

SOLAS – Further Education and Training Authority
Ordinary Board Meeting No. 061
Thursday, 4th November 2020

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

Apologies: *None*

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

Part attendance: *Mr. C. J. Dunne* - *SOLAS*
Ms. N. White - *SOLAS*
Mr. G. Gasparro - *SOLAS*
Mr. G. O’Connor - *SOLAS*
Mr. R. Kelly - *SOLAS*
Ms. S. Dunlop - *SOLAS*

Note: Declaration of Conflict of Interest

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

There were no conflicts arising.

1. Minutes

(i) (Revised) Minutes – No. 060 – Tuesday, 7th July, 2020

The revised minutes of meeting No. 060 held on Tuesday, 7th July, 2020 were approved by the Board and signed by the Chairman.

(ii) (Draft) Minutes - No. 061 – Thursday, 24th September, 2020

The draft minutes of meeting No. 061 held on Thursday, 24th September, 2020 were approved by the Board and signed by the Chairman.

2. Matters Arising

Board approval by written procedure – October, 2020

Award of contract to Gartner Ireland for ICT Advisory Services

It was noted that the Board approved the award of a contract by written procedure on 23rd October, 2020 to Gartner Ireland for ICT Advisory Services.

Note of Board meetings – for publication

The Board agreed that a note of all Board meetings is to be published on the SOLAS website and the SOLAS intranet.

3. Report from Chief Executive Officer

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

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

- An update on the status of SOLAS Office closure due to Level 5 Covid-19 restrictions*
- An update on the delivery of FET programmes during Level 5 restrictions including limited on-site delivery for apprenticeship training and smaller group learning*

- *An additional allocation of €8m of Exchequer funding for an Educational Disadvantaged Fund to target vulnerable learners most disadvantaged during Covid-19*
- *The strong further commitment to investing in skills and FET in 2021, following on from the July stimulus package with the overall SOLAS budget expected to increase which will be used target a number of developments including Skills to Compete, Skills to Advance, funding to mitigate educational disadvantage, Apprenticeship and new retrofitting skills programme*
- *The continued implementation of the organisation's new ways of working and refreshed structure with new line management arrangements and new roles, responsibilities and outcomes defined*
- *The roll out of the new performance review and development system throughout the organisation.*
- *A new approach to the SOLAS business plan, budget and balanced scorecard for 2021 which will replace the established system of annual submission of 11 separate business plans*
- *A campaign to appoint a Director of Branding, Communications and Strategy Implementation to include the role of Board Secretary has commenced and the Board will be kept advised of progress.*

Delivering on 2020 Priorities

The CEO provided an update on the status of 2020 priorities, all of which are progressing with some timeframe adjustments.

The Board also discussed

- *The engagement level of learners with FET during Covid-19 in the Level 1-3 categories*
- *The Skills to Advance initiative which is ahead of target for 2021*
- *The Board noted that Apprenticeship registrations for 2020 will be short of the forecasted numbers as a result of the impact of Covid-19.*
- *An update from the CEO on matters relating to the on-going investigation at Kildare and Wicklow Education and Training Board (KWETB) and recent media reports.*

Discussion

The Board noted the CEO report as presented and requested that the appreciation of the Board be conveyed to the Executive and staff for the significant progress which had been achieved to date.

4. SOLAS Funding / Budget (2nd Revision) 2020

Proposal

That the Board note the additional allocation of €8.0m to SOLAS in respect of an Educational Disadvantaged Fund in 2020 and approve the total Revised Expenditure Budget of €930.5m.

Background

The Board were advised of the current budget position and noted that following the July Stimulus package, the total SOLAS combined Exchequer & NTF allocation was increased by €59.5m to €919.218m. A revised budget (1st revision) was approved by the Board at its September meeting. Since then, the SOLAS allocation has been increased by a further €8.0m in respect of an Educational Disadvantaged Fund, designed to increase the capacity of ETBs and community education providers to address the decline in participation of disadvantaged learners particularly those on literacy and basic skills programmes at levels 1-3.

The Board were advised that the total Exchequer and NTF allocation to SOLAS is €927.218m and, when other SOLAS income is added, the overall total revised budget is €930.5m including adjustments which were detailed in the Board Paper.

Discussion

The Board welcomed the funding proposals to support learners, particularly disadvantaged learners, through the disbursement of the €8m special Education Disadvantaged Fund.

Board Decision

The Board approved the revised expenditure budget (2nd revision) in an amount of €930.5m, an €8.0m increase on the budget already approved and relates to additional funding allocated for an Educational Disadvantaged Fund.

5. 2020 Capital Allocations for Further Education and Training (FET)

Proposal

That the Board approve and authorise additional FET capital funding allocations to four ETBs totalling €1,069,674. These additional applications were received since Board approval of the Revised Capital Plan 2020 at its September meeting.

That the Board note that the SOLAS Capital Funding Budget for 2020 is €22.5m and approved capital funding for projects to ETBs in 2020 will be €28.683m.

That the Board note that funding for approved projects that do not proceed or cannot be funded within the 2020 budget will be carried over and funded from the 2021 Capital Budget.

Background

The 2020 capital funding budget to support capital investment projects across the ETB network is €17.5m. In July, it was confirmed that €5m in a once-off capital grant would be provided to ETBs and other FET providers to purchase devices that could then be loaned to disadvantaged students experiencing difficulty accessing remote learning opportunities. As a result, the combined SOLAS capital budget for 2020 is €22.5m. To date, the Board has approved capital funding applications totalling €27,613,573.

The Board were advised that four additional capital requests were received in October 2020 and that SOLAS had also been advised of cost overrun with the procurement of a backup generator in one ETB. Details of these applications were set out in the Board paper circulated in advance of the meeting. (Board Paper 062.5). It was noted that the associated costs total €1,069,674 and would result in total approved capital funding of €28,683,247.

The Board were advised that funding for approved projects that do not proceed or cannot be funded within the 2020 budget will be carried over and funded from the 2021 Capital Budget.

Discussion

The Board noted the update on capital funding and asked to be kept advised on progress on negotiations with the Department to carry over any unspent capital to 2021.

Board Decision

The Board approved and authorised additional FET capital funding allocations of €1,069,674 to four ETBs

The Board noted that the SOLAS Capital Funding Budget for 2020 is €22.5m and approved capital funding allocations to ETBs in 2020 will be €28.683m.

The Board noted that funding for approved projects that do not proceed or cannot be funded within the 2020 budget will be carried over and funded from the 2021 Capital Budget.

6. Proposed Schedule – SOLAS Board Meetings 2021

Proposal

The Board was asked to discuss and agree the proposed schedule – SOLAS Board Meetings 2021. A final schedule will be presented for information at the December, 2020 Board meeting.

Discussion

The Acting Secretary, advised that the proposed schedule of meetings for 2021 had been circulated to the Board for consideration.

Board Decision

The Board discussed and agreed the proposed schedule – SOLAS Board Meetings 2021 subject to one adjustment.

An amended schedule will be presented at the December, 2020 Board meeting for noting.

**7. SOLAS Finance Report
*For the nine-month period to 25th September, 2020***

Proposal

That the Board note the SOLAS Finance Report for the nine-month period to 25th September, 2020.

Revised Budget

The Board were provided with an overview of the Finance Report which was circulated ahead of the meeting. The Board were advised that the annual budget has been revised to reflect that approved by the Board at its 24th September 2020 meeting. The budget at €922.0m, represents an increase of €58.0m on the original budget of €864.0m, excluding SOLAS Capital.

The expenditure and income budgets, relating to expenditure undertaken directly by SOLAS, were both reduced by €1.5m. The total budget for the disbursement of grants was increased by €59.5m under the July stimulus package resulting in an overall increase in the budget of €58.0m.

The total budget available to Education and Training Boards (ETBs) includes an unallocated amount of €47.215m. It was noted individual ETB budgets have not been adjusted to reflect the revised budget in the report.

Summary

The report sets out expenditure compared with income for the nine-month period ended 25th September 2020.

Capital of €0.5m is included as part of the SOLAS budget and a further €22.406m included in the Grants to ETBs of €831.746m. Schools and Other Organisations have a €0.094m capital allocation. The total revised capital allocation is €23.0m.

Discussion

The update on the SOLAS Finance Report was welcomed. The Board discussed the Apprentice Employer Incentivisation Scheme and its impact on Apprenticeship registrations particularly pre-2016 Apprenticeship programmes and suggested that consideration be given to increasing the €3,000 grant to employers under the scheme. The CEO advised that the new Apprenticeship Action Plan was considering a range of issues including registration numbers.

It was noted that an update on progress on the Apprentice Employer Incentivisation Scheme will be provided at the December Board meeting.

Board Decision

The Board noted the SOLAS Finance Report for the nine-month period to 25th September, 2020.

**8. Construction Services
Alternative Safe Pass Delivery Method**

Proposal

That the Board note the status update on the work to date in identifying an Alternative Delivery Method for Safe Pass training as outlined in the paper.

Background

Following the Board meeting on the 7 July 2020, a Construction Services Working Group was established to review potential alternative delivery methods for the Safe Pass courses.

An overview of the five options considered by the Working Group was provided along with details of their recommendation to develop an ‘Experienced Worker’ self-directed learning Safe Pass programme with an alternative assessment methodology.

It was noted that, stakeholder consultation undertaken with primary stakeholders, the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, the Local Government Management Agency and the Construction Industry Federation resulted in broad support for the potential alternative delivery method.

The Board was advised that the introduction of an online assessment and e-learning options in SOLAS’ Construction Services Unit’s (CSU) Transformation and Transition Action Plan, (arising from a recommendation in the BearingPoint Report) had a target delivery date of 2021/22. However, the proposed timeline of two years is dependent on the option adopted and the availability/allocation of additional (internal and external) resources and budget.

The Board was advised that the next steps involved an analysis and selection of preferred delivery option which adhering to DPER IT development

requirements. A development and implementation plan would be devised for the delivery of this provision.

It was also noted that the piloting of the proposed alternative delivery was being trialled.

Discussion

The Board welcomed the proposals outlined and discussed a number of other options to be considered by the Working Group. The timeline for implementation was also considered and the Board who requested that the work to implement an alternative delivery method be expedited.

The Board were advised of the in-depth consultations undertaken between SOLAS and all stakeholders resulting in the proposals set out in the Board Paper and noted the need to ensure sufficient resources and funding are available to meet the costs and requirements of implementing an alternative method.

The Chairman requested the Executive to revert with an update on progress at the 10th December, 2020 Board meeting.

Board Decision

The Board noted the status update on the work to date in identifying an Alternative Delivery Method for Safe Pass training as outlined in the Board paper and requested that the timeline for the implementation of an alternative delivery method be expedited.

The Board requested a further discussion on progress at the 10th December, Board meeting.

9. Further Education and Training (FET) Independent Evaluations Proposed SOLAS response to the independent evaluations of Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS) and Specific Skills Training (SST)

Proposal

That the Board note the Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS) and Specific Skills Training (SST) evaluation reports and that the SOLAS response to the findings and recommendations be included in the FET strategy implementation plan.

Background

The Board were provided with an overview of the main findings and recommendations of Indecon's independent evaluations of both programmes which had been circulated in advance of the meeting.

It was noted that both the findings and recommendations were supported by a VTOS/SST advisory group comprising representatives from the Department of

Education and Skills, Education and Training Boards (ETBs) and Education and Training Boards Ireland. In addition, the SOLAS Strategic Planning Committee and the Senior Leadership Team had reviewed both evaluations and consultation on these findings had been undertaken with ETBs.

The Board were advised that, the findings and recommendations of the evaluations will be included in the development of the FET strategy implementation plan which supports the reform and transformation of the strategy required across FET programme delivery. This will be further progressed through the Strategic Planning Committee.

Discussion

The Board welcomed the overview and noted the findings and recommendations of both evaluations.

Board Decision

The Board noted the Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS) and Specific Skills Training (SST) evaluation reports and the SOLAS response to the findings and recommendations which will be included in the FET strategy implementation plan.

The Board noted that the evaluation reports will be formally circulated to the VTOS and SST advisory group members.

10. Update on use of SOLAS Logo

Given time constraints on the day, it was agreed that this item would be discussed at a later Board meeting.

11. Board Committees and Advisory Committees

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

Audit and Risk Committee

Ms. C. Munro, Chair, advised that the SOLAS Internal Audit Plan 2020 continues to be delivered with completion dates for a small number of reviews to occur in early 2021.

Strategic Planning Committee

Ms. N. O'Reilly, Chair, reported that the Committee had recently met to discuss the consultation on the Apprenticeship Action Plan with an update on the discussion to be included in the Committee minutes.

Workforce and Organisational Development Committee

Ms. O. Coughlan, Chair, reported that the Committee recently met and discussed a range of issues, including the Balanced Scorecard.

National Apprenticeship Advisory Committee

Mr. P. Cremmins, Chair, provided an update on recent Committee discussions on the Action Plan for Apprenticeship.

(2) Committee & Advisory Committee – Minutes

There were no Committee or Advisory Committee minutes available for noting.

12. Any Other Business

Condolences

The Chairman and Board extended its sympathies to Mr. R. Chestnutt, recently retired external member of the Audit and Risk Committee, on the recent passing of his wife (RIP).

There was no other business conducted.

13. Date of Next Meeting

The next meeting was scheduled to take place on Thursday, 10th December, 2020.

APPENDIX 1



Time: 10.00am – 1.00pm

Venue: via MS Teams

Board of SOLAS Meeting - Wednesday, 4th November, 2020

A G E N D A

Part 1 Part attendance by Minister Simon Harris TD 10.00am to 10.30am
Minister for Further & Higher Education, Research, Innovation & Science

Part 2 Ordinary Board Business 10.30am to 1.00pm

Note: **Declaration of Conflict of Interest**

- * 1. Minutes
DRAFT Minutes - No. 061 – Thursday, 24th September, 2020
- 2. Matters Arising
Decision Item – (Approval by written procedure – October, 2020)
Award of Contract to Gartner Ireland for ICT Advisory Services
- * 3. Report from Chief Executive Officer

DECISION ITEMS

- * 4. SOLAS Funding / Budget (2nd Revision) 2020
- * 5. 2020 Capital Allocations for Further Education and Training (FET)
- * 6. Proposed Schedule – SOLAS Board Meetings 2021

DISCUSSION ITEMS

- * 7. SOLAS Finance Report
For the nine-month period to 25th September, 2020
- * 8. Construction Services
Alternative Safe Pass Delivery Method

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DISCUSSION ITEMS – *Cont'd...*

- * 9. Further Education and Training (FET) Independent Evaluations
Proposed SOLAS response to the independent evaluations of
(i) Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS) and (ii) Specific Skills Training (SST)

INFORMATION ITEMS

- * 10. Update on use of SOLAS Logo
- 11. Board Committees and Advisory Committees
 - (1) Committee & Advisory Committee - *Update from Chair(s)*
 - (2) Committee & Advisory Committee - *Minutes (None)*
- 12. Any Other Business
- 13. Date of Next Meeting

* *(Denotes Paper)*