

AGENCY MANAGEMENT BOARD MEETING WEDNESDAY 20TH FEBRUARY 2008

Present: David Stephen, Chief Executive
Martin Lowe, NEBM
Margaret Munckton, NEBM
Eileen Marshall, NEBM
Bruce Nelson, NEBM
Graham Gunn, SAAS
Audrey Heatlie, SAAS
Audrey Shimmons, SAAS
Maureen Shevas, SAAS
Linda Pender, SAAS (Secretary)

Minutes of the previous meeting

1. The minutes of the previous meeting held on 8th November 2007 were agreed.

Matters Arising

2. David updated the Board on the following:-
 - Maureen Shevas has replaced Tracy Richardson as Personnel Officer.
 - The GE Abolition Bill - 2nd stage had been successful and the Bill was on track to be enacted by 1st April.
 - On-line applications – David had written to institutions with a proposal to reduce the number of printed application issued by SAAS. All 18 institutions who had replied were in favour. David would write to Cabinet Secretary and suggest introducing the new system next year where paper applications would only be available on request from SAAS.
 - David would be attending a meeting shortly to discuss what relationship SAAS was likely to have with Skills Development Scotland – a new body being created from an amalgamation of SUfl, Careers Scotland and parts of Scottish Enterprise's training networks.
 - Logica would be carrying out a cost benefits exercise on the ILA scheme to consider future delivery options. An information gathering phase would be starting next day.
 - Following the recent announcement about Agencies and NDPBs, the SG were carrying out a further exercise to look at Corporate Governance and the relationships such bodies should have with Ministers. The Agency now had clearance to finalise its Framework document and it would be sent to the Cabinet Secretary for approval in the next few weeks. **Action : David/Linda**
 - It was agreed to send copies of the SG whos/who chart to NEBMs.
Action : Linda
 - Quality Scotland were reviewing the SAAS application for QA awards again and would meet with SAAS later in the week to provide feedback.

Quarterly Report

Customer Services Unit

3. October had been a busy month as more than 6,000 applications had been received and overtime had been required to keep mail manageable. By mid November 99.5% of applications had been processed (Annex A showed statistics for the quarter). On average it had taken 7.27 days to process an application in this quarter compared to just over 10 days in the same period last year. CSU were now working mostly on travel expenses and finalising awards.
4. New telephony statistics – The tables provided an overview of the system and showed calls offered/answered and average waiting times. It was agreed that the bar chart format adopted gave a good picture of performance and that these tables should feature in future reports.
5. SLC were dropping their free call service (SAAS had also found this necessary two years ago). SLC were also intending to introduce a new, state of the art IVR system which would enable many more of their calls to be dealt with electronically. SAAS would examine the feasibility and cost of doing likewise.
6. ILA accounts – There were now 97,500 open accounts of which around 50,000 were active. The ILA Team had caught up on the temporary backlog which had earlier in the year due to a successful advertising campaign by Learndirect.
7. Mail shots – SAAS had issued letters to all students about the changes in means-testing to be introduced as from April 2008.
8. Staffing – CSU currently had a high level of staff vacancies caused mainly by staff moving to develop their careers. Responses to internal and external advertising had been disappointingly low. Interviewing would start in the week commencing 25 February but it was not expected that all posts would be filled. Accordingly, it was planned to bring in Pertemps staff in time for them to be trained at the same time as new recruits. This would have the benefit of allowing CSU to re-evaluate its staffing requirements in the light of the efficiencies that would result if STePS could be introduced for 2008-2009. CSU did not expect to fill all vacancies from this exercise and would have to use casual staff. This would be acceptable as it was not known how StEPS would effect staffing levels.
9. Targets – targets were to be re-defined as part of the balanced scorecard exercise. A first draft of the balanced scorecard would be available by the end of February. It was agreed that the same target for dealing with written correspondence should apply to e-mails – the volume of which was continuing to increase.

Finance

10. DRCs – An underspend was forecast due to the level of staff vacancies. However, this was likely to be relatively small.
11. Programme expenditure – The actual numbers of applications received had shown that student numbers overall were higher than statisticians had originally forecast. Budgets had been re-worked accordingly. Loan take up continued on a downward trend. Contrary to anecdotal evidence, the numbers of students on HNC/HND courses had increased over last year. **Action:** Audrey Shimmons agreed to provide figures to the Board showing trends in student numbers for FE/HE before the next meeting.
12. It was explained that the £1.2m asset impairment figure in Running Costs allowed for the GRASS system to be written off in full this year.

Personnel

13. Recruitment – 25 A3 posts are vacant, 64 applications were received and 29 people will be invited to interview. 5 A2 posts are vacant, 21 applications were received and 11 people had been invited to interview. Finance also had 2 A2 posts to fill and the Personnel Team were considering how best to fill those posts.
14. Homeworking – This project had been suspended temporarily as broadband access had caused difficulties and resulted in the project becoming more expensive than originally anticipated.
15. SG HR's new resourcing policy did give Agencies some measure of flexibility but also signalled a move back to organising promotions between Bands on a block, centralised basis. The first promotion exercise seemed likely to take place in the summer and could affect SAAS adversely if too many of our A Band staff were successful.

Information Systems and Operational Policy

16. StEPS – At the last Project Board meeting the project status was reported as “amber” as there had been some slippage. Original time estimates provided by Webmethods had been significantly understated but, following a meeting with two of their senior managers, more support was now being supplied to bring things back on track. However, the situation remained finely balanced and the Project Board would have to decide by no later than mid – March whether to move to StEPS or retain GRASS for one last season. **Action:** David would inform members of the decision as soon as it was known.
17. The Policy Team would be providing workshops/seminars for Institutions covering forthcoming policy changes and on-line applications.
18. Universities were continuing efforts to attract EU students and welcomed SAAS participation in events being sponsored by the British Council. A member of the Policy team had recently attended events in the Baltic states.

Chief Executive

19. HWLS – the Agency’s SHAW bronze and silver portfolios were currently being reassessed against the new HWLS criteria and it was hoped to reach the Gold standard by the end of the year.

20. Environment ISO 14001 certification – the Agency would be assessed for ISO 14001 in July.

Minutes of Meetings

21. Martin Lowe would cease to chair the Audit Committee after the July meeting as his appointment to the Board was due to end on 31 September. Margaret Munckton’s appointment would end on 31 July. Work was in hand to identify new candidates for appointment.

Fraud Reports

22. Fraud Reports were tabled for information on the travel allowance scheme, lone parent childcare grant and DIUS fraud risk management exercise.

Complaints Report

23. No major trends were highlighted. A few complaints had suggested a need for further training on customer handling for certain staff.

Date of the next meeting

24. Linda would canvass dates for the next meeting in due course.

Chief Executive’s Office
22 February 2008