NIPEC/1/2026

Minutes of the Northern Ireland Practice and Education Council Meeting, held on Wednesday 11 March 2026 at 2.00 pm In James House

Present:	Kieran McCormick (Chair) Gary Cousins (SPO, representing CEx) Katrin Lehmann Nirmala Bhogal (via Teams) Gary Mitchell (via Teams) Karen Diamond Siobhán Caslin Janine Stockdale
Apologies:	Linda Kelly (Chief Executive) Eilidh McGregor Brenda Kelly Sharon McRoberts
In Attendance:	Jill Jackson, Head of Corporate Services Lisa McEneaney, Business Manager
Secretariat:	Heather Mallon, Council Secretary

1.0 Welcome and Apologies

Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting. Apologies were noted from the Chief Executive, Ms B Kelly, Ms McRoberts and Ms McGregor. Chair noted that Mr Gary Cousins, Senior Professional Officer, was in attendance to represent the Chief Executive and Mrs Lisa McEneaney, Business Manager, was in attendance to present on NIPEC's five-year review of the Equality Scheme.

2.0 Chair's Business

2.1 Welcome to any Members of the Public

Chair noted that a number of staff and students were in attendance from the School of Nursing & Midwifery at Queen's University Belfast and welcomed them warmly to the meeting.

2.2 Council Members – Conflicts of Interest

Members did not declare any conflicts of interest in relation to the agenda items to be discussed at today's Council meeting.

2.3 Register of Council Members' Activity

Chair thanked those members who had submitted their updates for the Activity Register. He stressed that capturing a true reflection of Council Members' activities was an essential piece of work and requested that, those who had not already done so, send Mrs Mallon a note of their activity since the last meeting at their earliest convenience.

Members noted the Register.

ACTION: *Those members who have not already done so, to send Mrs Mallon a note of their activities.*

2.4 Update on appointment of new Chair and Council Members

Chair advised that he had received no further update from the Public Appointments Unit (PAU) on either the replacement Council Members' positions or the position of Chair. He undertook to inform members as soon as he received confirmation of when the position of Chair would be advertised. In the meantime, the Chair would continue to request that PAU progress the matter.

2.5 Draft Board Governance Self-Assessment Document 2025-26 (*Circulated for approval)*

Chair asked if everyone had read over the draft Board Governance Self-Assessment Document 2025-26 and members confirmed that they had. Chair enquired if members had any questions or comments to make on the document.

Ms Caslin highlighted an inconsistency between pages 52 and 64 of the document regarding the Risk Management Action Plan. She noted that Page 52 stated that "the Risk Management Strategy & Action Plan is updated annually and approved by the A&R Committee (last approved February 2025)", whilst page 64 stated that "The latest version was approved in February 2026." Ms Caslin wished to clarify that the Action Plan was noted at the February 2026 meeting and not formally approved. Ms Jackson undertook to include the Risk Management Action Plan on the next Audit & Risk Committee agenda for approval and also to amend the self-assessment document accordingly.

Dr Bhogal queried the reference to RAG ratings throughout the document. Ms Jackson advised that, although the organisation had moved away from the use of RAG ratings on the Work Plan, they continued to use these in other aspects of reporting.

Council members approved the draft Board Governance Self-Assessment Document 2025-26, subject to the amendment requested by Ms Caslin being made.

ACTION: *Ms Jackson to include the Risk Management Action Plan on the next Audit & Risk Committee agenda for approval and to amend the draft Board Governance Self-Assessment Document accordingly.*

2.6 Council Development Plan 2026-27 *(Circulated for approval)*

Chair enquired if members had read over the Council Development Plan 2026-27 and members confirmed that they had.

Members approved the Council Development Plan 2026-27.

2.7 Signed Partnership Agreement *(Circulated for noting)*

Chair stated that the Partnership Agreement is required to be shared annually to remind Council of its role and responsibilities. Members did not have any comments to make on the Agreement.

Members noted the Partnership Agreement.

2.8 Appointment of an Interim Deputy Chair

Chair said that, given that he was likely to be in the role of Interim Chair for the foreseeable future and the volume of upcoming activity, he was of the view that the support of a Deputy Chair would be beneficial. He advised that he would be reaching out to members in the near future to ascertain their interest in taking on the role. Chair clarified that the role does not require the individual to be a registered nurse.

2.9 Minister to attend Regional Collaborative Event on Ethnic Diversity on 25 March 2026

Chair reported that NIPEC is due to hold its third Annual Ethnic Diversity Collaborative Event on 25 March 2026 in Stranmillis College, Belfast. The event will provide an opportunity for global majority colleagues to hear about the recently launched NI Career and Development Model; the results from the Organisational Survey; and presentations from Global Majority staff regarding their experiences. Chair was pleased to note that the Health Minister had accepted an invite to attend the event. He requested that any member interested in attending let Mrs Mallon know.

2.10 Council Workshop – 30 September 2026

Chair informed members that a Council Workshop was scheduled for 30 September and invited suggestions for potential topics. Chair was of the view that an exploration of the impact of artificial intelligence on healthcare could be particularly timely, given the upcoming RCN event on the subject. Ms Caslin agreed that this would be a worthwhile topic.

Ms Jackson advised that she, Mr Cousins and several other staff members were currently participating in a 16-week pilot of M365 Co-pilot to assess how it could enhance productivity, support decision-making and improve ways of working across Trusts and ALBs. Mr Cousins added that he had already found Co-pilot to be a beneficial resource.

Dr Bhogal concurred that AI would be an interesting topic for the workshop and suggested that digital healthcare, including its potential cost-saving benefits, could also be explored. Chair agreed with this suggestion.

There was a discussion on possible presenters for the workshop. It was noted that it was important that any presenters meet the requirements of the NI HSC Framework. Ms Stockdale suggested that Claire Buchner, Assistant Director, Digital Health and Nursing at the Department of Health would be a good point of contact. Mr Cousins advised that Ms Buchner was scheduled to speak at the RCN event in April.

Ms Jackson undertook to look into appropriate presenters and feedback to Chair and Chief Executive.

ACTION: *Ms Jackson to look into appropriate presenters and feedback to Chair and Chief Executive.*

2.11 Members' Appraisals 2025-26

Chair advised members that appraisals were due again soon and Mrs Mallon would be contacting them in the near future to arrange suitable dates and times.

3.0 Minutes of the Previous Meeting

The minutes of the meeting held on 3 December 2025 had been circulated for approval. Chair asked if members had read the minutes and were happy to approve. Ms Stockdale stated that Dr Mitchell's apologies required to be included in the minutes and Mrs Mallon undertook to make this amendment.

The previous minutes were approved, subject to the requested amendment being made.

4.0 Matters Arising

4.1 Updated Action Plan *(Circulated for approval)*

Chair invited Ms Jackson to take members through the open items on the Action Plan.

With regard to the Muckamore records, these are still retained on a database as the Inquiry has not yet issued its report. Once it does, Ms Jackson undertook to contact the Inquiry Solicitors again and ask if NIPEC can proceed to delete the information from the server. Ms Jackson was hopeful that the report would be issued by June 2026.

In relation to registration and revalidation, Ms Jackson advised that she intended to carry out an annual review of this in the next week or two. She would be emailing all staff and Council members to obtain their updates. Ms Jackson wished to ask Council how frequently they would like these checks to be undertaken going forward. In response to a query from Ms Caslin, Ms Jackson advised that registrants were required to revalidate every three years. Chair was of the view that an annual review was suffice, adding that there was a professional onus on registrant Council members to advise NIPEC if they were removed from the register for any reason.

Regarding Ms Stockdale providing contacts of Directors of Nursing, Ms Stockdale confirmed that the item was now closed.

Ms Jackson informed members that the open item on SharePoint would be covered later in the agenda.

Council approved the updated Action Plan.

5.0 Correspondence

5.1 Letter to Health Minister from Secretary of State - Identity and Language (Northern Ireland) Act 2022 – New Statutory Duty – 28 January 2026 *(For noting)*

5.2 Draft Strategic and Operational Planning Guidance 2026 *(For noting)*

5.3 Being Open Framework – Stakeholder Engagement (For Noting)

Council members noted the previously circulated correspondence.

6.0 Operational Performance and Service Improvement

Chair invited Mr Cousins to take members through this section of the Agenda.

6.1 Presentation on the Implementation of the Revised NIPEC Work Plan – Lessons Learnt One Year on by Gary Cousins, Senior Professional Officer

Mr Cousins presented an overview of the first full year of the implementation of the revised NIPEC Professional Work Plan. He outlined the rationale for redesigning the system, highlighting the need for strengthened governance, reduced manual burden and improved reporting mechanisms in line with NIPEC's four statutory functions.

Mr Cousins advised that the previous Word-based system created inconsistencies, reliance on manual data entry and delays caused by centralised RAG rating processes. The new approach has addressed the need for improved governance and strengthened accountability, reduction of the manual administrative burden and enhanced efficiency in reporting and monitoring. The result has been the development of a cost-effective, customised, in-house tool which avoided the need for external expenditure.

Mr Cousins outlined the key aims of the new Work Plan such as: strengthening governance through clearer project ownership; improving data quality via consistent capture methods and formatting; increasing organisational efficiency through intuitive system design; and developing meaningful performance metrics to support internal assurance and Council oversight. He highlighted that the system's flexibility allowed for ongoing refinement as the needs of the organisation evolve.

Mr Cousins explained how the new Work Plan had resulted in a number of improvements, such as clearer identification of project leads resulting in a greater sense of ownership and accountability; a project weighting scale to assist with the allocation of resources; a structured progress assessment scale aligned to IHI guidance; and the introduction of a project management dashboard to increase transparency. Mr Cousins said that positive feedback had been received previously from Council members on the easy to read format and the enhanced clarity of reporting it provided.

Mr Cousins highlighted the collaborative approach taken in the development of the new Work Plan, involving senior staff and project support officers in the design and its ongoing refinement. Feedback was reviewed regularly and adjustments agreed through the Total Quality Management Group.

Mr Cousins outlined some planned next steps including: introducing refinements based on user feedback and audit recommendations; strengthening integration with governance structures; embedding the system within staff induction and supervision discussions; aligning reporting cycles consistently with end of quarter timelines; and maintaining openness to future enhancements responsive to organisational needs. Mr Cousins said that the Work Plan did not capture all work undertaken by NIPEC but it did track the key projects.

Mr Cousins was happy to report that a recent audit on professional projects had only identified a small number of minor recommendations. He asked if members had any questions or comments to make.

Chair enquired as to what "NA" meant in regard to projects not progressing. Mr Cousins explained that it had been trialled briefly after internal audit had commented that there was no way to tell if a project which was not progressing was being reviewed. The term has since been removed from next year's Work Plan and replaced by a simple "Yes" or "No" option with some space to add free text for an update. Chair thought that would be helpful.

Chair enquired about two projects which were showing that they had not progressed due to a lack of capacity within the NIPEC team. Mr Cousins advised that there was a possibility that these projects could be picked up again and that an element of manual analysis was still required. He said that Ms Jackson had reached out to ITS to explore the possibility of digitised support with this. Chair noted a separate tab on the Work Plan which provided further details on the reasons for certain projects not progressing. Mr Cousins said that the team had thought that it was important not to exclude anything too early and had opted to complete the full year.

Ms Stockdale stated that the members of the Professional Business Committee had found that the new version of the Work Plan made their role much easier. She was curious about the type of work the Work Plan did not capture and wondered if there was another means of ascertaining the other activities being undertaken. Mr Cousins said that, for example, the team were involved in other pieces of work they were not leading on. He advised that the team where exploring ways to capture this type of work for internal and Council purposes but not necessarily for external purposes.

Dr Bhogal was of the view that the additional transparency would be useful. She considered it important that NIPEC did not underplay their value. Dr Bhogal said that there had been discussion at the recent Professional Business Committee meeting around the potential for sharing the model as a means of generating income. Mr Cousins advised that there had been discussion within the team on a similar matter and Sponsor Branch had confirmed that NIPEC were not permitted to income generate. He said that Mrs L Kelly planned to bring the Work Plan to an upcoming ALB forum under lessons learnt. Mr Cousins was of the view that there may be value in sharing the learning with other ALBs who may, then in turn, be more likely to share their own learning.

Dr Bhogal complimented Mr Cousins and the team on a very well done piece of work. Chair thanked Mr Cousins for his presentation.

6.2 Chief Executive's Report (*Circulated for noting)*

Mr Cousins referred to the Chief Executive's report which had been circulated prior to the meeting and those present confirmed they had read same. This report highlighted some of the key aspects of the Chief Executive's work and NIPEC's priorities since the last Council meeting. Mr Cousins wished to draw particular attention to the NI Cancer Nursing Clinical Career Pathway, which was promoted by the CNO on World Cancer Day on 4 February 2026. There had been significant regional and national interest in this pathway and NIPEC have been invited to take part in a podcast by the RCN, which could help further promote the pathway nationally.

Mr Cousins also wished to draw members' attention to the successful appointment of a Band 7 Professional Officer for Nursing. The successful candidate was currently undergoing the requisite pre-employment checks. Mr Cousins advised that, unfortunately, the recruitment exercise had failed to identify a suitable candidate for the midwifery post, with the three shortlisted midwifery candidates withdrawing from the process.

He was further disappointed to report that, due to the challenging financial situation, Sponsor Branch had instructed NIPEC to put a hold on the recruitment of a Professional Officer for Midwifery. Chair noted that 54 applications had been received for the nursing post, which was a positive reflection of NIPEC's profile within the nursing profession, however, queried the notably low number of applications submitted for the midwifery post. Mr Cousins advised that the organisation was seeking to obtain informal feedback from the applicants who had withdrawn from the process to ascertain the reasons for their withdrawal. Ms Stockdale did not find the low level of interest from midwives surprising as it was reflective of what was happening elsewhere within the profession.

Chair thanked Mr Cousins for the presentation of the Chief Executive's Report and Council members noted same.

6.3 NIPEC Professional Work Plan 2025-26 Q4 – Business Plan objectives progress Monitoring Report from 1 December 2025 to 28 February 2026 *(Circulated for noting)*

Chair asked if members had read over the Professional Work Plan and they confirmed that they had. He asked if members had any questions or comments to make but none were forthcoming.

Council members noted the Professional Work Plan.

6.4 **Draft Business Plan 2026-27 *(Circulated for approval)***

Chair enquired if members had read over the draft Business Plan 2026-27 and members confirmed that they had. Members had no questions or comments to make on the document.

Members approved the Business Plan 2026-27.

6.5 **Copy of the Consultation Activity Report *(Circulated for noting)***

Ms Jackson reported that no consultations of significance had been received since the last meeting. Mr Cousins advised that the team had been reviewing how the information was collated and would be moving to an Excel dashboard for the incoming year.

Members noted the Activity Report.

7.0 Corporate Control & Finance

Chair invited Ms Jackson to take members through this section of the Agenda.

7.1 Report from Standing Committees

7.1.1 Unconfirmed minutes of the A&R Meeting held on 17 February 2026 *(Circulated for Noting)*

7.1.2 Confirmed minutes of the PBC Meeting held on 28 November 2025 *(Circulated for Noting)*

Members noted the minutes.

7.2 Revised Standing Orders

Ms Jackson asked if members had read the revised Standing Orders and accompanying cover sheet and members confirmed that they had. Ms Jackson noted that the most up to date Data Protection legislation had not been referenced and so undertook to amend the wording to “relevant Data Protection legislation” if members were content. Members agreed to this amendment.

Chair wished to take the opportunity to stress the importance of attendance at meetings if at all possible. He stated that membership of Committees is quite lean at present and it is important that quoracy is maintained, especially for the Audit & Risk Committee which is statutory Committee. Chair requested that members make him aware of any issues they may be experiencing in attending meetings and to consider joining meetings via Teams, when joining in person was not possible.

Members approved the Standing Orders, subsequent to the amendment outlined being made.

7.3 Finance

7.3.1 Financial Summary of Expenditure, Month 10 *(Circulated for noting)*

Ms Jackson reported that the organisation had been projecting a full year-end position of a surplus of £55,000, however, this had changed significantly following the preparation of the draft Month 11 figures.

Ms Jackson explained that a significant element of the variance was as a result of a separate allocation of £38,000 for the senior executive pay award, which NIPEC had already been accruing for. Unfortunately, the allocation had been ring-fenced and so the organisation had no option but to return it.

Ms Jackson advised that she had requested a retraction last week for the £38,000 and an additional £9,500, which had arisen from slippage from the two Band 7 posts that have not yet been filled. She reported that Sponsor Branch have confirmed that this request has been accepted which, based on draft figures, leaves NIPEC with a projected surplus of £9,527.

Ms Jackson informed members that NIPEC was therefore currently in a good position and she was confident that breakeven would be met. She added that it had been a particularly challenging year. Ms Jackson asked if members had any questions or comments to make.

Ms Lehmann commended Ms Jackson on her management of a difficult financial situation and Chair concurred.

Council members noted the update.

7.3.2 Update on Legal Case

Ms Jackson was happy to confirm that the legal case previously discussed at Council had been settled and payment for damages is currently being prepared for issue to the claimant. The case is therefore closed.

7.3.3 Draft Budget 2026-27

Ms Jackson reported that the draft Budget had been prepared based on a flat cash allocation of the same amount as last year as NIPEC had not yet received confirmation of its allocation for 2026-27. She advised that the current forecast projected a surplus of approximately £45,000, however, this amount did not include any potential pay uplift, associate spend or discretionary expenditure.

Ms Jackson explained that this projected surplus could be further impacted by the recent financial planning exercise, where the organisation was asked to prepare scenarios based on 5%, 10% and 15% reductions in its opening allocation.

Ms Jackson was of the view that the only way to meet these reductions would be to reduce posts. She provided the example that a Band 7 post, with its associated employers' costs, would not generate sufficient savings for a 5% reduction. Therefore, if any of these reductions were to be imposed, they would present a significant challenge to the organisation.

Ms Jackson advised that she and the Chief Executive had met with the CNO and her officials to discuss NIPEC's return and they confirmed that they would put up a strong argument against any reductions, given the disproportionate impact it would have on NIPEC as a small body. She informed members, however, that they had been advised not to proceed with either the recruitment of the second Band 7 post or the Communications Officer post in the meantime.

Ms Jackson was of the opinion that any such reductions would be catastrophic for the organisation. She added, however, that the Chief Executive remained optimistic that the CNO would find a way forward. Ms Jackson asked if members had any questions or comments to make.

Chair advised that he and the Chief Executive had written jointly to the CNO to request a meeting. Unfortunately, he had been unable to attend due to a family bereavement but the Chief Executive and Ms Jackson had met with the CNO and her officials and left them in no uncertain terms of NIPEC's position.

Chair noted that the budget allocation for 2026-27 was still not known at this stage and indeed it could be April or later before it was known. He was very aware that the impact of a reduction on such a small organisation would be felt much harder. Chair added that he was also optimistic that the CNO would find a solution for NIPEC, however, in the event of a reduction in allocation, he may call an extraordinary meeting.

Chair said that it was disappointing to hear that the Communications role had been put on hold and was of the view that it would be a step back for the organisation if this role not be replaced.

Ms Jackson was pleased to advise that NIPEC had been able to take on a midwife via the agency route for two days a week to complete a PID for a midwifery career pathway. It was hoped that the funding would be secured to extend this role to a full year to allow the pathway to be developed. Ms Stockdale was delighted to hear this news.

Council members noted the update.

7.3.4 Savings Exercise and financial planning 2026-27 *(Verbal update)*

This item had been previously discussed under Item 7.3.3.

7.4 Corporate Risk Register 2025-26, Version 10 (*Circulated for approval)*

Ms Jackson referred to the Corporate Risk Register previously circulated and reported that it had been reviewed and approved by Business Team at their last meeting. She asked members if they had any questions or comments to make on the Register. Ms Caslin advised that there had been a discussion at the February Audit & Risk Committee Meeting and depending on the financial allocation, it may be necessary to reconsider the rating of Risks 1 and 2.

Council members approved the Risk Register.

7.5 KPIs 2025-26 *(Circulated for noting)*

Ms Jackson made reference to the KPI report previously circulated and highlighted that the absence figures have reduced. She reported that a new Absence Management Policy had just been issued which placed a greater onus on line managers to manage absence, along with a number of other changes.

Members noted the contents of the report.

7.6 NIPEC 5 Year Review of Equality Scheme (Circulated for consideration)

Ms Jackson invited Mrs McEneaney to present the NIPEC five-year review of the Equality Scheme. Mrs McEneaney explained that the review required to be undertaken every five years in keeping with NIPEC's statutory requirements and allowed the organisation, through a process of self-evaluation, to review its approved equality scheme. Mrs McEneaney advised that ultimately this was a good news story, which demonstrated how NIPEC have supported Section 75 groups and the scheme's implementation. Ms McEneaney asked those present if they had any questions or comments to make.

Ms Jackson wished to personally thank Ms McEneaney for the effort she had put into the collating of the report. She added that it was an excellent report which demonstrated very clearly the type of progress NIPEC has made in its Equality obligations. Ms Stockdale commended the report and acknowledged the amount of work that had evidently gone into it. She drew attention to the fact that is was no different from the piece of work required of the larger organisations. Chair reiterated this sentiment.

7.7 Update on development of SharePoint Site *(Verbal update)*

By way of update, Ms Jackson informed members that she had commissioned ITS to build a SharePoint site for housing Council papers. ITS have advised that they hope to commence work on this in April, which will provide an opportunity to test the site before the Decision Time renewal is due in January 2027. Ms Jackson reported that she had still not received an invoice from Decision Time for this year, which as before presents a challenge with financial planning. Members did not have any questions or comments to make on the update.

7.8 Annual SIRO Report 2025-26 *(Circulated for noting)*

Ms Jackson advised that, following the review of KPIs in 2024-25, it was agreed that the Information Governance related figures would be included in an annual SIRO report to Council. She asked members to note that the main activities and requirements have been met. Ms Jackson said that a large portion of the work involved responding to Assembly Questions. A further three Assembly Questions had been received and responded to since the report was circulated.

Members noted the report.

8.0 Safety and Quality

8.1 DoH Covid-19 Public Inquiry Group *(Verbal update)*

Chair invited Ms Jackson to provide the Council with her update on the Covid-19 Public Inquiry Group. Ms Jackson reported that an email had been received from the Central Co-Ordination Team on 10 March 2026 advising that the Inquiry will publish its third report and recommendations on its website at 12 noon on Thursday 19 March 2026. This report will conclude the investigation into the 'Impact of Covid-19 pandemic on healthcare systems in the 4 nations of the UK' (Module 3).

Members noted the update.

9.0 Any Other Business

Chair concluded business and thanked everyone for their contributions to the meeting. He thanked the staff and students from QUB for their attendance and hoped they had found it interesting.

10.0 Date, Time and Venue of Next Meeting

The next public meeting date of NIPEC Council is **1 July 2026 at 2.00pm** and will be held **in Room 1.7, First Floor, James House.**