

AGENCY MANAGEMENT BOARD MEETING

Tuesday 17th August 2004 at 2:00pm

Present: David Stephen
Professor Pauline Weetman
Graham Gunn
Donald Wood
Audrey Heatlie
Stephen Blyth
Linda Pender

Apologies Jaki Carnegie
Robert Seaton

1. Board members recorded their thanks to Robert Seaton for his valuable contribution as a Non Executive Board Member. A candidate would be interviewed next week for the vacancy created by Robert standing down. Members also thanked Linda Pender whose last meeting this would be as Board Secretary.

Minutes of previous meeting

2. The minutes of the meeting held on 11 May were agreed.

Matters Arising

3. The Chief Executive updated the Board on action taken since the last meeting:-

- The management information component of the telephony recording system had broken down during the quarter although this had not affected call handling per se. There was a reasonable prospect that funding for a new system might become available in October.
- David Stephen and Neil Pickard had attended an Association of Scottish Colleges event on 1 July to promote use of the SAAS website. Good feedback had been received from college administrators and a simple guide had been produced to help them advise students about how to apply online.
- Pauline Weetman suggested that, in order to mount a similar event for university staff, the Agency should contact John Martin of the Association of Managers of student services in HE (AMOSSHE).
- The Agency would not apply for a Quality Scotland award this year but would re-enter the competition next year.

Quarterly Report

4. The Agency had achieved good results for the 1st quarter and processing was ahead of target. New shortened applications for certain categories of continuing students had helped the Agency process more cases earlier in the session. It was intended to extend the shortened application forms to students from low income families. Royal Mail had recommenced early morning deliveries which helped the EDM Team's flow of work.

5. The Agency had to date received approximately 72,000 applications and had processed 88% of them. Acknowledgement letters had been suspended for a period due to printing problems at Saughton House but award letters had been being issued only two days later. This provided evidence that the proposal to stop issuing acknowledgement letters next session could be workable and save resources. Audrey agreed to provide a note of the additional printing costs incurred because of the breakdown of the in-house printing service for the Quarterly Review meeting.

6. If students applied on-line they would receive an automatic acknowledgement and continuing students, who have a student reference number, could use the automated telephony system to check which stage their application was at.

7. The Agency had learned lessons from last year and the percentage of cases processed in under 14 days was better than had ever been achieved in the past.

Finance

8. The Finance Team had had additional work this quarter putting forward bids for the spending review on programme and running costs. Prints on expenditure to date had not been provided as the Agency had only received confirmation of the annual budget towards the end of July.

9. The Finance team were reviewing with our economist and statistician their methods for calculating and profiling programme expenditure. However, the large underspend last year had been due to colleagues in SE Finance applying different RAB charges to the budget and spend.

Personnel

10. The Agency had launched a pilot special bonus scheme. This allowed for awards of time off as well as or instead of cash. Pauline noted that the term 'bonus' might have to be changed since it might have implications for how the scheme might be viewed by the Inland Revenue. She also pointed to the need for scheme criteria to be objective and open. It was intended that the pilot should be independently evaluated at the end of the year.

Information Systems & Operational Policy

11. Prequalifying questionnaires had been issued for the new IT contract and 51 companies had so far expressed interest (one week before the closing date).

12. A dedicated project team was working on the interface for ILAS with Learndirect. The date for the Ministerial launch for ILAS had slipped to 4 October 2004.

Minutes of Committee meeting

IS Steering Committee

13. The Committee had agreed to look at the possibilities of using text messaging to contact students.

14. Some work was being done on electronic signatures which could help simplify the Agency's on-line services.

Finance Committee

15. The Agency's accounts at an advanced stage of preparation and had been provisionally cleared by audit. The accounts should be finalised by the end of August.

16. SE Finance were blocking the transfer of DSA assessment costs to programme expenditure. David had asked Audit Scotland to look at the issue again and to reconsider their advice. However students would continue to be tested for DSA and the service would not be affected by budget constraints.

Health and Safety Committee

17. A fire risk audit had been carried out and fire training was now required for all staff. The staff awaydays would be an ideal opportunity to provide a training session as all staff would attend.

Record of Complaints received April to June 2004

18. It was agreed that the complaints listed were relatively minor and gave no grounds for serious concern.

Web Traffic Statistics

19. The number of web applications received had dropped slightly from last year. However overall website usage continued to grow. David asked for the Agency's performance reporting results to be moved to the website home page where they could more readily be seen.

Corporate Plan

20. The draft Corporate Plan had been tabled for information and comments were invited by correspondence if necessary. Pauline Weetman suggested including a separate aim to "demonstrate accountability" although this was arguably covered under Corporate Governance. David agreed to consider amending the text but noted that since it already had provisional ministerial clearance anything of substance might have to wait until next year's version was produced.

21. The printed copies of the Annual Report would be less glossy and fewer copies would be printed to save resources.

22. It was agreed to circulate a draft of the Agency's annual report and accounts to Non-Executive Board Members for comment. A special meeting could be arranged to discuss the draft documents if required.

Telephony System Update

23. A short paper had been prepared to inform Board members why there had been no telephony statistics for a 5 week period. This, taken with recent advice from the Ombudsman that failure to record calls could be held to be maladministration, pointed to the need for the entire telephony system to be replaced as soon as possible.

Travel Claims

24. A paper had been prepared for the Board seeking approval to change the closing date for travel claims from 31 July to 31 March. This would help the Agency's workflow as the processing season was now starting earlier and dealing with travel could slow down the processing of main applications for support. It was agreed that the proposals seemed sensible but that Graham and Audrey should look a bit more closely at cost/benefit before a final decision was taken.

Risk Register – Management Board Responsibility

25. The Board considered that some of the high level risks in the Register might better be assigned to senior managers. However, the Board still wished to keep high level risks under regular review.

26. It was agreed to add a new column to the register for closed, open or dormant categories and also to add a column to show the escalation procedure if problems were not resolved. Likelihood/impact ratings would be reviewed twice a year and the updated register would be copied to Board members.

27. It was noted that difficulties being experienced in England this year could have risked sparking an increase in calls to the Agency. Briefing had been prepared for press office but in the event had not been needed.

Any Other Business

28. David gave an overview of the main points raised at a presentation on Efficient Government at a recent meeting of Agency Chief Executives. Savings of £500 million were being sought across the public sector by 2006/07 and £1 billion by 2008/09. Examples of efficient government included sharing IT, HR or procurement services. David was due to meet the Permanent Secretary later this week along with other Agency Chief Executives to discuss the implications of the Efficient Government initiative for agencies.

29. Pauline congratulated the Agency on its publications scheme under the Freedom of Information Act which was very comprehensive.

Date of next meeting

30. To be arranged.

SAAS
19 August 2004