

Meeting of the Northern Ireland Skills Council

Boardroom, Belfast Metropolitan College (Titanic Campus)

2 p.m., Monday 4<sup>th</sup> September 2023

**In Attendance:**

Kathleen O'Hare (Chair)  
Ann Morgan (Appointed Member, Bus.)  
Annie Millar (Appointed Member, Bus.)  
Caroline van der Feltz (Appointed Member, Bus.)  
Frances Weldon (Appointed Member, Bus.)  
Mary Meehan (Appointed Member, Bus.)  
Mark Langhammer (Appointed Member, TU)  
Deborah O'Hare (Appointed Member, CVS)  
Liam Devine (NICVA / Clanrye Group)  
Chloe Ferguson (NUS-USI)  
Gerry Campbell (CCEA)  
Leo Murphy (FE Rep, NWRC)  
Abbie McKenna (HE Rep, UU)  
Fiona McKeown (SOLACE)  
Marek Zemanik (CIPD)  
Gareth Hetherington (UUEPC)  
Gordon Parkes (NI Business Alliance / NIE)  
Moirá Doherty (DfE)  
Linsey Farrell (DE)  
Niall Casey (Invest NI)  
Deirdre Ward (DfC)  
Claire Thompson (DfE)  
Graeme Wilkinson (DfE, Secretariat)  
Shauna Mullan (DfE, Secretariat)  
Roger Arneill (DfE, Secretariat / Minutes)

**Apologies:**

Paul Bartholomew (Abbie McKenna deputising)  
Adrian McCreesh (Fiona McKeown deputising)  
Lee Ann Panglea (Marek Zemanik deputising),

**Guests:**

Louise Ward Hunter (Belfast Met for Agenda Item 1 only)

**1. Welcome and Introductions**

- 1.1. Kathleen welcomed attendees to the first meeting of the newly constituted Northern Ireland Skills Council. Kathleen provided background on her career history and involvement with a range of Boards and organisations engaged in the skills agenda. Kathleen paid tribute to the work of the interim Skills Council and recorded her thanks for the work which has been done to date, before outlining her commitment to the future work of the Council.

- 1.2. Louise welcomed the Council to Belfast Met and provided an overview of the economic and social importance of the FE sector.
- 1.3. Moira Doherty introduced herself as the new Deputy Secretary for Skills and Education and Skills Strategy Programme SRO. Moira outlined the importance of skills development both in terms of delivering on economic priorities and supporting individuals to reach their potential. She advised that she will bring an update on progress on the implementation of the Skills Strategy to future meetings of the Council, and that she looks forward to working with the Council to bring about transformative change to the skills and education system.
- 1.4. As this was the first meeting of the Skills Council in its substantive form, Kathleen invited all members to introduce themselves. In the course of the introductions, numerous members highlighted their desire to ensure that the Skills Council was not just focused on economic development but that it fully recognised and advocated the social and economic importance of supporting individuals with low or no qualifications to participate in skills development and positive labour market outcomes.
- 1.5. Graeme closed the introductions by recording his thanks to all members of the Skills Council for giving their time and commitment to the development of the skills agenda in Northern Ireland.
- 1.6. Kathleen noted that at future meetings, she intended to commence the agenda with an opportunity for members to feed back to the Skills Council on relevant engagements they had undertaken between meetings. In this regard, she asked Ann to provide an update on the Local Policy Innovation Partnership Workshop<sup>1</sup> hosted by Professor Kristal Miller, Ulster University (UU).
- 1.7. Ann noted that the workshop was the culmination of phase 1 of the research project and brought together stakeholders in education and skills, from a range of backgrounds, to consider four main themes:
  - research gaps on current and future skills needs in Northern Ireland;
  - strategic priorities regarding skills in Northern Ireland over the next 1 – 3 years;
  - identification of the mechanisms can facilitate greater awareness and shared learning regarding skills-based initiatives across Northern Ireland; and
  - identification of attendee’s top priorities for phase 2 of the research project.
- 1.8. UU will be submitting a bid for phase 2 of the research project which requires evidence of non-academic stakeholder support including either a financial commitment or a letter of support which provides stakeholder assurance on the value of the research and their commitment to continue to provide support through contribution of knowledge and expertise. The question posed to the Skills Council is whether it is willing to provide a letter of support?
- 1.9. Gareth added that this is the only bid going forward from Northern Ireland, so there was no concern with competing institutions and secondly that financial support is not a significant concern. The primary requirement is to demonstrate stakeholder commitment to the future development of the research.
- 1.10. Niall added that the UU work needs to recognise the Skills council and that there needs to be a clear focus on what the bid will do.
- 1.11. Discussion highlighted that the Council was broadly supportive of the proposals, but concluded that there was a need to highlight the Council’s desire to ensure the emerging research was cohesive with the policy agenda of the relevant government departments.
- 1.12. It was agreed that Kathleen would share the relevant papers, issued by UU for further consideration and input, by correspondence, to Council members.

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<sup>1</sup> The following Council members attended this event on 30<sup>th</sup> August: Ann Morgan, Kathleen O’Hare, Gareth Hetherington and Deirdre Ward.

**Action 1.1: Secretariat to issue the papers from the Local Innovation Policy Partnership Event to Skills Council members for consideration and agreement on next steps.**

**2. Agree Previous Minutes and Update on Actions<sup>2</sup>**

- 2.1. Kathleen asked if all relevant members<sup>3</sup> were content that the minutes of the meeting held on 8<sup>th</sup> March 2023 were a fair and accurate reflection of the meeting. The minutes of the meeting were agreed.
- 2.2. Kathleen asked Graeme to provide an update on the outstanding action point, which was agreed by the Interim Skills Council and committed them to develop work on the ongoing labour supply issue in Northern Ireland. This would include consideration of associated issues such as migration policy, economic inactivity and gender imbalances.
- 2.3. Graeme said that the supply of labour remained a significant issue affecting businesses in Northern Ireland. It was agreed that he would develop and present terms of reference (ToR) for a piece of work on this area to the next meeting of the Council.
- 2.4. Chloe advised colleagues that Economic Social Research Institute and the Shared Island Unit in the Department of the Taoiseach would be publishing research on migrant integration on the island before the end of the year; this is likely to be of interest to the Skills Council in the context of labour supply.
- 2.5. The following points were discussed and should be considered as terms of reference are developed:
  - the scope to examine the relationship between HE funding models and labour supply issues;
  - ongoing concerns associated with visa requirements for international students; and
  - the potential for a Northern Ireland specific shortage occupations list.

**Action 1.2: Graeme to develop and present ToR for proposed work on the current supply of labour.**

**Action 1.3: Secretariat to share the current Home Office Shortage Occupation List.**

**3. Address from DfE Permanent Secretary**

- 3.1. Kathleen advised members that Mike Brennan unfortunately had to cancel attendance at this meeting due to another commitment.

**4. NISC Terms of Reference**

- 4.1. Kathleen introduced the ToR, making clear reference to the Skills Council's advisory role, but also the significant impact the Council can make through influence. The ToR also sets out the scope and process for the Council to establish TFGs which would be vital in driving the Council's work programme. She invited any comments or queries on the proposed ToR.
- 4.2. Whilst members were broadly content, there was an agreement that greater clarity was required on individual voting rights, as associated with membership status, and whether a majority, or weighted majority, would be required should the Council need to take a vote on

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<sup>2</sup> The opportunity for members to declare conflicts of interest was omitted from the agenda. An e-mail was subsequently issued to all attendees asking for a declaration of relevant conflicts of interest by correspondence. One conflict of interest was raised by Gareth Hetherington, that his wife is employed by the Department for the Economy as the Finance Director.

<sup>3</sup> Those that were members of the Interim Skills Council.

the adoption of a particular position. Furthermore, it was noted that the civil servants participating on the Council should not participate in any voting procedure given the potential for conflict with the principle of Civil Service impartiality and accountability to ministers.

- 4.3. It was agreed that the Secretariat should make revisions based on the discussion held and seek agreement from the Chair prior to recirculating to Council members, with a view to agreement by correspondence.
- 4.4. Chloe also highlighted examples of best practice where active learners are involved in fora such as the Skills Council. She asked that the Council considered whether there was scope to include active learners, either in the Council itself or through a sub-committee. Members discussed the wide variety of learner groups that existed and the challenge that may pose to direct participation on the Skills Council. A number of alternative avenues were considered including how learner groups are reflected through SEDI's work, the potential for an additional sub-committee or stakeholder forum, or by explicit reference in the Council's principles to engage with active learners.

**Action 1.4: Secretariat to redraft ToR based on feedback received and agree revisions with Chair before re-issue to Council members.**

**Action 1.5: Secretariat to produce an options paper on approaches to active learner engagement, for consideration at Council meeting in December.**

## **5. Updates on Existing Skills Council Sub-Groups: SEDI, Green Energy Skills and Digital Skills**

- 5.1. Graeme provided an introduction to this item, highlighting the role and purpose of the existing groups and the need to ensure a transition to the TFG format set out in the Council's draft ToR. In this regard, he made reference to the need for TFGs to be timebound – with the exception of SEDI - and to be established with a clearly defined purpose and intended outcome.
- 5.2. With regard to the Digital Skills sub-group, Graeme advised Council that he had been developing a programme of work with the NI Software Alliance which is chaired by John Healy and proposed that he would present a draft ToR for the Council to agree at its next meeting. He noted that John's ongoing engagement in this work, alongside his expertise and experience in the sector, made him an excellent candidate to Chair the future work of the Digital Skills Industry Reference Group.
- 5.3. Kathleen advised that Caroline had agreed to assume the Chair of SEDI and invited her to update on the work she had undertaken to date.
- 5.4. Caroline recorded her thanks to SEDI's support team for facilitating handover. She noted that she was working with the team and existing membership to complete the work programme that had already been established. She had also developed plans for a strategy day, which would consider a range of issues including membership and next steps in the sub-committee's work programme.
- 5.5. Council members welcomed the work undertaken by SEDI to date. The Council also agreed that SEDI's focus should not be limited to the groups defined under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act, but rather focus on the broader question of social inclusion. Caroline agreed that this approach would be considered through the planned strategy day.
- 5.6. Gordon provided an update on the work undertaken by the Green Energy Skills Industry Reference Group and particularly the completion of the skills audit proposed in the Skills Strategy. The challenge now is in the development and implementation of approaches to address its findings.

5.7. He advised colleagues of the business-led development of a course, providing entry level opportunities in the utilities sector where suitably is assessed through practical competence exercises. This remains a promising pilot at present, but if it works, a broad roll-out is anticipated.

**Action 1.6: Graeme to work with John Healy to develop draft ToR for the Digital Skills Industry Reference Group for consideration at the next meeting of the NI Skills Council.**

## **6. Priority Areas and Development of Workplan 2023/24**

- 6.1. With reference to the paper provided, Kathleen asked members to consider their top priorities in small groups and provide feedback. Common issues identified included:
- 14 – 19;
  - careers, including particular emphasis on reaching student influencers and business – education engagement;
  - social inclusion;
  - labour supply; and
  - employability / transversal skills.
- 6.2. There was consensus, however, that the first step the Council would take before prioritising any single issue will be to engage with the issues in depth to ensure a common understanding and a strong baseline of knowledge. This should provide the basis of a development session prior to the agenda for the next meeting.

## **7. Skill Up**

7.1. Graeme highlighted that the Skill Up programme had received funding from the NIO and DfE for a 3-year period which would conclude in March 2024. The course had been well received and delivered good outcomes but, at present, the Department could not commit to funding beyond March 2024. He agreed that he would circulate the CCEA Evaluation of the Skill Up Programme for members reference.

**Action 1.7: Graeme to circulate the CCEA Evaluation of the Skill Up Programme**

## **8. Any Other Business & Date of Next Meeting**

- 8.1. No other items were raised.
- 8.2. The next meeting will be held on the 6<sup>th</sup> December.