

**SOLAS – Further Education and Training Authority**  
**Ordinary Board Meeting No. 065**  
**Wednesday, 24<sup>th</sup> March, 2021**  
**Meeting Note**

Present:

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

- Mr C.J. Dunne - SOLAS Executive
- Dr. M-L Trant - SOLAS Executive
- Ms. N White - SOLAS Executive

Apologies: None

In attendance:

- Ms. M. Walshe - Secretary
- Ms. T. Dunne - Board Secretariat
  
- Mr. G. Gasparro - SOLAS
- Mr. G. O'Connor - SOLAS
- Ms. M. Lyons - SOLAS
- Ms. C. Ni Fhloinn - SOLAS
- Ms. R. Doherty - SOLAS.

### **Declaration of Conflict of Interest**

There were no conflicts arising.

#### **1. Minutes**

##### **(i) Draft Minutes - No. 064 – Thursday, 11<sup>th</sup> February, 2021**

The Board approved the minutes of meeting No. 064 held on Thursday, 11<sup>th</sup> February, 2020.

##### **(ii) Meeting Note (for publication) – No. 064 – 11<sup>th</sup> February, 2021**

The Board approved the meeting note for Meeting No. 064 – Thursday, 11<sup>th</sup> February, 2021, for publication on the SOLAS website.

#### **2. Matters Arising**

##### **Decision Item – Approved by Written Procedure – 10<sup>th</sup> March 2021.**

##### **Approval of Capital Investment for National Apprenticeships in 2021**

It was confirmed that following circulation of a Board paper by email, the Board approved a capital investment for national apprenticeships in 2021 to a value of €10,141,800 to enable the addition of essential craft training provision within the Further Education and Training sector. It was noted that funding amounts for individual Education and Training Boards may be adjusted based on detailed costings and procurement processes over the coming months and that the Board will be kept informed of progress and any adjustments within the overall allocation.

#### **3. Report from Chief Executive Officer**

The Board noted the CEO Report which had been circulated in advance of the meeting.

Items in the report and highlighted on the day included: -

- The on-going engagement and support for SOLAS staff who continue to work remotely.
- The continuing impact of Covid-19 restrictions on the FET and Apprenticeship systems and planning underway for a phased return to onsite education and training provision for practical learning with a particular focus on apprenticeship.
- An announcement by Minister Simon Harris TD, of his intention to ensure that FET and Apprenticeship options will be made available at the same time as higher education options via the CAO process.
- An update on limited Safe Pass training for staff working on essential construction projects and a progress report on the on-going development of a Safe Pass online delivery option.

- The continuing work to promote the value of SOLAS and FET with significant media coverage for both FET and SOLAS on the CAO announcement and the launch of a Skills to Advance hospitality initiative.
- The Board was advised that the Director of Construction Services is due to retire in April and that an acting director has been appointed for a period of six months.

#### Progress on delivery of 2021 SOLAS Business Plan

The CEO provided an update on progress against the five core business objectives in the 2021 SOLAS Business Plan and the current status of KPIs underpinning the balanced scorecard. The Board was advised that work is progressing on each of the objectives however, as discussed at previous Board meetings, there are signs of reduced participation in FET amongst vulnerable target groups and the need to support ETBs and other FET providers to re-engage these learners was highlighted.

#### Update on New Apprenticeship Action Plan

Following discussion at the February Board meeting, the CEO provided a further update on the development of a new Apprenticeship Action Plan by the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS).

The Board welcomed the CEO report and discussed the progress against the delivery of the business plan. It was suggested that a working group to examine the drop in participation levels amongst marginalised groups could be of benefit and would demonstrate SOLAS' commitment to a mechanism for addressing the issue in a strategic manner. The CEO proposed that this would be considered as part of the FET strategy implementation process under the 'Inclusion' pillar.

In response to the update on the Apprenticeship Action Plan, the Board acknowledged the potential for the plan to further progress the development of Apprenticeship as a major route to skill development in Ireland and discussed the potential implications of the establishment of a National Apprenticeship Office with feedback noted.

Following a request from a Board member, it was agreed that an update on the recommendations arising from the Review of Post Leaving Certificate provision would be provided at the next meeting of the Board.

#### **4. SOLAS Budget 2021**

##### **Adoption of 2021 Activity and Expenditure Budgets**

#### Proposal

The Board was asked to approve the 2021 Activity and Expenditure Budgets totalling €993.0m as outlined in the Board paper.

### Overview and discussion

The Board was advised that the outline budget for 2021, which was noted by the Board at its February meeting, remained the same at €993.0m and that the paper circulated ahead of the meeting proposed the distribution of the non-capital budget element of €960.0m with the remaining €33m for capital to be dealt with in a separate paper. The Board was provided with a summary of SOLAS funding in 2021 with additional amounts allocated in 2021 highlighted and proposed expenditure including SOLAS operational and direct costs, grants to ETBs, schools and other organisations, grants to employers under the Apprenticeship Incentivisation Scheme and capital.

The Board noted the activity and expenditure budgets as set out in the Board paper and that a separate paper outlining the 2021 Funding Allocation for Further Education and Training would be presented at a later meeting.

### Board Decision

The Board approved the summary proposed budget as outlined in the paper and noted that upon approval, the detailed process of allocating budgets by SOLAS function and ETB and non-ETB organisations will be completed in line with the SOLAS Further Education and Training Service Plan for 2021.

## **5. SOLAS Capital Plan 2021**

### Proposal

The Board was asked to note and authorise the overall SOLAS Capital Plan for 2021 as set out in the Board paper.

### Overview and discussion

The Board was provided with an overview of the paper and was advised that the total SOLAS capital allocation for 2021 is €33.0m including €32.5m to cover ETB capital requirements and €0.5m to cover SOLAS capital requirements. It was noted that €32.5m will be expended in respect of necessary building works and equipment for ETB facilities on priorities set and approved by Senior Management. It was proposed that an initial devolved capital allocation of €8,047,500 will be disbursed across ETBs, subject to DFHERIS final approval with bids being invited from all ETBs for the remaining funding working to predetermined priorities including apprenticeship, health and safety and other FET projects. A separate paper on the initial devolved capital allocation was included for decision at a later stage in the meeting and the proposed utilisation of the ETB capital budget will be set out in future Board papers.

A budget of €500,000 is available to SOLAS for capital needs in 2021 and will be spent on planned and approved equipment needs.

### Board Decision

The Board noted and authorised the SOLAS 2021 Capital Plan.

## **6. SOLAS Capital Plan 2021 - Update 2021 Devolved Capital Allocations to ETBs and Capital Funding Applications Cavan-Monaghan Education and Training Board (CMETB).**

### Proposal

The Board was asked to approve devolved capital allocations to ETBs for 2021 and capital funding applications for Cavan-Monaghan Education and Training Board (CMETB).

### Overview and discussion

The Board was provided with an overview of the paper and was advised that the introduction of devolved capital funding grants by DFHERIS in 2019 was welcomed by the sector as it equips ETBs to respond to their most pressing capital needs. It was noted, however, that the introduction of a new capital funding process combined with the restrictions that had occurred due to the pandemic have resulted in delays to the approval of some 2020 projects. It was further noted that it is anticipated that these new processes and the continuing restrictions would make it challenging to allocate the full 2021 capital budget. It was therefore proposed, and the Board was asked to approve, as a once-off measure, an increase of €5m to the devolved capital grant bringing the total to €8.047m for 2021 with proposed increases for each ETB outlined in the paper.

### Additional Capital Requests from Cavan-Monaghan Education and Training Board (CMETB)

The Board was provided with information on two capital funding requests that had been received from CMETB relating to equipment costs and ground works associated with the rental of temporary modular accommodation in Cavan Town and owned by the ETB and for the establishment of a Supply Chain Logistics and Procurement Centre of Excellence (SCLP). Board approval was sought for:

#### Cavan Institute – Ground works and equipment

- €202,000 in capital funding for the ground works required to locate the temporary modular accommodation and a further €497,426 for equipment.
- A capital payment of €61,000 will be required in 2026 for the decommissioning of the site when the temporary modular accommodation is removed.

### Supply Chain Logistics and Procurement Centre of Excellence (SCLP)

- €207,000 for capital equipment over the next two years of the project with €100,000 has been requested in Year 1. A further application for €107k in capital funding will be requested in 2022. The centre will be housed in a modular unit structure and CMETB have requested €35,000 in capital funding for the ground works required to locate the temporary modular unit.

The Board welcomed the devolved capital funding approach and the capital allocations requests from CMETB. Following a request from the Board, it was agreed that an update on the progress on capital funding during 2021 would be provided at a future meeting.

### Board Decision

The Board:

- approved a once off increase in the Devolved Capital Grant from €5.5m in 2020 to €8.047.5m in 2021.
- approved the allocation of capital funding to CMETB for ground works (€202k) and equipment (€497,426) required for the temporary relocation of FET services in Cavan Town.
- approved the allocation of capital funding to CMETB for ground works (€35k) and equipment (€100k) required for the Supply Chain Logistics and Procurement Centre of Excellence (SCLP).

## **7. Draft SOLAS Financial Statements to 31<sup>st</sup> December 2020**

### **(i) 2020 Financial Statements (Draft)**

### **(ii) Governance Statement and Board Members Report (Draft)**

#### Proposal

The Board was asked to note the Draft Financial Statements of SOLAS for the year ended 31st December 2020.

#### Overview and discussion

The Board was provided with an overview of the paper noting that the financial statements were presented in line with the requirements of the Further Education and Training Act 2013. The Board was advised that the draft 'Governance Statement and Board Members' Report' was included in compliance with guidance from Department of Public Expenditure and Reform on the Code of Practice for the Governance of State Bodies (2016).

It was noted that the Draft Financial Statements 2020 have been submitted to relevant Departments as per the requirements of the Code of Practice (2016). The draft statements were noted by the SOLAS Senior Leadership Team on 8<sup>th</sup> March 2021 and will be reviewed, along with the Governance Statement by the Audit and Risk Committee on 13<sup>th</sup> April 2021.

The Board was advised that the 2020 Accounts were being audited by the Comptroller and Auditor General's (C&AG) office and, following clearance, the final audited accounts will be presented for approval at the 29<sup>th</sup> April 2021 Board meeting.

#### Discussion

The Chair of the Audit and Risk Committee welcomed the update and noted that the C&AG will also be in attendance at the next meeting of the Committee. It was agreed that the ARC could address any queries from Board members on the Board paper at its 13<sup>th</sup> April 2021 meeting.

Suggested amends to the Governance Statement and Board Members' Report were noted.

#### Board Decision

The Board noted the draft Financial Statements of SOLAS for the year ended 31st December 2020.

### **8. European Social Fund (ESF) Update**

#### Proposal

The Board was asked to note the update on European Social Fund (ESF) developments.

#### Overview and discussion

The Board was provided with an update on the 2020 European Social Fund (ESF) and developments to date in 2021 on the Programme for Employability, Inclusion & Learning (PEIL) 2014-2020 with current programme allocations as outlined in the Board paper.

Specifically, the Board was provided with updates on:

- ESF Financial Claims submitted by ETBs for Further Education and Training Programmes
- Further Education claims
- ETB Training for the Unemployed and CTC ESF claim
- ESF Non-Financial data reporting and management verification checks
- Expected claims in 2021
- The next ESF Operational Programme (ESF+ 2021-2027) & REACT EU Fund
- Audit updates.

The Board welcomed the update and discussed a number of areas related to the paper including the importance on inputting accurate data on the PLSS, the need to upskill ETBs on the importance of data collation, difficulties in the collection of data from some learner groups, the potential for reputational damage where errors in audits on claims occur and the need to address barriers to participation such a childcare.

#### Board Decision

The Board noted the progress made during 2020 and, to date, in 2021 and SOLAS' role as Intermediate Body under the Programme for Employability Inclusion and Learning (PEIL) 2014 – 2020.

### **9. SOLAS Finance Report For the two-month period to 26<sup>th</sup> February 2021**

#### Proposal

The Board was asked to note the SOLAS Finance Report for the two-month period to 26<sup>th</sup> February 2021.

#### Overview and discussion

The Board was provided with an update on expenditure compared with income for the two-month period ended 26<sup>th</sup> February 2021. Total expenditure for the period was €139.033m which was €0.4m behind the estimated year to date budget. The Board was provided with further updates including:

- One phase of Grants to ETBs totalling €127.983m has been paid to date.
- Apprenticeship Incentivisation Grants were underspent by €0.256m against an estimated year to date budget of €1.4m.
- An amount of €0.500m is included as part of the SOLAS budget and a further €32.500m is included in the Grants to ETBs of €897.500m, in respect of capital.

#### Board Decision

The Board noted the Finance Report for the two-month period to 26<sup>th</sup> February 2021.

### **10. eCollege Analysis of Preliminary Data on New Entrants to eCollege in 2020**

#### Proposal

The Board was asked to note the analysis of new entrants to eCollege in 2020 and key findings arising from the analysis.



### Overview and discussion

The Board was provided with an overview of the profile and experiences of new entrants to eCollege courses in 2020, the outcomes achieved by the end of 2020 and an analysis of preliminary data and forms to support the future development of eCollege as set out in the Board paper. The Board was updated on a number of key metrics following the opening up of eCollege in March 2020 including:

- In 2019, there were 7,446 new entrants to eCollege, 34,223 in 2020, and 12,728 to the end of February 2021 with an average of 635 new starters per month in 2019 compared to an average of 2,851 per month in 2020.
- A breakdown of the profile of new entrants to eCollege 2020 in terms of age, gender, geographic location and course-type, as well as variances in course cluster enrolments by gender, number of completers, partial completers, full completers and early finishers and duration spent on the course.
- Data captured on new entrants in 2020 via a mandatory pre-course questionnaire including employment status at the start of the course, level of education and objectives in taking the course.
- Data captured on learner experience at the midpoint of the course which showed 64% expressing a positive experience and suggestions for improvements.

It was noted that the outcomes for new entrants in 2020 will continue to be recorded and tracked into 2021 with data indicating a completion rate comparable to international examples. A follow-up analysis of eCollege data during Quarters 3 & 4, 2021 will be undertaken and the Board updated on the findings.

The Board welcomed the update and discussed a number of areas related to the paper including the possible introduction of digital badging, suggested steps to support non completers and the need to ensure value for money.

On a related matter and in response to a query from a Board member, an update was provided on Skills to Advance and activities undertaken for engaging with employers via ETBs, IBEC, ISME, SMEs and IDA Ireland.

### Board Decision

The Board noted the analysis of new entrants to eCollege in 2020 and key findings arising from the analysis.

## **11. 10 Year Adult Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy**

### Proposal

The Board was asked to note progress in developing the strategy to-date and their input was sought on key areas of focus and priorities.

### Overview and discussion

The Board was provided with an overview of the stages of work to date including initiation, research, consultation and development of the Strategy. The inclusive approach to developing the strategy was highlighted with views sought from a wide range of stakeholder groups via omnibus polls, one to one interviews, bilateral meetings and focus groups. The Board was briefed on the emerging themes and the five core pillars which the strategy will be framed around.

Board feedback was sought however, due to time constraints on the day, it was agreed that feedback would be provided via the Strategic Planning Committee at its meeting on 15<sup>th</sup> April 2021 and with the Chairperson of the Committee providing feedback at the next meeting of the Board.

## **12. Annual Board Performance Survey - 2020**

Due to time constraints on the day, this item was held over until the 29<sup>th</sup> April 2020 meeting.

## **13. Board Committees and Advisory Committee**

### **(1) Committees & Advisory Committee - Update from Chairpersons**

#### Audit and Risk Committee (ARC)

The Chairperson confirmed that the next Committee meeting would take place on 15<sup>th</sup> April 2021 where the Committee would be meeting with the C&AG to discuss the 2020 Financial Statements and reviewing 2020 Governance documents.

#### Strategic Planning Committee (SPC)

The Chairperson advised that the Committee would be discussing the ALND strategy, the three-year SOLAS Corporate Plan and Further Education and Training Strategy Implementation Plan at its next meeting in April.

#### Workforce and Organisational Development Committee

The Chairperson advised that the Committee would be discussing the Human Capital Report at its next meeting in April 2021.

National Apprenticeship Advisory Committee

The Chairperson provided an update on the last meeting of the Committee where is discussed the Government allocation of €20 million in capital funding to support increasing capacity on apprenticeship.

**(2) Committees & Advisory Committee - Minutes**

**(i) Workforce and Organisational Development Committee Minutes – Wednesday, 11<sup>th</sup> November 2020**

The Board noted the minutes of the Workforce and Organisational Development Committee meeting held on Wednesday, 11<sup>th</sup> November 2020.

**(ii) National Apprenticeship Advisory Committee Minutes – Tuesday, 8<sup>th</sup> December 2020**

The Board noted the minutes of the National Apprenticeship Advisory Committee meeting held on Tuesday, 8<sup>th</sup> December 2020.

**14. Any Other Business**

There was no other business conducted.

**15. Date of Next Meeting**

The next meeting is scheduled to take place on Thursday, 29<sup>th</sup> April 2021.

**Part 2 – Private Session**

Note: Due to time constraints on the day, this item was held over to the 29<sup>th</sup> April 2021 Board meeting.

**APPENDIX 1**



**Time: 9.30am – 1.00pm**  
**Venue: Online via MS Teams**

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**Board of SOLAS Meeting**

**No. 065 – Wednesday, 24<sup>th</sup> March 2021**

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**09.30 – 12.30 Part 1 – Ordinary Board business**  
**12.30 – 01.00 Part 2 – Private Session**

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**Part 1 – Ordinary Board business**

Note: **Declaration of Conflict of Interest**

- \* 1. Minutes
  - (i) Draft Minutes - No. 064 – Thursday, 11<sup>th</sup> February 2021
  - (ii) Meeting Note (for publication) – No. 064 – 11<sup>th</sup> February 2021
- 2. Matters Arising
  - Decision Item – (approval by written procedure – March 2021)
  - Approval of Capital Investment for National Apprenticeships in 2021
- \* 3. Report from Chief Executive Officer
  - including update on Apprenticeship Action Plan

**DECISION ITEMS**

- \* 4. SOLAS Budget 2021
  - Adoption of 2021 Activity and Expenditure Budgets
- \* 5. SOLAS Capital Plan 2021
- \* 6. SOLAS Capital Plan 2021 – Update
  - 2021 Devolved Capital Allocations to Education and Training Boards (ETBs) and Capital Funding Applications - CMETB

## **DISCUSSION ITEMS**

- \* 7. Draft SOLAS Financial Statements to 31<sup>st</sup> December 2020
  - (i) 2020 Financial Statements (Draft)
  - (ii) Governance Statement and Board Members Report (Draft)
- \* 8. European Social Fund (ESF) – Update
- \* 9. SOLAS Finance Report  
For the two-month period to 26<sup>th</sup> February 2021
- \* 10. eCollege  
Analysis of Preliminary Data on new Entrants to eCollege in 2020
- \* 11. 10 Year Adult Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy
- \* 12. Annual Board Performance Survey - 2020

## **INFORMATION ITEMS**

- \* 13. Board Committees and Advisory Committee
  - (1) Committees & Advisory Committee - Update from Chairpersons
  - (2) Committees & Advisory Committee - Minutes
    - (i) Workforce and Organisational Development Committee  
Minutes – Wednesday, 11<sup>th</sup> November 2020
    - (ii) National Apprenticeship Advisory Committee  
Minutes – Tuesday, 8<sup>th</sup> December 2020
- 14. Any Other Business
- 15. Date of Next Meeting

\* (Denotes Paper)

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### **12.30 – 1.00 - Part 2 – Private Session**

Introductory comments by Chairperson