

AGENCY MANAGEMENT BOARD MEETING THURSDAY 30TH AUGUST 2007

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

Apologies: Eileen Marshall, NEBM

Minutes of the previous meeting

1. The minutes of the meeting held on 2007 were agreed.

Matters Arising

2. David updated the Board on action taken since the last meeting:-
 - The agency were awaiting final Ministerial decisions on possible changes to student funding all of which were contingent on the Spending Review outcome.
3. The Agency needed to have this timetable confirmed and have full details of changes required for next year by October to allow system changes to be made in time for April 2008.

Quarterly Report

Customer Services Unit

4. 88,000 applications had been processed to date (68% of the expected overall total) and 66% of these had been made on-line. This was a better performance than in any previous year. Annex A showed that the average time for processing an application in the first quarter had been 2.29 days – a remarkable improvement on even last year's good figures. Large volumes of correspondence were causing some difficulty (mostly due to the increase in the number of e-mails received). A new contact form had been designed for the website which had increased the number of complaints/ appeals received and this would be reviewed shortly.
5. The number of phone calls received had increased after exam results were issued. The number of phone lines into the Agency had been increased to deal with this traffic and a new 0845 service number introduced. However, due to physical and financial constraints on the number of operatives the Agency could engage, it would always be the case that demand would outstrip supply. CSU were working with contact central on a new management information system for the telephony service and hoped to be in a position to begin providing call handling statistics again by the next quarter.

6. The SLC had a problem with payments to part-time students and were advising those affected to call SAAS. This had also increased the number of incoming calls.
7. ILA processing – There were now 73,500 open accounts.
8. GE – the Agency were looking at cases where students had been allowed to defer payment. GE deferrals were shown in Annex F. The figures included postgraduate students and students who, for a variety of reasons, were progressing to a further year of study and had not yet graduated.
9. Results of recent SPSO appeals on payment of GE had been encouraging with findings in the Agency's favour. However, as a consequence of the bill to abolish the GE, there could be an increase in complaints and other correspondence from students who had already paid or were contesting their liability.

Finance

10. DRCs – forecast outturn for the year was slightly higher than budget but a transfer of funds had still to be received for legal costs that would significantly reduce the figure. The Finance Team had been advised to write off the costs of software that would become redundant after STEPS went live and so depreciation would increase. £78k would also be transferred from the capital budget to provide additional fee loan reports.
11. Student Programme Expenditure – fees and grants came within DEL (Departmental Expenditure Limits) and so were funded from the Scottish Block. Other elements (including loan subsidies) were categorised as AME (Annually Managed Expenditure) where budgeting was more difficult and funding came direct from Treasury. There were further areas of spend that came under neither category. The accountancy rules for each category were different. At present, an underspend of £82m was being forecast but this figure would reduce significantly once budgets were adjusted by Autumn revisions due to be made by SE Finance.
12. Fraud – The lone parent child care grant exercise was now complete and a report would go to senior management shortly. As a result of the exercise 197 students' claims had been investigated and a number of cases found where grant was being claimed in respect of non-registered child minders. The Agency would therefore be looking at tightening controls on the grant scheme.
13. The Agency had referred a case of fraud to the Crown Office. This involved an allegedly dyslexic student forging the signatures of his personal care assistants. A successful prosecution had ensued and sentence was due to be passed in September.

Information Systems and Operational Policy

14. The Agency had recently launched its new website which had been well received by the HE sector.
15. STEPS/ GRASS – The new software contract had been let and the contractor had already run staff workshops to begin designing high level functionality. A project board had been set up and the project was so far on schedule and well within budget. The new system would be much more flexible than GRASS and make it easier to deal with policy

changes in a shorter timescale and at much less expense. It was agreed that a presentation on STEPS would be provided at the next Board meeting.

Personnel

16. The Personnel report showed a higher than usual number of vacancies as the BSU required additional staff for the STEPS project and a number of Agency staff had been promoted to posts elsewhere in the SE.

17. The BSU B1 recruitment boards had been carried out in-house and resulted in 7 successful candidates (4 internal and 3 external). The Personnel Team were now working on CSU vacancies and planned an internal promotion board followed by an external A3 recruitment board. By designing their own assessment centres rather than employing Capita as was the practice elsewhere in the Executive, the Team had saved SAAS a substantial amount of money.

18. David and Tracy had recently met SE HR to discuss the current relationship between Agencies and 'the centre'. The meeting had been more positive than expected and there now seemed to be at least a chance of securing greater freedom to align staffing and terms and conditions of service to business needs.

19. The SE, Agencies and NDPBs were working together to tender for new Occupational Health Service and Employee Assistance Programme contracts.

20. Homeworking project – 7 staff had been identified for the pilot which was due to start in November. There were some outstanding issues with IT support and associated costs but a paper would be finalised shortly for senior management to consider by the end of September.

21. The Agency was working on the Healthy Working Lives scheme with our immediate neighbours (Scottish Prison Service and Sportscotland) to improve the number of options available to staff to participate in healthy activities.

Minutes of Committee meetings

22. Audit Committee meeting 27 June 2007 – The committee had highlighted the need to consider the risks and impact of policy changes on the Agency. Internal audit reports had provided satisfactory assurances to the Committee and the Management Board. David would contact Allan Smith regarding the forthcoming SLC audit.

23. Information Systems Steering Committee – 29 June 2007 – there were no issues to note which had not been already covered in the quarterly report.

Complaints Report

24. No major issues had been raised in the report.

Any Other Business

25. The SLC had had a problem with its printing interface that had resulted in no payment schedule letters being sent to students at Perth College. However they were now

arranging for the letters to be sent and had confirmed that absence of a letter should not have resulted in payments being delayed.

Date of Next Meeting

26. The next meeting would be held on Thursday 8th November.

Chief Executive's Office
30 August 2007