

**SOLAS – Further Education and Training Authority**  
**Ordinary Board Meeting No. 067**  
**Tuesday, 1<sup>st</sup> June, 2021**  
**Meeting Note**

- Present:
- Mr. S. Aylward - Chairman
  - Mr. A. Brownlee – Chief Executive Officer
  - Mr. S. Burke
  - Ms. P. Carey
  - Ms. O. Coughlan
  - Mr. P. Cremmins
  - Mr. P. J. Dwyer
  - Mr. D.J. Loftus
  - Ms. Y. McNulty
  - Ms. N. O’Reilly
  - Ms. C. Sheridan
- Mr. C.J. Dunne - SOLAS Executive
- Dr. M-L Trant - SOLAS Executive
- Ms. E. Devery - SOLAS Committee Secretariat
- Mr. A. McGrath - SOLAS Advisory Committee Secretariat
- Ms. S. O’Neill - SOLAS Committee Secretariat
- Mr. J. Roe - SOLAS Committee Secretariat
- Ms. A. Walshe - SOLAS Committee Secretariat
- Apologies:
- Ms. C. Munro - Board Member
  - Ms. N. White - SOLAS Executive
- In attendance:
- Ms. M. Walshe - Secretary
  - Ms. T. Dunne - Board Secretariat
- Mr. D. Smith - SOLAS
- Ms. M. Walsh - SOLAS
- Ms. M. Oonan - SOLAS
- Ms. S. Dunlop - SOLAS
- Mr. P. Seery - SOLAS
- Mr. D. Lamont - SOLAS
- Ms. M. Lyons - SOLAS
- Ms. C. Ni Fhloinn - SOLAS
- Mr. G. Gasparro - SOLAS.

### **Conflict of Interest**

There were no conflict of interests arising.

### **1. Minutes**

#### **(i) Draft Minutes – No. 066 – Thursday, 29<sup>th</sup> April, 2021**

The Board approved the draft Minutes of Board meeting No. 066 held on Thursday, 29<sup>th</sup> April, 2021.

#### **(ii) Meeting Note (for publication) - No. 066 – Thursday 29<sup>th</sup> April, 2021**

The Board approved the draft meeting note for Meeting No. 066 – Thursday, 29<sup>th</sup> April, 2021, for publication on the SOLAS website.

### **2. Matters Arising**

#### **Meeting with Minister for Apprenticeship Action Plan**

The Chairperson noted the meeting with the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, Simon Harris TD and Department officials on Thursday 6<sup>th</sup> May, 2021 to discuss the Apprenticeship Action Plan.

There were no other matters arising.

### **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: -

- An update on the planning underway for a phased return of staff to Castleforbes House, once guidelines allow, with a draft hybrid working policy in development.
- An overview of current onsite FET activity and planning for a significant increase of on-site activity from September 2021.
- Work underway to address waiting lists for off-the-job training for craft apprentices including capacity increases, an adapted delivery approach for phase 2 and competency assessments for phase 5 apprentices waiting nine months or more for phase 6 training.
- Agreement on the overall approach to FET strategy implementation by the Strategic Planning Committee and the FET Strategy Implementation Steering Group. An update on progress made since the Strategy was launched was also provided.
- The finalisation of the Adult Literacy and Numeracy Strategy with a final version to be circulated to the Board ahead of its official publication and launch.
- Work underway to ensure a more consistent and universal transition approach between FET and Higher Education with a partnership initiative between DFHERIS, SOLAS, HEA and QQI to examine a potential call for

interested ETBs and Higher Education Institutions to commence co-design and delivery of programmes.

- Engagement with the Department of An Taoiseach, DFHERIS and MANDATE around the establishment of a €3m reskilling support fund for workers affected by the Debenhams closure.
- An update on communications activity including media coverage, ThisisFet campaign activity and participation at the Ibec/NAPD 'TY Talks21' event.

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

The Board was provided with an update on progress against the 2021 Business Plan and the SOLAS Balanced Scorecard with details of KPIs achieved across the five business objectives including receipt of the audit certificate from the C&AG, growth of employee participation in the Skills to Advance initiative and the rolling out a performance review and development system with an associated coaching programme for all staff.

The CEO also reported on actions to address two 'red flag' areas including 'widening participation' and 'reforming apprenticeship which are being progressed.

#### SOLAS retirements

The CEO reported the recent retirement of two SOLAS Directors. The Secretary was asked to convey the appreciation of the Board to both directors for their contribution to the work of SOLAS.

The Board welcomed the CEO report and the update on progress against the Business Plan. Following discussion on possible challenges experienced by learners during the time of Covid-19, the Board requested that the Executive consider potential barriers to participation, including childcare, and how the ETBs might be able to assist in this regard by providing mechanisms to increase participation.

#### **4. Procurement of Service Provider to deliver Safe Pass training**

##### Proposal

The Board was asked to consider and approve an approach for the procurement of a service provider to deliver online Safe Pass training over a period of four years.

##### Overview and Discussion

The Board was provided with a status report on the current position and on progress made in developing an online Safe Pass delivery option for renewals.

The Board was advised that the team were now at the point where a detailed specification had been prepared for how the online Safe Pass delivery option should operate and that it would require the direct support of an external

provider. It was noted that prior to any expenditure in this area, approval is firstly needed from the Digital Government Oversight Unit in the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and an application had been submitted.

#### Board Decision

The Board approved the recommendation to proceed with an open tender process to procure a suitable service provider to deliver an online Safe Pass option.

### **5. Security Services Contract Tender**

#### Proposal

The Board was asked to approve an addition to the 2021 Procurement Plan to include a proposed tender for the SOLAS Security Services Contract.

#### Overview and Discussion

On 11<sup>th</sup> February, 2021, the Board approved the 2021 Procurement Plan which included 65 items totalling €23.5m proposed for tender in 2021.

The Board was advised that the Security Services Contract for Castleforbes House expires on 1<sup>st</sup> May 2022. However, taking into account the timelines required to complete the tender process, Board approval is required to add the proposed tender to the 2021 Procurement Plan.

#### Board Decision

The Board approved an addition to the 2021 Procurement Plan to include a proposed tender for the SOLAS Security Services Contract over a four-year period.

### **6. SOLAS Car Parking Licence Agreement**

#### Proposal

The Board was asked to approve the securing of 30 additional parking spaces for SOLAS staff at Parkrite Ltd Car Park, Commons Street, Dublin 1, for a period of two years.

#### Overview and Discussion

At its April, 2021 meeting, the Board agreed, in principle, to the Executive securing up to 30 additional parking spaces for SOLAS staff adjacent to Castleforbes House. These spaces were in addition to the 21 current spaces in the basement car park of SOLAS' Dublin 1 premises.

The Board was provided with an update on progress since the last meeting and advised that SOLAS had sought quotations from local Car Parking providers with the most cost-effective option being from Parkrite Ltd. It was noted that SOLAS staff will make an agreed contribution to the cost of the parking.

### Board Decision

The Board approved the securing of 30 additional parking spaces for SOLAS staff at Parkrite Ltd Car Park, Commons Street, Dublin 1, for a period of two years.

## **7. Learning and Development – Award of Contracts**

### Proposal

The Board was asked to approve the awarding of contracts for a Learning and Development Framework to four companies under Lot 1 and to four companies under Lot 2 - for the specified values using the cascade mechanism.

### Overview and Discussion

The Board was provided with an overview of the paper circulated ahead of the meeting and noted that, in July 2020, the Board approved a proposal to tender for a Learning and Development Framework as part of the SOLAS People Strategy 2020-2024. Following the meeting, a tender was issued in March, 2021 comprising two Lots - (Lot 1): Accredited training, and (Lot 2): Non-Accredited Training, using the cascade mechanism.

The Board was advised that ten submissions were received and evaluated and that the Board paper detailed the proposal to award contracts to four named companies under (Lot 1): Accredited Training and to four named companies under (Lot 2): Non-Accredited Training, for specified amounts. The contracts will run for an initial period of 24 months with a possible annual rollover for up to a further 24 months.

### Board Decision

The Board approved the award of a Tender Contract for a Learning and Development Framework to four companies under Lot 1 and to four companies under Lot 2 - for specified values.

## **8. ICT Services – C#.Net Developer – Award of Contract**

### Proposal

The Board was asked to approve the award of contract for a C#.Net Developer procured through a mini competition under an existing Framework Agreement for the Supply of ICT Contractors for SOLAS ICT Department. The contract is for 480 days, which roughly equates to two calendar years.

### Overview and Discussion

The Board was provided with an overview of the proposal and advised that in February 2021, the Board approved the annual procurement plan which included a mini competition for a C#.Net developer for a period of 480 days (approx. 2 years). A mini competition involving the five companies on the SOLAS Framework Agreement for the Supply of ICT Contractors for SOLAS ICT Department was run with three candidates put forward. The submissions were

evaluated, and the candidate proposed by SABEO Contracting Services was selected based on the selection criteria and skill set required.

The Board was advised that the developer appointed will primarily be working on the Programme and Learner Support System (PLSS), an ICT system for FET providers to manage and administer the programmes and courses they offer and to manage the application process and learner lifecycle.

Board Decision

The Board approved the award of the contract to SABEO Contracting Services. The contract is for 480 days, which roughly equates to two calendar years.

**9. Legal Services - Award of Contracts**

Proposal

The Board was asked to approve the award of contracts for legal services to SOLAS over a period of four years using the cascade mechanism.

Overview and Discussion

The Board was provided with an overview of the proposal and advised that in February 2021, the Board approved the annual procurement plan which included a tender for legal services for SOLAS. A request for tender issued in February 2021 and seven responses were received and evaluated resulting in a proposal to award contracts, using the cascade mechanism, to: -

William Fry (Ranked 1)  
Beauchamps (Ranked 2)

The appointments, commencing in July 2021 will run for an initial period of 24 months, with a potential annual rollover up to a further 24 months. Expenditure will be dependent on the volume of legal activity and the appointment will be subject to annual review. The Board was advised that the proposal represented a significant reduction on the value of previous contracts, as detailed in the Board paper.

The Board welcomed the proposal and provided feedback including a suggestion any future tender include a “legal costs account” to assist with cost control. In response to a query, the Board was advised that there was no monthly retainer element included in the proposed contracts.

Board Decision

The Board approved the William Fry (Ranked 1) and Beauchamps (Ranked 2) in respect of the appointment of Legal Advisers to SOLAS using the cascade mechanism.

The appointment is for an initial period of 24 months with a possible annual rollover up to a further 24 months. The appointment will be subject to annual review.

## **10. Innovation and Updates on SOLAS Data and Research**

### Proposal

The Board was asked to note ongoing innovation in the areas of SOLAS research and data analytics and the role of the internal teams in both supporting and driving the SOLAS agenda, as well as in wider national social and economic areas including Brexit.

### Overview and Discussion

The Board was provided with an overview of the work of the Research, Data and Strategic Engagement team during the pandemic which supported the FET system, FET stakeholders and the wider economic skills landscape.

The Board was advised that the Skills and Labour Market Research Unit (SLMRU) had developed targeted analysis and research, at regional and national level, in collaboration with key labour market forums and agencies to ensure that the FET system was suitably responsive to the evolving environment. In addition, research papers on the future world of work, part time workers in Ireland and Brexit had been produced.

The Data Analytics team supported the agenda for transformation across SOLAS and the FET system and published reports into outcomes on FET learners, including a project on Women in Further Education and Training (FET) which involved participants discussing their experiences and journey.

The presentation included a video on a new “Smart Choices” platform which is an inter-active labour market information database.

The Board welcomed the presentation and the range of valuable data analytic information produced by the Team to support the ambition of the Further Education and Training Strategy, in particular the new Smart Choices database which is currently under development.

### Board Decision

The Board noted the ongoing activities and innovation within the areas of research and data analytics in SOLAS.

## **11. Update on ICT Security**

### Proposal

The Board was asked to note the update on SOLAS ICT Security

### Overview and Discussion

The Board was provided with an overview of the IT Security measures that SOLAS has in place. The Board was advised that in response to recent cyber-attacks in the public sector, the National Cyber Security Centre had issued an updated advisory including a list of priority actions for state bodies with SOLAS having controls in place to address each of them.

An overview of the recommendations and actions taken following two recent internal audits in the ICT area was also provided. It was noted that the findings had indicated that SOLAS has ‘a good control environment to ensure the confidentiality, integrity and availability of its critical applications and IT systems’. It was also noted that a series of online training programmes had been undertaken by all SOLAS staff.

The Board was advised that despite having robust systems in place, SOLAS will not be complacent with regard to ICT security matters.

The Board welcomed the status update on SOLAS ICT security initiatives in terms of development, in progress or implemented. Following a discussion, it was suggested that a further ICT audit should be considered during 2021 and it was agreed that a further update on the area would be provided to the Board later in the year.

### Board Decision

The Board noted the update on SOLAS ICT Security.

## **12. Strategic Development of eCollege 2021/2022 – Update and Proposals for Discussion**

### Proposal

The Board was asked to note and discuss the Board paper which aimed to further develop the strategic agenda for eCollege.

### Overview and Discussion

The Board was provided with an overview of the paper circulated ahead of the meeting including details of current eCollege operations, its core features and an outline of key actions taken to improve the service over 2020-2021. The Board was advised that the Future FET: Transforming Learning Strategy outlines an ambition for eCollege to develop on several fronts including becoming a central location for online and blended study options across FET, defining an approach to FET content development and supporting ETBs in online and blended learning delivery. The ambition is to transform the reach,



range, and quality of the service to learners, optimising the role of eCollege in Future FET.

The Board was asked to consider a number of strategic actions proposed for the next 18 months under each of the areas including expanding access to other FET learners, new course offerings, strategic partnerships to provide new course content, enhancements to data infrastructure and the application of a user centred approach to service improvements.

The Board welcomed the update and advised that the Executive has the support of the Board to progress the future strategy for eCollege. In response to a query regarding completions, the Board was advised that a report on 2020 starters who completed their courses in 2021 will be presented to the Board at a meeting later in the year.

#### Board Decision

The Board noted and discussed the proposed strategic actions for eCollege, aimed at ensuring service continuity while balancing challenges of supply, quality, cost, and complexity.

### **13. SOLAS Finance Report For the four-month period to 30<sup>th</sup> April, 2021**

#### Proposal

The Board was asked to note the SOLAS Finance Report for the four-month period to 30<sup>th</sup> April, 2021.

#### Overview and discussion

The Board was advised that the SOLAS overhead budget had been increased by €260,000 to provide for an increased budget in the ICT Department. This increase took account of an ICT contract already approved by the Board and the balance used, as far as possible, to further reduce the risk of a security breach.

The Board was then presented with the normal monthly update on expenditure compared with income for the four-month period to 30<sup>th</sup> April, 2021.

Total expenditure for the period was €282.850m and €6.818m behind the year-to-date budget.

Further updates included: -

- Two phases of Grants to ETBs amounting to €255.802m have been paid to date.
- Apprenticeship Incentivisation Grants was underspent by €5.6m against a year-to-date budget of €8.1m.

- SOLAS actual direct costs were under the year-to-date budget by €0.6m while SOLAS Operational Costs were under budget by circa €0.6m. The Board was advised that some planned expenditure, in communications and other overheads, had been deferred.

#### Board Decision

The Board noted the Finance Report for the four-month period to 30th April, 2021 and approved the change to the 2021 Budget.

The Board also noted and approved the changes to the 2021 Budget which were notified to the Board on the day.

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

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

##### **Audit and Risk Committee**

The Secretary provided an update on behalf of the Chairperson and advised that the Committee had not met since the April 2021 Board meeting. It was noted that the Chairperson had requested that their appreciation and that of the Audit and Risk Committee be conveyed to the SOLAS Finance Team following the issuing of the audit certificate by the C&AG.

##### **Strategic Planning Committee**

The Chairperson advised that the minutes of the 15<sup>th</sup> April, 2021 meeting, [item 067.13(2) refers] details the Committee's discussion on the Adult Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy, the SOLAS Corporate Plan and the Further Education and Training Strategy.

At its meeting on Tuesday, 11<sup>th</sup> May 2020, the Committee discussed the Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy Implementation Plan. An additional meeting of the Committee is proposed for Tuesday, 29<sup>th</sup> June, 2021, to discuss the Corporate Plan and to continue its discussion on the FET Strategy Implementation plan ahead of their presentation to the Board at the 13<sup>th</sup> July, 2021 meeting.

##### **Workforce and Organisational Development Committee**

The Chairperson confirmed that the Committee had not met since the April, 2021 Board meeting. The next scheduled meeting will take place on Wednesday, 16<sup>th</sup> June, 2020 and an update on the outcome of that meeting will be provided at the next Board meeting in July, 2021.

##### **National Apprenticeship Advisory Committee**

The Chairperson confirmed that the Committee had not met since the April 2021 Board meeting. However, progress since the last Committee meeting was noted which included, the launch by the Minister of the new Apprenticeship Action Plan and a number of meetings the Chairperson attended with members of the SOLAS executive and Industry representatives.

The Board will be updated on progress at its July meeting.

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

**Strategic Planning Committee  
Minutes – 15<sup>th</sup> April, 2021**

The Board noted the Minutes of the Strategic Planning Committee meeting held on Thursday, 15<sup>th</sup> April, 2021.

**15. Any Other Business**

Update on Apprenticeship

In response to a query on the number of apprenticeship types currently available the Board was advised that 61 apprenticeships currently available with more in the pipeline for development during 2021 and early 2022.

**16. Date of Next Meeting**

It was noted that next Board meeting was scheduled to take place on Tuesday, 13<sup>th</sup> July, 2021.

**APPENDIX 1**



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**Time: 10.00am – 1.30pm**  
**Venue: MS Teams**

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**Board of SOLAS Meeting**

**A G E N D A**

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**Note: Declaration of Conflict of Interest**

- \* 1. Minutes
  - (i) Draft Minutes – No. 066 – Thursday, 29<sup>th</sup> April, 2021
  - (ii) Meeting Note (for publication) - No. 066 – Thursday, 29<sup>th</sup> April, 2021
- 2. Matters Arising  
Meeting with Minister re Apprenticeship Action Plan
- \* 3. Report from Chief Executive Officer

**DECISION ITEMS**

- \* 4. Procurement of Service Provider to deliver Safe Pass training
- \* 5. Security Services Contract Tender
- \* 6. SOLAS Car Parking Licence Agreement
- \* 7. Learning and Development – Award of Contracts
- \* 8. ICT Services – C#.Net Developer – Award of Contract
- \* 9. Legal Services - Award of Contracts

**DISCUSSION ITEMS**

- \* 10. Innovation and Updates on SOLAS Data and Research
- 11. Update on ICT Security
- \* 12. Strategic Development of eCollege 2021/2022 – Update and Proposals for Discussion

**INFORMATION ITEMS**

- \* 13. SOLAS Finance Report  
For the four-month period to 30<sup>th</sup> April, 2021
- \* 14. Board Committees and Advisory Committee
  - (i) Committee & Advisory Committee - Update from Chairpersons
  - (ii) Committee & Advisory Committee - Minutes  
  
Strategic Planning Committee  
Minutes – 15<sup>th</sup> April, 2021
- 15. Any Other Business
- 16. Date of Next Meeting

\* (Denotes Paper)