

MINUTES OF THE DE BOARD MEETING
Thursday 7 August 2025
Meeting Room 3, Rathgael House

Attendees:

Ronnie Armour (Chair)
Heather Cousins
Faustina Graham
Paul Brush
Paul Corrigan
Neil Palmer
Marcella Phillips
Peter Hutchinson (item 5)
Jeremy Gardner (item 6)
Kathryn Menary (item 3)

Apologies:

Suzanne Kingon
Anna Carragher

In attendance:

Bryan Laverty (Board secretary)

Observer:

George Platt – DALO, Private office

Permanent Secretary Update

Restructuring at Grade 3 is bedding in. Suzanne and Paul have taken up post.

TPS to G5 have been approved:

- Tina Dempster – EYC&C&YPS
- Peter Hutchinson – Curriculum Taskforce

Jeremy Gardner has taken up post as Director of Corporate Services and Education Governance.

Deirdre Ward takes up post as Director of SEN Strategic Policy & Legislation this week.

The main areas of concern presently remain finance and special education placements.

The Minister has been working with TMG to establish a detailed roadmap for the Department up to November. He is pleased with support and progress across the Department and with how his priorities are being taken forward.

The results of the NICS People Survey have been received. An update will be provided in the autumn.

Grade 3 Updates

Heather reported the following:

- The School Uniform Bill will reach consideration stage in September. It is hoped it will be passed by the Assembly in December with a view to being implemented next September.
- The Department is awaiting JRs on the Minister's decisions regarding Bangor Academy and Rathmore Primary School.
- Strule is progressing well.

Paul advised the following:

- SEN Reform – the pilot projects are getting underway.
- SEN placements – the number of children without places has fallen from 150 in June to 33. This does not include those children who have a place that will not be ready in September – the EA will be asked to itemise these.
- Workforce – the Review of Workload is proceeding with a report due in November.
- TSN/RAISE – A JR is due to take place on 8/9 September to challenge the areas included.
- Early Years – a draft Strategy will be brought to the Executive by the end of October.

Faustina reported as follows:

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- The ETI is finalising its work programme for September to December, with a weighting towards individual organisation inspection rather than thematic evaluations. A thematic piece on SPIMS will be published in the autumn.
- Three newly appointed specialist inspectors are taking up post shortly.
- Four additional posts will be advertised in September.
- The ETI is working with various areas across DE to investigate the possibility of seconding senior leaders into ETI via Interchange using programme funding to support the posts.

School Improvement

Kathryn spoke to the paper which provided the Board with an update on the School Improvement agenda, setting out the:

- Background to the area.

- The findings of the End-to-End Review of School Improvement.
- The areas to be addressed by the TransformED NI Strategy; and
- The next steps.

The Board discussed:

- Addressing the cultural change required within the teaching workforce and how TransformED will address induction procedures for new teachers.
- The need to communicate the intentions of new policies and consider the timing of announcements. Mark Monaghan to consider this area.

Curriculum Review and Curriculum Taskforce

Peter provided the Board with an update on the Curriculum Review and the work of the Curriculum Taskforce.

Peter outlined:

- The findings of the Strategic Review of the Northern Ireland Curriculum.
- The DE response.
- The objectives and structure of the Taskforce.
- The challenging timescales for the work of the Taskforce and the next steps – operationalising the working groups – and the production and implementation of a revised curriculum in September 2027.

A curriculum conference will take place at the end of September which will aim to energise the wider system about curriculum design and understanding. Consultation on a draft curriculum framework will take place in spring 2026 and the aim is to have a final curriculum framework agreed by the Taskforce and presented to the Minister by June 2026.

The Board discussed:

- The role of CCEA; and
- Risks around controversial areas of the curriculum.

DE Corporate Risk Register (CRR) & Risk Management

Jeremy spoke to his paper and provided the Board with an update on risk management since the last update to the Board on 10 April.

The Board:

- Approved amendments to the CRR.
- Noted the Department's current risk profile.
- Noted the findings of the Alignment and Quality Assurance exercise; and
- Noted the findings of the Internal Audit Review of Risk Management.

ARAC

Paul provided an update to the Departmental Board on the key areas discussed at the last ARAC meeting on 28 May 2025.

The Board noted the ARAC Annual Report 2024/25 and the revised ARAC TOR, and thanked Paul for his update.

Finance Update

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

June Monitoring

In addition to the previously announced allocations (£15m for SEN and £17.9m for National Insurance Contributions) the Executive agreed a further allocation of £20.4m to address education pressures.

In addition, a number of technical transfers and allocations from central funds were processed, including £55m set aside by the Executive specifically for the Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) Strategy

Resource Budget

The EA has declared pressures of £292m. The Minister had asked the EA how it will address this shortfall.

G3s have been asked to work with finance to develop a five-year plan.

Transformation Bids

A second call for Transformation proposals was issued by DoF on 23 June 2025 with a closing date of 8 August 2025. The total amount available is £102.6m, with each department allowed to submit up to three proposals.

Proposals have been collated by Finance and proposals will be presented for consideration by TMG and the Minister shortly.

Capital

The Department submitted bids totalling £91.6m in June Monitoring and received £12.3m additional general capital. Following several technical transfers and adjustments, the current DE Capital Budget is £398.8m

The Independent Review Panel of funding of schools has commenced work, led by Peter May. It is due to report by the end of October.

Neil provided an update on:

- The Classification Status of VG and GMI schools.
- Annual reports and Accounts; and
- The high-risk EA IT projects.

HR Report

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

Marcella advised that the new format for the Board report reflects the key principles of the NICS People Strategy.

She provided an update on resourcing.

Marcella reported that the revised Hybrid Working policy will be fully implemented in October. Staff will be required to attend their place of work for 40% minimum of the working week. An update on its implementation will be provided in due course.

The Board had a brief discussion regarding temporary promotions and the age profile of the Department's staff.

Non Departmental Public Bodies – verbal update

Ronnie advised that:

- A main issue at the latest round of GARs in June focussed on budget/finance.
- A meeting between the top teams in both EA and DE will take place with the Minister in September.

AOB

George advised that the Minister is likely to appear at the Education Committee in September.