement 2024/25

Ray proved the Board with an update on the draft DE Accounting Officer's Governance Statement and the NDPBs' Governance Statements for 2024/25.

The Board endorsed the draft Governance Statement in its current form.

Health & Safety Report

Ray presented the DE Health & Safety Annual Report 2024-25 to the Board for clearance.

Further to the Report Ray advised that:

- The revised Hybrid Working Policy will include health and safety assessments for home working; and
- Internal Audit's reports into Hybrid Working and Fire Wardens are both under consideration.

The Board endorsed the Health & Safety Annual Report.

DE People Plan 2024-26 Update

Ray outlined the background to the current DE People Plan and some of the achievements of the Staff Engagement Forum in delivering the Action Plan associated with the People Plan.

The results of the NICS People Survey will be available in June and will influence the People Plan going forward, and what will be the priorities for the Department in implementing the Five-Year People Strategy.

HR Report

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

She provided an update on resourcing:

- 617 candidates were invited to interview for the internal general service G7 competition, which commenced on 7 April. It is expected that the interview process will conclude on 30 May with a merit list anticipated mid to late June 2025
- 657 applications were received to the general Service G6 competition. Online assessment tests and eligibility sifts are completed and invitations to interview issued on 12 May with interviews scheduled to begin on 9 June.
- Consideration of new competitions at DP/SO is ongoing;
- She is liaising with the ETI regarding the Inspection recruitments.

Marcella reported that:

- The NICS People Survey has ended and results will be available in June.
- It is anticipated that a review of the automated AO interviews process will be undertaken.
- The number of temporary promotions is increasing with 95 currently in place across the Department.
- There continues to be an issue around the completion of End Year Reviews. She will identify any hotspots and bring these to the attention of G3s, although the restructuring within the Department will impact on the ability to provide any accurate report.

Finance Update

Resource Budget

Neil advised that outturn has confirmed that there was a 0.04% underspend in the 2024/25 resource budget. Ronnie acknowledged that this was a fantastic achievement.

Current indications for the 2025/26 resource budget indicate an overcommitment of £300m in respect of inescapable and pre-committed pressures only.

The £50m for the ELC Strategy has not yet been allocated to DE. This is contingent upon the Executive approving the Department of Education's ELC Strategy plan for 2025-26 and Business Case approval. Executive approval was received on 15 May. The Business case is currently with DoF for approval.

June monitoring is underway. DE Directorate returns are currently being assessed by Finance. As previously indicated by the Minister of Finance, it is expected that DE will receive several pre-committed additional allocations as part of June monitoring. These are already included in the overall budget and overspend forecast.

Capital Budget

There was a £1m underspend of the 2024/25 capital budget.

The 2025/26 budget forecast indicates £83m in pressures.

Neil provided an update on:

- DACs;
- The Classification Status of VG and GMI schools; and
- Annual reports and Accounts.

Permanent Secretary Update

Ronnie reported the following:

- Linsey is moving to DfC in June. He paid tribute to her and admitted she would be a great loss to DE. He offered his personal thanks, and those of the Board to Linsey and advised that her impact will be seen in DE for years to come.
- Two TP opportunities to G3 have been advertised within the Department. The closing date for applications is tomorrow and a sift will be undertaken this weekend. Discussions with a purpose will take place next week. It is hoped to appoint Monday week before Linsey moves to DfC. There will then be a further restructuring of the Department.
- The Minister will have a series of meetings with G3s before the summer break.
- The TransformED Conference was very successful, with the International Panel taking part.
- The Workforce Independent Panel has been established with Paul Sweeney as Chair and Liam Perry and Larry Flanagan as members. The Panel commenced work at the start of May. The work of the Panel is currently being scoped and will include a focussed piece on workload, as well as being responsible for implementing 26 heads of agreement included as part of the teachers pay deal. The Panel is due to report in November.

Grade 3 Updates

Heather advised the following:

- The Integrated Education Strategy consultation has ended. A paper will be prepared for the Minister;
- The School Uniform Bill is ongoing.

Faustina advised that:

- She was appreciative of all of the work the school improvement team were doing in taking forward the Inspection legislation is moving forward. The public consultation is underway.
- The Inspection Programme is up and running.
The ETI is quality assuring the revised inspection model and the implementation.

Linsey thanked everyone for the kind words on her departure from DE and added that it had been a pleasure to work in DE. She reported the following:

- TransformED – the launch went very well. The implementation plan has been published and she met with the EA on this earlier today. The Curriculum Review will be published next week together with the Minister's response.
- SEN Reform Agenda – work is ongoing with the EA on the development of the Operational Plan.
- Liaison is ongoing with the Transformation Board regarding funding.
- Together with the Minister for the Economy, the Minister has signed off the Careers Action Plan.
- The Healthy Relationships Forum has been established. Its next meeting is on 8 June. An action plan will issue to the Minister in mid-June.

Non Departmental Public Bodies – verbal update

Ronnie advised that:

- A new round of GARs will begin shortly.
- The interviews for the EA leadership team have been completed.

Paul advised that the Chair of the EA ARAC has requested a meeting with him.

AOB

Ronnie advised that Ray will be moving to DfC in June. He thanked Ray for his many years of service with the ETI and the Department and wished him well in his new post.