

MINUTES OF THE DE BOARD MEETING
Thursday 29 June 2023
Conference Room, Rathgael House

Attendees:

Mark Browne (Chair)
Linsey Farrell
John Smith
Faustina Graham
Joan McEwan
Paul Corrigan
Andrew Scott (items 6 and 7)
Marcella Phillips
Claire McClelland (Item 3)
Dale Heaney (Item 3)
Neil Palmer (Item 4)

Apologies:

Lianne Patterson
Gary Fair

In attendance:

Bryan Lavery (Board Secretary)

Observer:

Nadine Gilmore – Staff Officer, Pupil Support Unit
Stephen Jamison – Deputy Principal Accountant

Education Disadvantage

Claire presented her paper which provided the Board with an update on the ongoing work to address underachievement and educational disadvantage.

Claire updated the Board on:

- A Fair Start, in particular the impact of reduced funding in 2023/24; the 4th progress report which will be published shortly on the DE website and circulated to MLAs;
- Targeting Social Need;
- The Extended Schools programme;
- The locality based programmes;
- The WRAP programme;
- The Parental Engagement Advertising Campaigns; and
- Other relevant policy areas which support the raising of educational attainment and closing the gap, including:
 - Children and Young People's Strategy and Delivery Plan;
 - SEN and Inclusion Framework; and
 - A range of early years support provisions.

Claire outlined the next steps and particularly:

- the development of a new Reducing Educational Disadvantage (RED) Programme which will focus on a 'whole community approach to education' and a 'place-based' focus that coheres the greatest concentration of effort in those localities with the greatest concentration of educational underachievement; and
- the End to End Review of School Improvement.

The Board discussed:

- Interest in this area from external parties – e.g., PAC.
- Influencing attitudes to education within the home and wider society.
- The importance of aligning data to target interventions and enable the development of schools with their wider communities.
- The importance of using external and international research, such as recent studies by QUB.
- An all-island approach with the government in the ROI using 'A Shared Island'.
- The impact of absenteeism.

Finance Director Report

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

He advised that the Department's final outturn position for 2022/23 is due in the next few weeks, with no significant change expected to the position reported at the last meeting.

Regarding the 2023/24 position, Neil provided an update on the Permanent Secretary's decision not to proceed with proposals in relation to the reduction in funding of some early years and youth services provision advising that further budget allocations have now been made to these programmes, in comparison with the interim budget allocations.

Neil reported that based on budget allocations and decisions made to date, there remains an estimated funding gap in 2023/24 of more than £300m, of which £200m relates to the EA's resource position. Neil advised that a contingency of c£50m continues to be held whilst pressures are monitored and assessed.

Neil advised that there is an overcommitment of the Capital budget of £21m at present, which masks a shortfall of £180m in the overall budget, which has resulted in a number of activities being shelved in 2023/24.

He reported that the Teachers' Pension Scheme Accounts for 2020/21 have been certified, while those for 2021/22 are currently being drafted with the audit anticipated to commence soon. The DE accounts for 2022/23 are being audited at present also.

Neil updated attendees on the contractual dispute between ESS and Capita relating to the SIMS system, advising that recent mediation efforts had not proved successful and the dispute is likely to end up in court. Neil provided attendees with some

information on the complexities of the issues at play, advising that he would be hopeful that a situation where schools could not access the SIMS system would not arise. Neil advised that the Finance Directorate would keep the Board/Senior Management informed.

The Board noted:

- Mark's speech to the education sector at Currie Primary School in which he set out the context for the budget cuts in 2023/24. A copy of the speech was circulated to members;
- The reinforcement of the message to the EA of the importance of providing current information on the schools' budget position; and
- An EQIA on the budget has been published for consultation.

The Revised anti-fraud policy and fraud response plan and the revised DE Raising Concerns at Work Policy

The Board was provided with the:

- DE Raising Concerns at Work (Whistleblowing) Policy, which sets out the Department's arrangements for handling and managing whistleblowing concerns that are raised both by members of staff and the public; and
- The DE Fraud Prevention Policy and Fraud Response Plan which sets out the Department's arrangements for preventing and responding to fraud.

Both documents were approved by the Board, but with the caveat that the Department will take cognisance of the outcomes from the action plan to improve governance across the NI Civil Service developed in response to findings from an external independent review undertaken by PwC to examine the handling of concerns and other matters raised in a case taken by a former DAERA employee.

DE Business Plan 2023-24

Andrew presented his paper which provided the Board with a final draft DE 2023/24 Business Plan for consideration and comment.

The Board approved the 2023/24 Business Plan.

The Board noted the position on the provision of business plans by the Department's ALBs, and particularly that the EA is yet to provide a draft business plan for consideration. The Department continues to press the EA for a draft plan.

Risk Management

Andrew presented his paper which sought the Board's approval to the new Corporate Risk Register (CRR).

The Board approved the CRR subject to:

- A review of the residual risk score for Risk 6; and

- Replacing 'fully enable' with 'inhibit' in the description for Risk 5.

Following these minor changes, the CRR will be circulated to DE staff and DE's ALBs.

HR Report

Marcella presented the HR Report and provided an update on HR issues to the Board.

Marcella advised the following:

- The NICS wide pause on filling General Service vacancies remains in place;
- The NICS wide Vacancy Re-set Exercise is continuing and advised that departments, including DE have been reviewing their vacancies, prioritising those which remain affordable and where necessary making provision to redeploy staff to any remaining critical vacancies. Data has been provided to departments on staffing levels to inform this consideration.

Michael Cooke, Director of the Strategic HR Business Partnering Team, NICSHR, introduced himself and outlined his role and that of NICS HR under the command of Catherine Shannon, NICSHR Strategic HR Director. He explained that a Pulse Survey had been introduced by NICSHR and sought agreement from the Board for this to be completed by the Senior Management Team in the Department. This was approved and Business Partners to make provision for the Survey to be opened in due course.

Marcella brought to the attention of the Board the copy of the NICSHR Business Plan for 2023-24, which had been circulated with papers. She drew attention to the strong focus within the plan around learning and development.

Marcella advised that there are no ongoing issues with sickness or performance management within DE at the present time.

The Board requested that Marcella and Michael report back to Andrew on the priorities for redeployment at G5 level across the NICS.

The Board had a brief discussion around the DE staffing position and a proposal to capitalise some posts.

Non Departmental Public Bodies

Linsey advised that external assessors are still in place in CCEA. She will be meeting with them to discuss the implementation of the action plan at the end of July. She will report progress to the next Board meeting in August.

Andrew reported that the membership of CCEA is due to be refreshed. However, the Secretary of State has indicated that he wishes to approve the commencement of all public appointment competitions, which will require regulations to be put in place. The earliest this can happen is September 2023, delaying the refresh competition.

Linsey reported that Eve Bremner has been appointed as the new CEO of CCMS. She will take up post in August.

AOB

The Board wished to put on record its thanks to both Lianne Patterson and John Smith for their contributions to the Board and the Department more generally. The Board wished both good luck with their future endeavours.