

## **AGENCY MANAGEMENT BOARD MEETING**

Thursday 4 November 2004

Present: David Stephen (Chair)  
Professor Pauline Weetman  
Jaki Carnegie  
Martin Lowe  
Graham Gunn  
Donald Wood  
Audrey Heatlie  
Stephen Blyth  
Frances Donnelly (Secretary)

1. David Stephen welcomed Martin Lowe who was replacing Robert Seaton as a non-executive board member and Frances Donnelly who had replaced Linda Pender as the Chief Executive's Executive Assistant.

### **Minutes of previous meeting**

2. The minutes of the meeting held on 17 August were agreed.

### **Matters Arising**

3. The Chief Executive updated the Board on action taken since the last meeting:-
  - Funding had been secured for the new telephony system. The equipment was on order and installation was expected to take three months to complete.
  - An event had been set up with Universities Scotland on the 25 Nov and would probably take place in Stirling (this has since been changed to Dundee University). Martin Lowe felt it would be a useful event for him to attend so as to gain an insight into the types of contact SAAS had with the HE sector. This was agreed.
  - Four tenders were expected for the new IT contract. The closing date was Monday 8<sup>th</sup> November and evaluation would be carried out over the following week.
  - Individual Learning Accounts (ILA's) – some learning providers were still not ready to go live. SAAS and FfL had recently hosted seminars for FE colleges and private sector learning providers to help bring them up to speed. Ministers had agreed that there could be a "soft launch" of the scheme once everything was fully ready – possibly followed up by a formal launch some time in the New Year.
  - Disabled Students Allowance (DSA) assessment costs were to be moved back into programme expenditure from direct running costs at either the Winter or Spring supplementaries. This would prevent them distorting the overall unit cost per application target.
  - Travel Expenses – David had recently attended a NUS conference where Jack McConnell talked about a discounted travel scheme for young people and free prescriptions for students. It was not clear yet how these groups would be defined. However, any changes to SAAS's handling of travel expenses would be suspended until further details became known.
  - The Agency had recently had a flood but had only been out of commission for one day. There had since been ongoing communication with the landlord, their insurance company and SE lawyers regarding the replacement of damaged fittings (eg carpets and roof tiles). We were also claiming for lost staff costs since the building had had to be evacuated. David said this had been a good test of our Business Continuity Plan and Risk Register. A follow up meeting had identified areas where we could do better and these would be fed back into our Continuity Planning.

## Quarterly Report

4. Audrey said that we had continued to see good results in this quarter. We had again experienced problems with the printing of acknowledgement letters which had had to be suspended for a few weeks. However, there had been no effect on processes, and no increase in telephone calls. This supported the proposal that was being developed to abolish acknowledgment letters altogether next session. We would also be looking at moving the printing facility in-house.
5. The Agency had received approximately 116,000 applications to date and processing continued to go well. Audrey had included a new section in the quarterly report which showed the volume of paper (application forms and correspondence) received and processed through EDM during the quarter. Both David and Pauline agreed it would be useful to continue to report this so that trends could be identified.
6. The telephony statistics reported were short of a couple of weeks in the quarter when callscan equipment had been being repaired. The new telephony system would provide a better and more reliable reporting tool.
7. We were now using EDM for all application forms and associated correspondence. Audrey said that staff were now getting used to this way of working and trusted the system.
8. David said that we hoped to do some formal benchmarking on application processing with Local Education Authorities in England and Wales. However, this still had to be set up. LEAs were known to be processing applications between six and ten weeks from receipt whereas SAAS was processing 90% of applications between six and ten days.

## Finance

9. Savings in staff costs were shown at £250,000 - approximately £40,000 per month. This would reduce as profiling took account of costs that were currently capitalised.
10. Pauline Weetman asked if the savings in staff costs were intentional. Donald said that we had not recruited as many recurring appointments as expected and that we had made savings through EDM. David confirmed that Syntegra had indicated staff savings in their EDM business case but these were being realised in year two of operation rather than year 1 as originally predicted. Some of the savings had been redeployed on ILA staff.
11. Under capital expenditure there had been a £1million overspend due to ILA and telephony equipment. However, this should be ironed out in revisions due in November. An additional saving in postal costs was expected due to BACS first.
12. Graham said that we would make a substantial saving of approximately £80,000 per year if we managed to bring our printing in-house. David said that accommodation space had been identified for this if the final business case supported the proposition.
13. Updated information on student numbers received from our statisticians was being used to estimate programme expenditure more accurately. Pauline asked if the number of students applying was changing. Stephen said that the numbers were expected to continue to rise over the next couple of years with a dip expected in sessions 2007-2008 and 2008-2009.
14. The Debt Recovery Team continued to perform well and had established good relations with Harper McLeod. Jaki asked how the Agency expected to recover the outstanding debt of £5.8m. Donald said that we were recovering approx £1m per year, writing off bad debt but also taking more cases to decree.

## **Personnel**

15. A Band A recruitment campaign for recurring appointments had already started.
16. The first group had been nominated for additional leave under the pilot Special Bonus Scheme. Only one cash award had so far been given.
17. Jaki congratulated SAAS for achieving the SHAW Bronze Award and David confirmed that we were now preparing for Silver.

## **Information Systems & Operational Policy**

18. Graham reported the number of online applications had increased since last year from about 12% to 15%. This might have been more but for shortened applications which, until such time as electronic signatures could be accepted, were likely to remain more attractive to students.
19. The BSU were intending to pilot the use of texting in January next year as a means of quick communication with students which could cut numbers of calls and letters.
20. BACS First – The Student Loans Company (SLC) were now paying 85% of the student population's first instalment by BACS. They would shortly be proposing to DfES that BACS be made mandatory and it was virtually certain that SAAS would do likewise.
21. ILA's – expected go-live seemed likely to be within the next couple of weeks and staff had worked hard (including overtime working), to get to this stage.
22. The new IT contract would hopefully be in place by Christmas. Time had been built in for a handover if need be. The evaluation phase would be conducted over the next couple of weeks.
23. The number of guides being produced had reduced slightly but we were still producing significant numbers of application forms. David said there were still problems with the time it takes to download forms from the website meaning that fewer people tended to do so.
24. A working group was looking at a new shortened application form targeted at low income families who receive full support. The numbers who might be able to use this form were estimated to be between 30,000 and 40,000.
25. Jaki commented on the increase in the number of hits on our website saying that it was a good indication for the future. Graham said the site had been redesigned following feedback after a visit to Bell College. This could have attributed to the increase in usage.
26. David said that the student portal for students in England and Wales to apply online was not yet open. We were, therefore, still about three years ahead in this respect.
27. Graham said that Penni Martin had left SAAS on promotion and was to be replaced by Michael Jackson with effect from 22 November.

## **Chief Executive's Office**

28. David said that the Disability Discrimination Act might require alterations/improvements to some parts of the building. The Freedom of Information Act would come into force in January and all staff would be receiving training this month. A dedicated team was continuing to work on the EFQM model with a view to submitting an award application next summer.
29. Martin Lowe asked if the Freedom of Information Act would have much of an impact on SAAS. David thought that that the impact should be small as we already had a fairly comprehensive publication scheme on our website but the mainstream Scottish Executive might receive more

requests. We would, however, keep our publication scheme under review and be ready to react to any unforeseen demands for information not covered by it.

## **Minutes of Committee meetings**

### IS Steering Committee

30. Graham said that we were still consulting with lawyers over Electronic Signatures and there had been no progress as yet.

### Fraud Committee

31. Donald Wood confirmed that our Auditors were happy with the way we are reporting fraud.

### Audit Committee

32. Pauline asked who would replace Robert Seaton as the non-executive member of the audit committee. Outwith the meeting it was agreed that Martin Lowe would attend the next meeting as a member and then consider whether to act as chairman in future.
33. Jaki asked if SAAS had had the opportunity to apply for funding to assist with Efficient Government. David said that the minimum grant was £1m and limited to 75% of the cost of a project. We had until the end of January to forward proposals and were in touch with two areas elsewhere in the Executive about possible joint ventures.

## **Record of Complaints received July to Sep 2004**

34. It was agreed that the complaints listed were relatively minor and gave no grounds for serious concern. Jaki commented that the number of complaints received was reasonable given over 100,000 applications had been processed so far.

## **SE Staff Survey**

35. David said these results were good compared both to other Agencies and the rest of the Executive. There was nothing of concern showing in the results and SAAS were using the EFQM model successfully. Martin and Jaki suggested that rather than wait until the awaydays to relay the results back to staff it might be better to do it sooner. David agreed that the results could be communicated to staff in an end of session message from the Chief Executive.

## **Any Other Business**

36. Martin Lowe asked if the proposed income/expenditure survey would be going ahead. David said he would check with John Rigg and report back.
37. David said that the PCS had called for Industrial Action on the 5 November. However, there would be little impact on the business at this late stage in the year. David would report back at the next meeting.

## **Date of next meeting**

38. To be arranged.

SAAS  
10 November 2004