

SOLAS – Further Education and Training Authority
Ordinary Board Meeting No. 064
Thursday, 11TH February 2021
Meeting Note

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
Mr. D.J. Loftus
Ms. Y. McNulty
Ms. C. Munro
Ms. N. O'Reilly
Ms. C. Sheridan

Mr C.J. Dunne - SOLAS Executive
Ms. 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. O'Connor - SOLAS
Mr. A. McGrath - SOLAS
Mr. P. Sheridan - SOLAS
Mr. G. Gasparro - SOLAS
Ms. U. Matthews - SOLAS
Ms. M. Walsh - SOLAS
Ms. R. Doherty - SOLAS.

Note: Declaration of Conflict of Interest

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

There were no conflicts arising.

1. Minutes

(i) Draft Minutes - No. 063 – Thursday, 10th December 2020

The Minutes of Board meeting No. 063 held on Thursday, 10th December 2020 were approved by the Board and signed by the Chairman.

(ii) Meeting Note (for publication) – No. 063 – 10th December 2020

The Board approved the meeting note for Meeting No. 063 – Thursday, 10th December 2020, for publication on the SOLAS website subject to some minor adjustments.

2. Matters Arising

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 included in the Report and highlighted on the day included:

- The impact of the Covid-19 restrictions on the FET System including:
 - the move to almost entirely online delivery of FET courses due to Level 5 restrictions.
 - the onsite induction and subsequent move to online training for two new Phase 2 apprentice groups in early January.
 - engagement with the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) and other stakeholders on plans for a phased return to practical training and assessment components for apprenticeship and other essential practical education and training.
 - the CEO advised the Board that the Covid-19 crisis had significantly exacerbated an existing issue of the physical capacity of the apprenticeship system, in both FET and HE, to accommodate demand from craft apprentices for off-the-job training. In response to this, it is expected that additional funding will be forthcoming from DFHERIS to support the expansion of apprenticeship capacity.

Once granted, a process for disbursement will be undertaken and Board approval will be sought by written procedure, if necessary, before the March 2021 meeting.

- The impact of Covid-19 restrictions and continued remote working on SOLAS staff in particular for those with childcare, home schooling and caring responsibilities. Steps taken to manage this include a commitment to flexibility around working hours, the right to disconnect, director engagement with teams and well-being initiatives.
- An update on the impact of the Mitigating Against Educational Disadvantage Fund which resulted in €5.8m being allocated by the 16 ETBs, to more than 500 Community Education projects. National and local promotional campaigns to promote the successes of the fund are currently being rolled out.
- A progress report on the development of the New 10 Year Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy including details on the development of an evidence base which included bi-lateral meetings, an omnibus poll, focus groups, one-to-one interviews and outreach work and input from 123 organisations and 450 individual responses to the consultation phase. Work to develop themes and ideas based on the research is now being advanced with the Technical Advisory Committee and the Ministerial chaired Inter-Departmental Committee.
- An update on the development of an Online Delivery Option for Safe Pass with options being explored including a core base of self-directed learning and an online exam delivered in test centres around the country. The Board will be updated on progress at the March 2021 meeting.
- An update on a promotional activity including a campaign to promote FET as a post second level option to students, parents and guidance counsellors to coincide with CAO deadlines.

The CEO also updated the Board on the new Apprenticeship Action Plan which is being developed by DFHERIS and noted initial feedback. A further update and discussion on the matter would be facilitated at the March 2021 Board meeting.

4. Capital Funding Allocations 2021

Proposal

That Board approve three capital funding allocations including two allocations to Kerry ETB and one to Mayo, Sligo, Leitrim ETB as outlined in the Board paper and presented on the day.

Overview

The Board was provided with background to the proposals as set out in the Board Paper and the rationale for the awarding of capital funding for the three projects including:

Block F (Ansaldo Building), Monavalley, Tralee, Co. Kerry

The acquisition of part of an existing building already leased by Kerry Education and Training Board (comprising 10,000 sq. Ft.) which would facilitate the further expansion of training options offered by Kerry Education and Training Board (KETB).

Purchase of Unit 1, Listowel Business Development Centre, Listowel Business Park, Listowel, Co. Kerry

The acquisition of the proposed property which would enable KETB to significantly expand its FET provision services. The cost of developing the premises was estimated at €480,000. A separate funding application for the development work will be brought to the Board for consideration in April.

Additional capital funding of €314,000 for hospitality training facilities in Sligo Training Centre

In April 2018, the Board approved capital funding of €315,000 for hospitality training facilities in Sligo Training Centre. Following a protracted and delayed planning process, the tender competition was completed in 2019. However, the winning quote was considerably higher than the original figure of €315,000.

In August 2019, Mayo-Sligo-Leitrim ETB confirmed that additional capital of €314,000 would be required in 2020 for the completion of the project but the application was not submitted until 2021. The Board was advised that the project will be progressed to completion once the current Covid-19 building restrictions are lifted.

Discussion

The Board welcomed the update on disbursement of capital funding to ETBs to develop and upgrade FET facilities through increased capital investment.

Board Decision

The Board approved the allocation of capital funding to Kerry Education and Training Board of €750,000 for the purchase of Block F (Ansaldo Building), Monavalley, Tralee, Co Kerry.

The Board approved the allocation of capital funding to Kerry Education and Training Board of €480,000 for the purchase of Unit 1, Listowel Business Development Centre, Listowel Business Park, Listowel, Co. Kerry.

The Board approved additional capital funding of €314,000 to Mayo-Sligo-Leitrim Education and Training Board for the completion of hospitality training facilities in Sligo Training Centre.

5. Apprenticeship

**Amendment Order to an existing Industrial Training Order
Industrial Training (Process Analytics Industry) (Amendment) Order 2021**

Proposal

That the Board approved the Amendment Order - Industrial Training (Process Analytics Industry) (Amendment) Order 2021, authorise the Chair and CEO to execute the order and authorise the CEO to oversee any matters arising during the final steps of the process leading to enactment of the Amendment Order as a statutory instrument.

Overview

The Board received a presentation on the paper and was advised that SOLAS had already created legislation designating the process analytics industry, and that by means of an Amendment Order, the Executive was seeking to expand the scope of that legislation to allow for the designation of additional related activities in the industry. It was noted that the proposed amendments are an expansion of the activities already designated and that there was no change to the activities previously designated in the legislation.

It was noted that thirteen bodies were consulted on the draft Industrial Training (Process Analytics Industry) (Amendment) Order 2021. The three responses received from representative organisations were duly considered and there were no modifications made to the draft ITO following the consultation process.

Board Decision

The Board approved an Amendment Order to an existing Industrial Training Order (ITO), namely, Statutory Instrument No. 200 of 2019 Industrial Training (Process Analytics Industry) Order 2019 thereby enabling the establishment of two new statutory apprenticeships (Equipment Systems Engineer, Software Solutions Architect) in the process analytics industry during 2021.

The Board authorised the SOLAS Chairman and the SOLAS Chief Executive Officer, to execute the Amendment Order on 11 Feb 2021, and authorised the Chief Executive Officer to oversee any matters arising and the final steps of the process leading to enactment of the Amendment Order as a statutory instrument.

6. Procurement Plan 2021

Proposal

That the Board approve the proposed 2021 Procurement Plan in accordance with section 8.20 of the Code of Practice for the Governance of State Bodies (2016).

Overview

The Board was advised that the proposed plan outlined all proposed tenders for goods and services necessary to deliver on the 2021 Business Plan and included six tenders at ‘work-in-progress’ stage at the end of 2020.

It was noted that the plan included 47 tenders valued at €22.1m (Appendix 1) and 17 mini-competitions from SOLAS frameworks valued at €1.4m (Appendix 2), which vary in duration from one to four years. The plan did not include planned procurement where a Sole or Tied supplier exists.

The Board was advised that the plan will be reviewed during the year and corrective action taken where necessary. It was noted that any new tender requirements that arise during the year, under the Board approval threshold of €250,000, will be added to the plan and tenders over €250,000 will be brought to the Board for approval.

Discussion

The Board noted the procurement plan for 2021. In response to a query on the regarding costs on the planned legal services tender, Mr C.J. Dunne advised the Board that SOLAS’ legal costs had reduced significantly in recent years.

Board Decision

The Board approved the proposed 2021 Procurement Plan in accordance with section 8.20 of the Code of Practice for the Governance of State Bodies (2016).

**7. SOLAS Finance Report
For the twelve-month period to 31st December 2020**

Proposal

That the Board note the SOLAS Finance Report for the twelve-month period to 31st December 2020.

Overview

The Board was advised of the year end position as at 31st December 2020 and noted that the results were reflective of a disruptive year due to Covid-19. The Board was advised that following revisions to the SOLAS budget in 2020, the final budget was €932.792m, including SOLAS capital of €0.5m.

The Board was advised that total expenditure for the year was €848.106m, giving an underspend of €84.186m or 9.0% of the annual budget. A summary of the underspend by main category was detailed in the Board paper.

The total capital budget in 2020 was €23.0m. Of this, €0.5m was allocated to SOLAS, €0.1m to Schools and Other Organisations with the balance of €22.4m allocated to ETBs. The SOLAS Capital spend was €0.303m, and actual funding to ETBs in respect of capital was €16.775m and for Schools and Other Organisations €0.1m. This represents an underspend on ETB capital of €5.6m. The SOLAS capital element was underspent by €0.2m.

It was noted that the Draft 2020 SOLAS Financial Statements will be presented at the March 2021 Board meeting.

Discussion

In response to a query, the Board was advised the original capital budget had been disbursed to ETBs in line with their requests and that savings might be accrued by individual ETBs in the coming weeks which the Board will be updated on at mid-year review stage. Furthermore, capital funds not expended in 2020 have been carried over to 2021 as completion of some projects extended beyond a one-year period.

A Board member queried if SOLAS had explored possibilities for funding under the European Union Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) Fund. Mr. Gasparro confirmed that a new ESF Operational Programme would commence in 2021 but conditions are dependent on up-front funding by the Member State with claims submitted retrospectively via the parent Department.

Board Decision

The Board noted the SOLAS Finance Report for the twelve-month period to 31st December 2020.

8. Learning Academy – Two-Year Learning & Development Strategy

Proposal

The Board endorsed Phase 1 of the Learning and Development Strategy as a key component under the SOLAS People Strategy 2020-2024.

Overview

The Board was provided with an overview of the paper and a timeline of work to be completed under the embedding phase of the Learning & Development Strategy.

The Chair of the Workforce and Organisational Development Committee welcomed the finalisation of the strategy and acknowledged the work of the People Team.

The Board welcomed the proposed approach and requested an update at the May 2021 Board meeting.

Board Decision

The Board endorsed Phase 1 of the Learning & Development Strategy as a key component under the SOLAS People Strategy 2020 – 2024 which had been approved by the Workforce Planning and Organisational Development Committee in November 2020.

9. Progress on development of a Framework for Learner Support in Further Education and Training (FET)

Proposal

That the Board note progress towards developing a framework of learner support in further education and training.

Overview

The Board was provided with an overview of work undertaken to date on the development of the framework noting that FET supports both social inclusion and access to education for the most vulnerable groups in society. The Board was advised that SOLAS, in partnership with ETBI, has developed a comprehensive resource bank, which has recently been updated, to assist ETBs in building inclusive good practice across provision.

It was noted that while there is considerable good practice in place, the approach to learner access and support is not completely consistent across ETBs or FET provision and a focus on identifying and fostering inclusion is one of three main priorities for #FutureFET: Transforming Learning, the Further Education and Training (FET Strategy 2020–2024).

Discussion

The Board welcomed the update, noting the progress and requested to be kept up to date on progress.

The CEO advised that ETBs have responsibility for the delivery of these services with SOLAS having an oversight role. The need for adequate resources to deliver these services was highlighted.

The Board was advised that their input on a framework of consistent learner support across the FET system and the coordination of the new 10-year strategy for adult literacy, numeracy and digital literacy will be sought at a future meeting.

Board Decision

The Board noted progress towards development of a framework for learner support with the recently published guidance on implementing universal design for learning in further education and training, and the comprehensive series of reports and practical guidance documents on assessment of literacy and numeracy and supports for learners with intellectual disabilities.

10. Outline Budget 2021

Exchequer and National Training Fund (NTF) Allocations.

Proposal

That the Board note the allocations as presented and note that a more detailed paper would be presented at the April 2021 Board meeting.

Overview

The Board was advised that the Board paper provided details of National Exchequer and National Training Fund Allocations to SOLAS as communicated by DFHERIS. It was noted that National Training Fund allocations are subject to Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (DPER) and Ministerial approval. Included in the Board paper was a schedule comparing the 2021 allocations with the original 2020 allocations, the revised 2020 allocations and the amount actually drawn down in 2020.

A more detailed paper, seeking the adoption of an activity and expenditure budget for 2021 will be presented to the Board in April and presented alongside the Further Education and Training (FET) Services Plan 2021 which will detail the resources required to deliver that plan.

The total amount allocated to SOLAS in 2021 is €989.324m, including capital of €33.0m. which comprises €612.883m in Exchequer funding and €376.441m in respect of the National Training Fund. When estimated other income of circa €3.676m is added, it allowed a budget of €993.0m to be set.

The combined Exchequer / NTF allocation represents an increase of circa €129.6m or 15.0% as compared with the original 2020 allocation and a €59.8m or 6.4% increase on the 2020 Revised Allocation with actual drawdown on 2020 was less than the original allocation.

The main increases in the 2021 allocation compared with the original allocation in 2020 were detailed in the Board paper.

Funding of ETB's and Other Organisations during January – April 2021

At its meeting in December 2020, the Board authorised pre-funding to grantees for the first four months of 2021 up to a limit of €256m for ETB's and €4.6m for Schools and Other Organisations to ensure continuity of service for the first four months of 2021. Allocations for 2021 are being finalised for Board approval. The first tranche of funding to ETB's of €128.0m was paid to ETBs in January and early February. When the business planning process and detailed

budgeting exercise is completed the allocations will be adjusted to match the agreed funding.

Board Decision

The Board noted the allocations as presented, for information purposes only. The Board also noted that more detailed papers are planned for presentation at the Board meetings in March and April, outlining the cost of the SOLAS Further Education and Training (FET) Plan and the resources required and seeking formal approval to implement same.

11. Board Committees and Advisory Committee

Committee & Advisory Committee

(1) Update from Chair(s)

Strategic Planning Committee

The Chair of the Strategic Planning Committee reported that it met on 26th January 2021 and discussed a range of issues including the Corporate Plan (2021-2023) and the implementation of the Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy.

Workforce and Organisational Development Committee

The Chair of the Workforce and Organisational Development Committee advised that the next meeting of the Committee will be in March 2021.

National Apprenticeship Advisory Committee

The Chair of the Committee provided an update on areas discussed at a recent NAAC meeting, including on-line delivery of off-the-job training for apprentices, planning for a phased return to onsite practical training, waiting lists for off-the-job training for some apprenticeships and engagement with DFHERIS on capital funding to increase training capacity.

(2) Committee & Advisory Committee - Minutes

(i) Audit and Risk Committee

Minutes (05/20) – Tuesday, 24th November 2020

The Board noted the minutes of the Audit and Risk Committee meeting No. 05/20 held on 24th November 2020.

(ii) Strategic Planning Committee

Minutes – Monday, 30th November 2020

The Board noted the Minutes of the Strategic Planning Committee meeting held on Monday, 30th November 2020.

(iii) Workforce and Organisational Development Committee

Minutes - Tuesday, 23rd June 2020

The Board noted the (revised) minutes of the Workforce and Organisational Development Committee meeting held on 23rd June 2020.

(iv) National Apprenticeship Advisory Committee

Minutes – 8th September 2020

The Board noted the minutes of the National Apprenticeship Advisory Committee meeting held on 8th September 2020.

12. Any Other Business

There was no other business.

13. Date of Next Meeting

The next meeting is scheduled to take place online via MS Teams on Wednesday, 24th March, 2021.

Part 2

Part attendance by Minister Simon Harris TD, Minister for Further & Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science.

The Chairman, on behalf of the Board, welcomed the Minister and his officials and thanked him for attending the meeting. Minister Harris thanked the Chairman and Board for their invitation and acknowledged their work and commitment to date. The Minister also acknowledged the commitment and leadership shown by the SOLAS CEO and that of his Leadership Team noting SOLAS 'agility in responding throughout 2020 and into 2021. In particular, he noted the organisation's commitment to the delivery of Government policy, the efficiency of the disbursement of the Mitigating Against Educational Disadvantage Fund and its effectiveness in progressing initiatives with ETBs and other providers to assist and provide supports to those most in need.

The Minister and the Board discussed a range of key priority areas for SOLAS in the coming year including:

- the need for re-skilling and the upskilling of individuals who had recently lost employment as a result of Covid-19.
- the integration of all post-secondary options, including FET, on a parallel or connected system to the CAO that would clearly demonstrate the wider portfolio of tertiary education options.
- the development and rollout of the ten-year literacy, numeracy and digital literacy strategy which is being led by SOLAS.
- plans for future expansion of Apprenticeship and the recommendations in the upcoming Apprenticeship Action Plan which will be presented to Government in March 2021.

The Board welcomed the Minister's input and thanked him for his comments and commitment to Further Education and Training. On the matter of the expansion of Apprenticeship, the Minister was urged to consider a quota approach with Government bodies with no tradition of taking on apprentices. The Chairman advised that the Board would consider his input and assured the Minister and his Department of Board's and the Executive's commitment.

Part 3 Strategic Planning Session

1. SOLAS Business Plan | Three Year Corporate Plan | Strategic Priorities

The CEO set the context for the Board’s discussion on strategic priorities for SOLAS in a presentation that outlined the SOLAS Business Plan 2021, key priorities, potential quick wins and a roadmap for the development of a three-year corporate plan for SOLAS.

The key priorities outlined included:

- Leading recovery
- FET strategy implementation and new Strategic Performance Agreements
- Apprenticeship capacity
- Literacy & numeracy and digital literacy strategy
- Embedding a performance culture
- Safe Pass innovation.

The CEO advised the Board that a traffic light balanced scorecard system with a strategic focus on tracking progress would be introduced in 2021, which would measure key outcomes including:

- Driving a delivery focus
- Engaging our Stakeholders
- Living SOLAS
- Working Smarter
- Making it Count.

The Board was invited to provide input on the draft business plan, key priorities identified and objectives for the three-year Corporate Plan.

Discussion

The Chairman thanked the CEO for his presentation and invited comments from Board members on the proposals.

The Chairman thanked the Board members for their contribution and comments which the Executive will consider.

Board Decision

The Board endorsed the approach to the 2021 SOLAS Business Plan and agreed the priorities set for the organisation in 2021.

2. Board discussion on the Independent Review of the Funding Model

The Chairman welcomed the members of the independent Funding Model Review Panel: Ms. Fiona Hartley, Mr. Ted Owens and Mr. Ken Rutherford.

Proposal

The Board was asked to review progress made in undertaking an independent review of the FET funding model and provide input on how best to shape the future funding approach to ETBs to ensure that SOLAS and FET strategic priorities can be delivered.

Overview

Ms. F. Hartley presented the background to the funding model, as detailed in the Board Paper circulated in advance of the meeting, which had been developed to fulfil the ambitions set out in the 2021 SOLAS Business plan.

The Board was advised that following Board approval in 2019, an independent Funding Model Review Panel was established to review and make recommendations on the optimal future approach to funding FET. The review process was structured across four key stages: review of current model; consultation with stakeholders; options development; final reporting and progress on all stages of the process.

The proposed model comprises four core components: - Discretionary Funding, Apprenticeship, Skills for Employment and Progression (Levels 4-6), Bridging and Foundation Skills (Levels 1-3) and Core Funding allocations.

The Board was advised that a pilot project would commence shortly, and that Board views were being sought on the overall approach to future FET funding, further ways in which SOLAS and FET strategic priorities could be reflected and, what aspects should to be examined and tested during the pilot phase with ETBs.

Discussion

The Board welcomed the proposed new funding model and provided feedback for consideration. Given time constraints on the day, the Board agreed that further discussion on the model would be held at the March Board meeting.

Closing comments

The Chairman thanked the members of the Funding Model Review Panel for their presentation and agreed that the Board would discuss the matter further at its 24th March 2021 Board meeting.

The meeting concluded.

Appendix 1



Time: 9.30am – 1.00pm
Venue: Online via MSTEams

Board of SOLAS Meeting
No. 064 – Thursday, 11th February 2021

A G E N D A

<u>Part 1</u>	SOLAS Board Meeting	9.30am – 10.45am
B R E A K		10.45am – 11.00am
<u>Part 2</u>	<u>Part attendance by Minister Simon Harris TD</u> Minister for Further & Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science	11.00 am to 11.30am
<u>Part 3</u>	Strategic Planning Session	11.30 am – 1.00pm

Part 1

Note: **Declaration of Conflict of Interest**

- * 1. Minutes
 - (i) Draft Minutes - No. 063 – Thursday, 10th December 2020
 - (ii) Meeting Note (for publication) – No. 063 – 10th December 2020
- 2. Matters Arising
- * 3. Report from Chief Executive Officer

DECISION ITEMS

- * 4. Update on Capital Allocations 2021
- * 5. Apprenticeship
Amendment to existing Industrial Training Order

Industrial Training (Process Analytics Industry) – (Amendment) Order 2021

- * 6. Procurement Plan 2021

DISCUSSION ITEMS

- * 7. SOLAS Finance Report
For the 12-month period to 31st December, 2020
- * 8. Learning Academy – Two-Year Learning & Development Strategy
- * 9. Progress on development of a Framework for Learner Support in Further Education and Training (FET)

INFORMATION ITEMS

- * 10. Outline Budget 2021
Exchequer and National Training Fund (NTF) Allocations.
- * 11. Board Committees and Advisory Committee
 - (1) Committee & Advisory Committee
Update from Chair(s)
 - (2) Committee & Advisory Committee - Minutes
 - (i) Audit and Risk Committee
Minutes – Tuesday, 24th November, 2020
 - (ii) Strategic Planning Committee
Minutes – Monday, 30th November, 2020
 - (iii) Workforce and Organisational Development Committee
Minutes - Tuesday, 26th June, 2020
 - (iv) National Apprenticeship Advisory Committee
Minutes – Tuesday, 8th September, 2020
- 12. Any Other Business
- 13. Date of Next Meeting

Part 2 **Part attendance by Minister Simon Harris TD** 11.00 am to 11.30am
Minister for Further & Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science

Part 3 **Strategic Planning Session** 11.30am – 1.00pm