

Quarterly Review Meeting – Monday 21st February at 10am

Attending: Mark Batho (Chair)
David Stephen
Graham Gunn
Audrey Heatlie
Donald Wood
Stephen Blyth
Chris McCrone
Frances Donnelly (Secretary)

Minutes of the previous meeting

- The minutes of the meeting held on 24th November were agreed subject to the following amendments:

Paragraph 3 of the Quarterly Report: 'Numeric and time targets *would* still be retained for internal management purposes...'

Matters Arising

- David indicated that there was nothing to update from the last meeting.

Quarterly Report

CSU

1. Audrey Heatlie said it had been a busy session with 128,000 applications being assessed by mid November. She confirmed that a much higher than usual number of late applications had been received in October and this had had a temporary effect on processing statistics. David commented that recent work on case studies in connection with Post Qualification Applications (PQA's) had confirmed that a large proportion of students from FE colleges tended to apply later than those entering universities.
2. Interviews had been held for recurring appointments but they had not identified sufficient candidates to fill all of the vacancies, although there had been a better response than last year. Looking ahead, Audrey said that staff refresher training was due to start soon along with training in preparation for next session. 28,000 students (an increase of about 40%) had been targeted for the Shortened Application which would be issued on 7 March.

Finance

3. Projected DRC underspends would be utilised before the end of the financial year. Mark emphasised the importance of accurate year – end estimates. 75% of any underspend this year would be lost and there could be no guarantee that any lost provision would be reinstated in a future year.

4. Chris commented on the amount spent on DSA assessments saying it appeared quite low given £750,000 had been profiled to year end and only £340,000 had been spent so far. Stephen said that February and March were both busy months for DSA assessments so the full budget should be spent by year end. David explained that the majority of students don't apply for DSA until November and it can take a further couple of months to schedule and complete needs assessments. Stephen also said that February would be a vital month for fee payments. Expenditure estimates had been based on student numbers projected by our statisticians and economists. However, the true figure would not be known until the fee run took place.
5. Chris added that the minutes from the last meeting noted a £14m saving due to the removal of Dependants Grant for children and the school meals grant. He asked if this would be continuous and remain in budget as no adjustment had been made. Mark confirmed this would be continuous and would need to be removed from the budget at some point in the future.
6. It was noted the Debt Recovery team was still performing well.

Personnel

7. Donald reported that sick absence continued to be high. There were a number of short term absences in the last quarter but nothing too alarming or potentially long term. Two members of staff were currently on formal trial periods. Research showed that young female staff were more prone to sick absence than males. Since the Agency has a higher than average proportion of young, female staff, higher levels of sick leave were to be expected.

IS Systems

8. Graham reported that the lawyers were still finalising the wording of the IT Support and Development contract but it was hoped BT would be able to sign within the next couple of days.
9. 3,500 ILA applications had been processed with a further 12,000 potentially still to be submitted. The overall figures were likely to be down against projected uptake due to the scheme having been launched in December, after the FE Autumn intake.
10. Graham reported that 15% of the applications received last session had been made online. Analysis had produced data that would help us target institutions showing lower than average usage to promote the service further for next session. Graham said there had been further communication with the solicitors about electronic signatures and he hoped to get a response sometime in March. Graham confirmed that removing the need for a signature would hopefully mean more students applying online. This, in turn, would mean quicker processing times and less paper.
11. Chris McCrone said that the Inland Revenue didn't ask for signatures for their e-assessment forms and asked why we couldn't follow suit. Graham highlighted that our situation was different in that the declaration signed by students stated they would pay back all monies received to which they were not entitled. The IR system also contained expensive to maintain measures of encryption.

CE Office

12. The new SAAS video was in production. David was pleased with the new format which was more in tune with the audience it was targeted at. A copy would be sent to Mark when it had been finalised.
13. A team had visited Hampshire County Council to initiate a benchmarking exercise. Early indications suggested that the LEA may benefit more from the exercise than SAAS.

Personnel Report

14. This report had been tabled for information and was duly noted.

Any other Business

15. David had spoken separately to Mark Batho on progress with the Efficient Government projects.

Date of next meeting

16. The date of the next meeting would be arranged in due course.

Chief Executive's Office
24 February 2005