

SOLAS – Further Education and Training Authority
Ordinary Board Meeting No. 061
Thursday, 24th September, 2020

Present: Mr. S. Aylward - Chairman
Mr. A. Brownlee – Chief Executive Officer
Mr. S. Burke
Ms. T. Carey
Ms. O. Coughlan
Mr. P. Cremmins
Mr. P. J. Dwyer
Ms. Y. McNulty
Ms. C. Munro
Ms. N. O'Reilly
Ms. C. Sheridan

Apologies: Mr. D.J. Loftus

In attendance: Ms. M. Walshe - Acting Secretary
Ms. T. Dunne - Board Secretariat

Mr. C.J. Dunne - For Items 4, 8, 9 and 12
Mr. G. Gasparro - For Items 4 and 12
Ms. N. White - For Items 4, 5, 6 and 11
Mr. C. Conlon - For Items 4 and 5
Ms. G. O'Connor - For Items 4 and 5
Ms. M. Lyons - For Item 7
Mr. N. Igoe - For Item 7
Ms. C. Ni Fhloinn - For Item 7
Mr. M Mooney - For Item 7
Mr. P. Kivlehan - For Items 8 and 9
Dr. M-L Trant - For Item 10
Mr. A. McGrath - For Item 10

Note: Conflict of Interest Declaration

At the outset of the meeting, Board members were invited to declare any potential or actual conflict of Interest.

There were no conflicts arising.

1. Minutes

The revised minutes of the Board meeting of 26th May 2020 were approved.

The draft minutes of the Board meeting of 7th July were approved.

Revised Minutes – No. 059 – Tuesday, 26th May, 2020

2. Matters Arising

Decision Item – (approved by written procedure – July, 2020)

'Approval of expenditure to facilitate increased usage of Moodle across FET arising from Covid-19'

It was noted that the Board approved an increased level of expenditure in the contract with Enovation Solutions by written procedure on 29th July 2020.

3. Report from Chief Executive Officer

The Board noted the CEO Report which had been circulated in advance of the meeting and presented on the day.

Items included in the Report and discussed on the day:-

- An update on the safe reopening of FET Facilities
- The July stimulus package, announced by Government in July 2020, which will support a range of FET services including additional funding for the roll out of the Skills to Compete Initiative, an Incentivisation scheme for Apprentice Employers and funding for the national retrofitting plan
- SOLAS input into the estimates process for the overall Government budget for 2021.
- Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, Simon Harris TD has charged SOLAS to lead on the development of a 10-year Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Skills Strategy
- The new FET Strategy 2020-2024 was launched by Minister Harris TD on 16th July, 2020. The launch received significant online views as well as media coverage and was well received by the sector.
- The implementation of the New Ways of Working within SOLAS and an agreed refreshed structure for the organisation will be formally launched on 28th September, 2020. The CEO reported on progress since the 7th July Board meeting on the development of an online delivery option for the renewal of Safe Pass cards.
- An update on progress on the examination of alternative Safe Pass delivery methods.

Discussion

The Board welcomed the significant progress on priorities and other areas since the July, 2020 Board meeting.

The need to identify barriers to participation amongst marginalised learners was highlighted. The CEO advised that the proposed funding approach to the end of the year, to be discussed later in the meeting, made provision for funding to support the most vulnerable in society (e.g., those with disabilities, refugees, older workers, immigrants, others).

In response to a query on the potential of retaining and re-allocating any potential year end savings to fund services to marginalised and disadvantaged groups, the CEO advised that Departmental approval will be required, in the first instance.

Following a broad discussion on the use of the SOLAS Brand on promotional materials being developed by ETBs, the Chairman requested that a proposal on the use of the SOLAS logo be prepared for the November, 2020 meeting for discussion.

4. SOLAS Budget 2020 **(i) Revised Budget and Forecast Outturn 2020**

Proposal

That the Board note the additional allocations and revised funding to SOLAS in 2020 and approve the Revised Expenditure Budget. The Board was also requested to note the Forecast Outturn 2020 as compared with the Revised Budget.

Background and discussion

An overview of the increased allocations to SOLAS, arising from the July Stimulus Package agreed by Government around dealing with the impact of Covid-19 and the categories of expenditure that the additional funding is to be applied was provided.

It was noted that the total combined Exchequer & National Training Fund allocation to SOLAS increased by €59.5m to €919.218m

Board Decision

The Board noted the additional allocations and revised funding to SOLAS in 2020 and approved the Revised Expenditure Budget as outlined in the Board Paper. The Board also noted the Forecast Outturn 2020 as compared with the Revised Budget.

(ii) SOLAS Revised Capital Plan 2020

Proposal

That the Board approve the SOLAS Revised Capital Plan for 2020.

Introduction

At its April Board Meeting the Board approved the Capital Plan for the SOLAS 2020 capital allocation of €18.0m, €17.5m to cover ETB capital requirements and €0.5m to cover SOLAS capital requirements.

The Board was advised that the total SOLAS capital allocation for 2020 has been increased from €18.0m to €23.0m. An additional €5.0m has been allocated to fund grants, to Education and Training Boards and other providers, to support disadvantaged students in accessing ICT devices.

Board Decision

The Board approved the SOLAS Revised Capital Plan for 2020.

5. Further Education and Training (FET) Services Plan Mid-Year Provision and Funding Review for 2019

Proposal

That the Board note the Mid-Year Provision and Funding Review for 2019 and endorse the approach to funding to the end of 2020 and FET funding for 2021 as detailed in the Board paper, which is subject to the finalisation of budget estimates and approval from the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform.

Background and Discussion

The Board paper, circulated ahead of the meeting, detailed the Mid-Year Review as well as the proposals for funding to then end of 2020 and estimated FET funding for 2021 and included updates on:

- The Mid-Year Review position
- Requests from ETBs for additional funding
- COVID-19 costs in Voluntary Secondary Community & Comprehensive Schools
- Provision for mitigating educational disadvantage and addressing the digital divide
- A proposed approach to funding over the remainder of the year
- Capital Projects
- Grants to Support Disadvantaged Students in Accessing ICT Devices
- Services Provision at the End June 2020
- On-going Engagement with ETBs regarding their Outturn Forecasts.

An overview of the Board paper was provided and the difficulty of framing and planning necessary funding for 2020 and estimated FET funding for 2021 as a result of the impact of Covid-19 was highlighted.

It was noted that there was additional funding for FET Grants as part of the July Stimulus Package and COVID-19-related supports. This investment has taken the original funding for FET grants from €799.5m to a revised funding position of €859m (including €22.5m for capital).

The Mid-Year Provision and Funding Review for 2019 was noted and the Board requested that the Executive engage with DFHERIS and DPER with regard to the approach to funding to the end of 2020 and FET funding for 2021

Board Decision

Subject to the finalisation of budget estimates and approval from the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, the Board endorsed the approach to funding to the end of 2020 and FET funding for 2021 outlined in the paper.

The Board further noted that Management will update the Board on these matters at its meetings in November and December 2020.

6. Additional expenditure under Media Buying Contract

Proposal

The Board approve additional expenditure under the service contract with Havas Media for media buying services.

Discussion

The Board were provided with details of campaigns run to date under the contract and further campaigns that will target, amongst others, those who have lost their jobs as a result of Covid-19. The Board welcomed progress to date on the promotion of FET and stressed the importance of continuing this work to target the relevant cohort of learners and employers using all means of communications, including digital in this regard.

Board Decision

The Board approved additional expenditure under the service contract with Havas Media for media buying services.

7. Approval of three service agreements for software, examination and certification costs to support eCollege and Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL) 2021

Proposal

That the Board approve expenditure on three specific services for 2021. As there is only one supplier in Ireland for each of these services, these are sole supplier agreements.

Background

These three sole supplier agreements, formerly within the approval level of the Executive, now require Board Approval due to changes in expenditure and approval thresholds. The Board was advised that, assuming at least the same usage as last year, these services would be utilised in 75 centres offering services for up to 13,000 learners.

Board Decision

The Board approved expenditure on three service contracts including:

- 1) Adobe Creative Suite national agreement with Micromail;
- 2) Certiport national certification agreement with Prodigy Learning;
- 3) Provision of ICDL courses for eCollege learners with ICS.

8. Risk Management Policy

Proposal

That the Board approve the reviewed and updated Risk Management Policy.

Background

The Risk Management process requires that the Risk Management Policy and the Risk Appetite Statement be reviewed annually by the Executive Leadership Team and by the Audit and Risk Committee. The Risk Management Policy is approved annually by the Board.

The Board were advised of the changes to the Risk Management Policy and advised that there were no amendments made to the Risk Appetite Statement.

Discussion

The Board welcomed the updates to the Corporate Risk Register.

The Audit and Risk Committee Chair advised the Board that the Committee had reviewed both the Corporate Risk Register and the Risk Management Update at their August meeting and recommended them for approval by the Board.

Board Decision

The Board approved the reviewed and updated Risk Management Policy for immediate implementation.

**9. Risk Management Update
Corporate Risk Register – Review #2 (August, 2020)**

Proposal

That the Board note the revised and updated SOLAS Corporate Risk Register review #2, August 2020.

Background

In compliance with the requirements of the Risk Management Policy, a Corporate Risk Register is prepared three times a year for review by Senior Management and the Audit and Risk Committee. The Register is also reviewed by the Board at least once annually.

An update was provided on the nine risks by rating and by category and was advised that reported that one risk had been removed since the last update. It was noted that the risk associated with CR9 (Covid-19) has been increased to reflect the possible risks associated with the re-opening of training centres.

Board Decision

The Board noted the revised and updated SOLAS Corporate Risk Register review #2, August 2020.

10. Update on Key Apprenticeship Developments

Proposal

That the Board note the Update on Key Apprenticeship Developments.

Introduction

The CEO set the background to a number of strategic and operational developments in apprenticeship during 2020, which included:-

- A new Department-led five-year action plan for the future direction of apprenticeship is expected to be published by year end with steering group support from SOLAS and the HEA.
- A new approach to Quality Assurance for apprenticeship is being developed and will be presented to Quality and Qualifications Ireland before year end 2020.

The Board were provided with an overview of key developments in Apprenticeship with a number of areas highlighted including:

- Apprenticeship registrations and redundancies during Covid-19
- The Apprentice Employer Incentivisation Scheme announced as part of the July Stimulus package
- New apprenticeship programmes in 2020
- Alternative assessment arrangements for over 2,000 craft apprentices
- Return to off-the-job training for craft apprentices
- Quality assurance of craft apprenticeships
- New assessment distribution system for craft apprenticeships
- Apprenticeship promotion in 2020 including the new apprenticeship website.

Discussion

The Board welcomed the comprehensive update on apprenticeship and thanked the Executive for the significant progress achieved since the last update, particularly with regard to provision to assist apprentices during Covid-19.

The Board highlighted the need to continue to support apprentices during Covid-19 particularly those who have been made redundant. A previous discussion on engaging the public sector with regard to employing apprentices was noted and will be actioned by the apprenticeship team.

The Chairman welcomed a suggestion that a meeting with the Department be held at a later stage, in order to assist Board members to contribute to the Government's action plan for Apprenticeship.

Board Decision

The Board noted the Update on Key Apprenticeship Developments.

11. Evaluations

- (i) Proposed SOLAS response to the Independent Evaluation of the Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS) Programme**

- (ii) Proposed SOLAS response to the Independent Evaluation of the Specific Skills Training (SST) Programme.**

Given time constraints on the day, it was agreed that this item would be discussed at the Board meeting on 4th November 2020.

12. SOLAS Finance Report

For the eight-month period to 28th August, 2020

Proposal

That the Board note the SOLAS Finance Report for the eight-month period to 28th August, 2020.

Background

The report sets out expenditure compared with income for the eight-month period ended 28th August, 2020. The annual budget of €864.400m, excluding SOLAS Capital, was approved by the Board at its meeting of 23rd April 2020.

Total expenditure for the period was €685.264m compared with a budget of €688.581m, giving an underspend of €3.317m or 0.5%.

Five phases of Grants to Education and Training Boards (ETBs) have been paid to date. Year to date grant expenditure at €648.3m is in line with profile and budgeted expenditure.

Capital of €0.5m is included as part of the SOLAS budget and a further €17.5m included in the Grants to ETBs of €786.467m for Capital. An amount of €0.5m is included as part of the SOLAS budget and a further €17.5m is included in the Grants to ETBs of €786.467m, in respect of Capital.

Board Decision

The Board noted the SOLAS Finance Report for the eight-month period to 28th August, 2020.

13. Board Committees and Advisory Committees

(1) Committee & Advisory Committee – Update from Chair(s)

(2) Committee & Advisory Committee – Minutes

(i) Audit and Risk Committee

Minutes - 03/20 – Tuesday, 9th April, 2020

The Board noted the minutes of the Audit and Risk Committee meeting No. 03/20 held on Tuesday, 9th April, 2020

(ii) National Apprenticeship Advisory Committee

(1) (Revised) Minutes – Wednesday, 13th May, 2020

The Board noted the Revised Minutes of the National Apprenticeship Advisory Committee meeting held on Wednesday, 13th May, 2020.

(2) Minutes – Thursday, 4th June, 2020

The Board noted the Minutes of the National Apprenticeship Advisory Committee meeting held on Thursday, 4th June, 2020

14. Any Other Business

Audit and Risk Committee – new external member

The Chair of the Audit and Risk Committee confirmed the appointment Peter Buckley as the new external member who will be the Independent Financial Expert on the Audit and Risk Committee.

Board welcome to new Executive Director

The Chairman and Board welcomed Nessa White - the newly appointed Executive Director – Strategy, Knowledge and Transformation to SOLAS.

Publication of Board minutes of SOLAS Board meetings

The Chairman, with the agreement of the Board, requested that the Board Secretariat consider the publication of SOLAS Board minutes.

Thank you to SOLAS Staff

The Chairman and Board thanked the CEO for the work progressed during the past few months, particularly during the Covid-19 restrictions, and asked that its appreciation be conveyed to all staff for their contribution.

15. Date of Next Meeting

The next meeting of the Board of SOLAS will be a remote meeting and will take place on Wednesday, 4th November, 2020.



Time: 10.00am – 1.00pm

Venue: SOLAS – Castleforbes House, Dublin 1

**Board of SOLAS Meeting
No. 061 – Thursday, 24th September, 2020**

A G E N D A

Note: Declaration of Conflict of Interest

- * 1. Minutes
 - (i) (Revised) Minutes – Tuesday, 26th May, 2020
 - (ii) Draft Minutes - No. 060 – Tuesday, 7th July, 2020
- 2. Matters Arising
Decision Item - (approved by written procedure - July, 2020)
'Approval of expenditure to facilitate increased usage of Moodle across FET arising from Covid-19'.
- * 3. Report from Chief Executive Officer

DECISION ITEMS

- * 4. SOLAS Budget 2020
 - (i) Revised Budget and Forecast Outturn 2020
 - (ii) SOLAS Revised Capital Plan 2020
- * 5. Further Education and Training (FET) Services Plan
Mid-Year Provision and Funding Review for 2020
- * 6. Additional expenditure under Media Buying Contract
- * 7. Approval of three service agreements for software, examination and certification costs to support eCollege and Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL) 2020-2021
- * 8. Risk Management Policy

DISCUSSION ITEMS

- * 9. Risk Management Update
Corporate Risk Register – Review #2 (August, 2020)
- * 10. Update on Key Apprenticeship Developments
- * 11. Further Education and Training (FET) Independent Evaluations
Proposed SOLAS response to the independent evaluations of Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS) and Specific Skills Training (SST)

INFORMATION ITEMS

- * 12. SOLAS Finance Report
For the eight-month period to 28th August, 2020
- * 13. Board Committees and Advisory Committees
 - (3) Committee & Advisory Committee - Update from Chair(s)
 - (4) Committee & Advisory Committee - Minutes
 - (iii) Audit and Risk Committee
Minutes – 03/20 – Tuesday, 9th April, 2020
 - (iv) National Apprenticeship Advisory Committee
 - (i) (Revised) Minutes – Wednesday, 13th May, 2020
 - (ii) Minutes – Tuesday, 9th June, 2020
- 14. Any Other Business
- 15. Date of Next Meeting

* (Denotes Paper)