

SOLAS – Further Education and Training Authority
Ordinary Board Meeting No. 068
Tuesday, 13th July 2021
Meeting Note

Present:	Mr. S. Aylward	Chairperson	
	Mr. A. Brownlee	Chief Executive Officer	
	Mr. S. Burke		
	Ms. P. Carey		
	Ms. O. Coughlan		
	Mr. P. Cremmins		
	Mr. P. J. Dwyer		
	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
	Mr. P. Sheridan	- SOLAS	
	Ms. C. Jones	- SOLAS	
Apologies:	Mr. D.J. Loftus	- Board Member	
	Ms. N. White	- SOLAS Executive	
In attendance:	Ms. M. Walshe	- Secretary	
	Ms. T. Dunne	- Board Secretariat	
		Mr. G. Bissett	- SOLAS
		Mr. G. O'Connor	- SOLAS
		Ms. M. Lyons	- SOLAS
		Ms. C. Ni Fhloinn	- SOLAS
		Ms. S. Dunlop	- SOLAS
		Ms. N. Fitzpatrick	- SOLAS.

Opening of Meeting

At the outset of the meeting the Board discussed recent correspondence received.

Chairperson's Opening Comments

The Chairperson advised that the CEO, Mr. A. Brownlee, was required to depart the meeting at 2pm to attend a meeting.

Conflict of Interest

There was no conflict of interest arising.

1. Minutes

(i) Draft Minutes – No. 067 – Tuesday, 1st June 2021

The Board approved the draft Minutes of Board meeting No. 067 held on Tuesday, 1st June 2021.

(ii) Draft Meeting Note (for publication) - No. 067 – Tuesday, 1st June 2021

The Board approved the draft meeting note of meeting No. 067 held on Tuesday, 1st June 2021 for publication on the SOLAS website.

2. Matters Arising

Decision Item – Approved by Written Procedure – 6th July 2021.

Approval of Capital Investment for emergency health and safety works in three Education and Training Boards

It was confirmed that, following circulation of a Board paper by email, the Board approved capital investment of €615,247.25 for Emergency Health and Safety works in three Education and Training Boards (ETBs) namely: (i) Cork ETB: €144,460.00, (ii) Cork ETB: €124,022.25 and Louth-Meath ETB: €346,765.00 on 6th July 2021.

3. Report from Chief Executive Officer

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

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

- The need to continue to monitor both capital and recurrent funding plans across ETBs to ensure the investment is channelled fully and effectively before year end.
- Provisional plans being put in place for the gradual, phased return of staff to an office environment, from September 2021, subject to further public health guidance.

- The welcome publication by Government of its plan for the full reopening of FET and HE facilities from September 2021 which will be critical for addressing apprenticeship waiting lists and providing upskilling and reskilling opportunities to lead the recovery.
- An update on the Green Skills agenda with FET included at the forefront of the Government's National Recovery and Resilience programme including targeted reskilling opportunities, expanding the network of retrofitting training centres of excellence, the development of core green skills modules in FET programmes and the updating of apprenticeship curricula to embed green skills technologies.
- The addition of responsibility for Green Skills to the Director of Construction Skills post for which a recruitment process is underway.
- The relaunch of the SOLAS Values facilitated group sessions across SOLAS.
- Details of Government strategies SOLAS is contributing to including Pathways to Work, DFHERIS' Statement of Strategy and the National Action Plan on Access to Higher Education.
- An update on communications activity including the launch of Universal Design for Learning guidelines.

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 and was provided with details of actions to address two 'red flag' areas including a new Mitigating Against Educational Disadvantage Fund to reduced participation in FET amongst vulnerable target groups and an emergency action plan to tackle craft apprenticeship training waiting lists.

The Board welcomed the CEO report and the update on progress against the business plan. Following discussion of the report and in response to queries raised, the Board was provided with updates on a number of areas including:

- On-going engagement with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform on progressing the tender for a service provider to deliver online Safe Pass training.
- The establishment of a Transformation Project Management Office to co-ordinate and facilitate FET Strategy Implementation. It was noted that some existing staff had transferred to the unit and that a recruitment competition was currently underway for additional staff.
- The Board was provided with an update on actions being progressed to address craft apprenticeship waiting lists which is impacting over 10,000 apprentices. The actions include utilisation of additional capital budget to increase the number of apprenticeship workshops, the planned return of apprentices to onsite learning facilities from September 2021 and other Phase 2 specific actions currently being worked through with a technical

group established between SOLAS and the ETBs. It was agreed that a more detailed update would be provided at the September Board meeting.

4. Draft SOLAS Corporate Plan 2021-2023

Proposal

The Board was asked to discuss and approve the draft SOLAS Corporate Plan 2021-2023 subject to any agreed amendments.

Overview and Discussion

The CEO provided an overview of the draft Corporate Plan which had been circulated in advance of the meeting and noted that SOLAS is required under legislation to present to the relevant Minister a strategy for the Further Education and Training (FET) system every five years and a Corporate Plan every three years setting out the organisation's commitments. The draft Plan is built around five strategic objectives relevant to all Departments across SOLAS and also proposed new FET system targets which, once approved, will be embedded in the new Strategic Planning Agreements (SPAs) with ETBs.

The Board was advised that a core group of external stakeholders had been consulted on the Plan in addition to the Strategic Planning Committee.

It was noted that following Board approval, the Corporate Plan will be submitted to the Minister and Department for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. Should any significant changes be proposed by the Minister or the Department, the Executive will revert back to the Board.

The Board welcomed the draft plan. Following a discussion on how to promote and support greater awareness of Further Education and Training (FET) options to school leavers, the Board agreed that increased promotion of Further Education and Training (FET) options including an increase in funding to support the SOLAS communications business unit's promotional campaigns was required. The Executive agreed to bring an update on current and planned communications activity to the next Board meeting.

Board Decision

The Board discussed and approved the draft SOLAS Corporate Plan 2021-2023 subject to any agreed amendments.

5. Update on 2021 Further Education and Training (FET) Services Plan

Proposal

The Board was asked to approve an increase in the allocation to the Voluntary Secondary and Community and Comprehensive Schools and Colleges (VSCCS) and to note clarifications in respect of allocations to Education and Training Boards (ETBs) and other providers.

Overview and Discussion

At its meeting on the 29th April, 2021, the Board approved 2021 funding allocations for Further Education and Training (FET). At that meeting, a number of verbal updates, (not included in the April Board paper), were provided by the Executive which added to information provided in the Board Paper.

It was confirmed that, in order to formally propose these updates and to record the Board's decision, clarification on total allocations provided to Education and Training Boards were set out in the Board Paper before the Board today for formal approval including:

- Confirmation that €9m for staff posts/costs would be allocated as detailed in the presentation given at the April meeting. This resulted in the total ETB allocations being increased from €828,821,368 to €837,883,039.
- Clarification that a decision was made to retain €19,174,142 in relation to PLC which was in excess of the funds transferred to SOLAS by DES/DHFERIS in 2020 and 2021 for PLC. Following this retention, total initial allocations advised to the ETBs was €818,708,628 with a breakdown per ETB provided in the Board paper.
- Confirmation of the final amounts allocated to NALA which were €90,000 for briefing papers and €40,000 for an awareness campaign.
- Confirmation of final funding to Accounting Technicians Ireland of €341,137 for lead provider funding for 2019 and collaborating provider funding for 2019 and 2020. It was noted that this funding was not previously presented to the Board for approval.

Back To Education Initiative Grants (BTEI) to Voluntary Secondary and Community and Comprehensive Schools (VSCCS) and Colleges

The Board was provided with an update on developments post-approval and Board approval was sought for an increase in funding to €41,889 for BTEI activity in Gorey Community School following the transfer of some of the provision previously delivered under the PLC programme to BTEI.

The Board was advised that a further update on funding would be provided at the September 2021 Board meeting at mid-term review stage.

Board Decision

The Board approved an increase in the allocation to the Voluntary Secondary and Community and Comprehensive Schools and Colleges (VSCCS) specifically to Gorey Community School.

The Board also noted: -

- Clarifications provided in relation to Education and Training Board Allocations for staff posts/cost and PLC funding.
- Clarification provided in relation to funding approved for the National Adult Literacy Agency.
- Clarification provided in relation to allocations to Accounting Technicians Ireland.

6. SOLAS Further Education and Training (FET) Capital Budget 2021

Proposal

The Board was asked to note an update on 2021 FET Capital Funding activities.

Overview and Discussion

At its 29th March 2021 meeting, the Board approved the SOLAS Capital Funding Budget 2021, an overall allocation of €33.0m, of which €32.5m was allocated to cover ETB capital requirements and €0.5m to cover SOLAS capital requirements.

The Board was provided with an overview of the more detailed capital appraisal process put in place in 2020 including the need for approval by the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) and the inclusion of consultant's reports setting out full costs for projects, and Buildings Condition Reports where necessary. It was noted that following approval, capital projects enter a capital funding pipeline with three decision gates and that costs for projects may increase/decrease during this process.

The Board was provided with a summary of Capital Funding Streams including:

- **Devolved Capital Funding Stream** for the most urgent infrastructural requirements for which the Board approved an allocation of €8.045m in April 2021.
- **Emergency Health and Safety Works Stream** for urgent health and safety requirements of ETBs during 2021. €3m has been allocated to this stream in 2021 and the Board has approved six applications under it to the end of June 2021.
- **Apprenticeship Funding Stream** - €10m has been allocated to this stream in 2021 for additional training facilities and equipment that can be granted in the shortest timeframe possible in order to address current waiting lists for craft apprenticeship.
- **Strategic Infrastructure Upgrade & Expansion Grant Stream** - ETBs will soon be invited to submit applications for projects to be funded in 2021-2022.
- **Leased Properties** with consideration being given to how lease application processes for FET properties can best be managed.
- **FET Capital Estates Project** - For the first time in 2021, the FET sector were surveyed on their capital stock of over 450 properties which will assist in decision making for individual ETB funding requests in.

It was noted that a FET Capital and Property Working Group, chaired by SOLAS, comprising representatives of ETBs FET & OSD Directorates, ETBI and DFHERIS has been established to oversee the processes around the application for funding for FET capital projects in ETBs.

The Board was provided with details of total funding for all funding streams that are currently in the Capital Funding Pipeline and funding requisitioned to date. Total funding allocated for the completion of 2020 projects is €9,159,626. Funding allocated for the completion of 2021 projects, plus funding allocated to the Devolved, Apprenticeship and Emergency Health and Safety Funding Streams is €23,109,926. Overall, the 2021/22 Funding Pipeline is costed at €32,271,552. To date €8,207,136 of this funding has been requisitioned.

The Board was asked to note and approve an increase of €42,565.19 for Emergency Lighting for Cork College of Commerce, Cork ETB. Following the Board's approval of this project by written procedure on 6th July 2021, the original tenderer for the project withdrew from the process so the next available tender was accepted.

The Board noted the update and encouraged the progression of as many projects as possible before year end in order to fully utilise the capital budget in 2021.

The Chairperson requested the Executive to have a reserve list of projects in place in the event that planned 2020/21 projects do not proceed.

Board Decision

The Board noted the update on 2021 FET Capital Funding activities.

The Board also approved the additional capital expenditure of €42,256.19 for emergency health and safety funding for an Emergency Lighting project in Cork College of Commerce, Cork ETB.

7. Software and Courseware Contracts for Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL) in Further Education and Training (FET)

Proposal

The Board was asked to approve software supports for Further Education and Training (FET) including eCollege, as follows, by: -

- Entering into a three-year minimum volume enterprise level agreement (ETLA) for Adobe products to support teaching and learning in digital design across eCollege, ETBs and Voluntary and Community schools.

- Approving the purchase of Adobe Creative Cloud licenses and associated products from Micromail, the sole supplier of platinum reselling services from Adobe for the Irish market, under year 1 (Aug 2021 – Sept 2022) of the proposed ETLA.

The Board was also asked to approve the following in relation to courseware supports for FET including eCollege:

- An increase in the maximum lifetime cost of courseware framework 2 created under tender 135175 from €800,000 (inc. VAT) as approved in 2018, to €2,165,336 (inc. VAT)

Overview and Discussion

The Board was provided an overview on the two proposed contracts. With regard to the software contract, SOLAS was proposing to enter into a central agreement for Adobe Creative Cloud products which would enable FET locations to control and administer the licenses locally. The new contract with Mircomail would operate from September 2021 to August 2024 based on a fixed annual purchase. The Board was advised that by contracting Mircomail, this agreement would achieve savings to the FET sector of at least €2,881,944 per annum, or €8,645,832 over three years.

The Board was advised of the background to the proposed increase in the maximum lifetime cost of the courseware framework which was being sought in response to on-going increased demand. Three providers: ICS, Prodigy Learning and Practice Labs operate under this courseware framework and the increase will not affect the approved budget for 2021.

The Board welcomed the update and sought assurances that the proposed three-year ELTA with Mircomail was fully compliant with public sector procurement guidelines. In response to a query the Board was advised that Adobe had confirmed that Mircomail was the only authorised platinum reseller for Ireland.

Board Decision

The Board, subject to the confirmation that SOLAS is fully compliant with procurement procedures, approved the following: -

- Entering into a 3-year (August 2021 to September 2024) ETLA via Micromail for Adobe Creative Cloud Licences on the basis of purchasing a minimum of 9,064 licences per annum.
- The purchase of licences under year 1 (Aug21-Sept22) of the ETLA to the from Micromail, the sole supplier of platinum reselling services from Adobe for the Irish market.

The Board also approved courseware supports for FET including eCollege for:

- An increase to the maximum lifetime cost of courseware framework 2 from €800,000 (inc. VAT) over four years to €2,165,336 (inc. VAT) over four years, an increase to the lifetime cost of €1,365,336 (inc. VAT).

8. Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy Implementation

Proposal

The Board was asked to note and endorse the approach outlined in the Implementation Framework for the National Further Education and Training Strategy, 2020-2024 Future FET: Transforming Learning.

Overview and Discussion

The Board was provided with an overview of the framework for the implementation of the FET Strategy 2020-2024 which was launched by Minister Simon Harris in July 2020. The overview included details on the approach, implementation structures, approach to monitoring and reporting, communications plan and one-year workstream action plans for strategic priorities and enabling themes. The Board was advised that a new transformation project management office (PMO) was being put in place to manage the implementation and delivery of workstream action plans. It was also noted that the implementation framework was developed following consultation and endorsement by the Board's Strategic Planning Committee and the FET Strategy Implementation Steering Committee comprising a core group of SOLAS, DFHERIS, ETBI and QQI.

The Chair of the Strategic Planning Committee acknowledged the significant work undertaken to develop the implementation framework. The need for communications campaigns was noted and it suggested that 'learner ambassadors' should be central to promoting the learner perspective and could be progressed through the National Further Education and Training (FET) Learner Forum.

The Board welcomed the update and endorsed the approach outlined.

Board Decision

The Board noted and endorsed the approach outlined in the FET Strategy 2020 – 2024 Implementation Framework.

9. Update on Skills to Advance Supports for Enterprise, Employees and Skills

Proposal

The Board was asked to discuss the update on the implementation of the Skills to Advance (STA) policy initiative and the proposed strategic actions for 2021-2022.

The STA Report comprised four sections; (i) background information, (ii) Summary of implementation supports, performance targets and employee profile to date (iii) outline of initiatives underway to increase the scale and impact of Skills to Advance and (iv) an overview of strategic actions planned for 2021-2022.

Overview and Discussion

The 2018-2021 Further Education and Training Policy Framework for Skills Development for People in Employment, Supporting Working Lives and Enterprise Growth in Ireland, promoted as the 'Skills to Advance' initiative, was launched in September 2018 and rolled out by the 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs).

Due to time constraints on the day, the Board was provided with a short presentation which focused on current achievements and future ambition of the Skills to Advance Initiative. Following discussion, the Board agreed that the paper would be further considered at the September Board meeting.

10. Adult Literacy for Life (ALL)

Proposal

The Board was asked to note an update on progress in developing the Adult Literacy for Life (ALL) 10-Year Adult Literacy Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy to date and endorse the final Strategy document.

Overview and Discussion

Due to time constraints on the day, it was agreed that the Board would note the update as per the Board paper and the most recent version of the Strategy which had been circulated to Board members.

Further discussion of the Strategy would be considered after its launch in September 2021.

Board Decision

The Board noted the progress on developing the Adult Literacy For Life (ALL) Strategy: A 10-year strategy for adult literacy, numeracy and digital Literacy in Ireland and endorsed the Strategy.

11. 2020 Staff Engagement Survey Results and Action Plans

Proposal

The Board was asked to note an update on the outcome from the 2020 Staff Engagement Survey, together with an overview of proposed actions for the remainder of 2021.

Overview and Discussion

Due to time constraints on the day, it was agreed that this item would be considered at the September Board meeting.

**12. SOLAS Finance Report
For the six-month period to 25th June 2021**

Proposal

The Board was asked to note the SOLAS Finance Report for the six-month period to 25th June 2021.

Overview and Discussion

The Board paper set out the normal monthly update on expenditure compared with income for the six-month period to 25th June 2021.

Total expenditure for the period was €457.106m compared with a budget of €466.368m resulting in an underspend of €9.262m or 2%. Most of this variance is related to the Apprenticeship Incentivisation Scheme, please see below.

Further updates included: -

- Apprenticeship Incentivisation Grants were underspent by €7.5m against a year-to-date budget of €11.0m.
- Three phases of Non-Capital Grants to Education and Training Boards (ETBs) amounting to €409.027m have been paid to date. The first phase of Devolved Capital Grants amounting to €7.070m was paid to the ETBs in June and was included in the report.
- SOLAS actual direct costs were under the year-to-date budget by €0.6m while Operational Costs were under budget by €1.0m.

Board Decision

The Board noted the Finance Report for the six-month period to 29th June 2021.

13. Board Committees and Advisory Committees

1. Committee & Advisory Committee - Update from Chairpersons

Due to time constraints on the day, Board Committee and Advisory Committee Chairpersons were asked to report on any items of significance with no items arising.

2. Committee & Advisory Committee - Minutes

(i) Strategic Planning Committee

Minutes – Tuesday, 11th May 2021

The Board noted the minutes of the Strategic Planning Committee meeting of Tuesday, 11th May 2021.

(ii) National Apprenticeship Advisory Committee

Minutes – Tuesday, 9th March 2021

The Board noted the minutes of the National Apprenticeship Advisory Committee meeting held on Tuesday, 9th March, 2021.

14. Any Other Business

None

15. Date of Next Meeting

The next meeting was scheduled to take place on Tuesday, 14th September 2021.

APPENDIX 1



Time: 10.00am – 1.30pm

Venue: MS Teams

Board of SOLAS Meeting

A G E N D A

Note: Declaration of Conflict of Interest

- * 1. Minutes
 - (i) Draft Minutes – No. 067 – Tuesday, 1st June, 2021
 - (ii) Meeting Note (for publication) - No. 067 – Tuesday, 1st June, 2021

- 2. Matters Arising

Decision Item (for approval by written procedure)

Approval of Capital Investment for emergency health and safety works in three Education and Training Boards

- * 3. Report from Chief Executive Officer

DECISION ITEMS

- * 4. (Draft) SOLAS Corporate Plan 2021-2023
- * 5. Update on 2021 Further Education and Training (FET) Services Plan
- * 6. SOLAS Further Education and Training (FET) Capital Budget 2021 Update
- * 7. Software and Courseware Contracts for Technology Enhanced Learning in Further Education and Training (FET)

DISCUSSION ITEMS

- * 8. *Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy Implementation*
- * 9. *Update on Skills to Advance Supports for Enterprise, Employees and Skills*

INFORMATION ITEMS

- * 10. Adult Literacy for Life (ALL)
10 Year Adult Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy
- * 11. *2020 Staff Engagement Survey Results and Action Plans*
- * 12. SOLAS Finance Report
For the six-month period to 25th June, 2021
- * 13. Board Committees and Advisory Committees
 - (1) Committee & Advisory Committee - Update from Chairpersons
 - (2) Committee & Advisory Committee - Minutes
 - (i) Strategic Planning Committee
Minutes – Tuesday, 11th May 2021
 - (ii) National Apprenticeship Advisory Committee
Minutes – Tuesday, 9 March 2021
- 14. *Any Other Business*
- 15. *Date of Next Meeting*

* *(Denotes Paper)*