

Quarterly Review Meeting – Thursday 26th May 2005 at 3pm

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

Minutes of the previous meeting

1. The minutes of the previous meeting held on the 21 February were agreed. There were no matters arising.

Quarterly Report

CSU

2. Audrey Heatlie reported that, as usual, the last quarter had been the quietest for the Customer Services Unit in terms of case processing. The main focus in the quarter had been on preparation for the coming session. This included reviewing processes, application forms and workflow set-ups as well as changes in the make up of the undergraduate team to allow different ways of managing their workload.

3. The new printers and enveloping machines had been installed to allow us to produce and issue our own letters. The new process had been working well. Mark asked if outside business could be attracted. David said that this was a possibility but that the new facility would need to be allowed to bed-in for a bit longer before we pursued it.

4. Audrey reported that the Shortened Applications had been issued at the beginning of March. 13,000 of these had been returned so far. To date, the Agency had received 30,000 applications in total and 95% of these had been processed. David commented that in the past the Agency had not normally achieved such numbers until the end of June. Traditionally, the Agency had had to cope with two seasonal “humps” of work in May and again in August when Higher results were issued. Use of the shortened application appeared to have largely removed the first of these and applications were instead being received in manageable numbers. The August surge was expected to remain although progressively greater use of online applications over time should help mitigate its effects on Agency performance.

5. Audrey added that the Shortened Application had now been extended to Nursing students with DoH agreement. Forms would be issued at the beginning of June. DoH had also agreed to Nursing students applying online. It was noted that there had been an increase from 15 to 18% in online applications since the last quarter. A number of colleges had been identified where the online take up was very low. Promoting the service in these colleges should help increase their numbers this year.

6. David said that on the back of a good response to this year’s video and CDROM he had written to all FE and HE institutions to ask if they would prefer to distribute this material to intending students instead of the paper application forms and guides they currently hand out. Responses received so far had been encouraging. If fewer new students had immediate access to forms, it was reasonable to expect online applications to increase further.

Finance

7. Outturn would be very close to budget. The annual accounts had been prepared late last year and this had attracted some criticism from Audit Scotland. We had agreed that the accounts would be ready for audit this year by the end of May and Stephen Blyth had been working flat out to achieve this. However, Audit Scotland had indicated in the last few days that they themselves would not now be able to start their audit until near the end of June.

8. A new B2 had been appointed to the SAAS finance team and would be starting in June (he was transferring from SPPA). He would be able to work part time in Glasgow as had previously been discussed so that some of the work currently carried out by ETLT finance could transfer to SAAS.

9. At the last meeting, spending on DSA assessments had been challenged since figures at that stage were pointing to a substantial underspend. At that time, it had been expected that the normal November peak in DSA applications would lead to the assessment budget being fully spent. However, this had clearly not happened and the reasons for that were being investigated. It was possible that there had been major delays in assessments being carried out due to the limited number of Assessment Centres and the increased numbers of student claimants they were having to deal with.

10. Mark again emphasised the importance of accurate year – end estimates. If notified too late, 75% of any underspends would be lost with no guarantee that any lost provision would be reinstated in a future year. Communication channels clearly needed to be improved and, while he welcomed the news about the B2 appointment, a lot more still needed to be done.

11. Donald reported on the Graduate Endowment. Final reminder letters would be issued within the next week to the 971 students who had not yet replied. If they continued to stay silent, formal Debt Recovery action would be initiated. The difficulties of contacting students who had changed address without notifying us was discussed. Chris cited the LA practice of having an agreement with the Royal Mail to return correspondence marked “gone away” regularly. Otherwise there was a risk that such letters would be collected somewhere centrally and dumped on the sender all at once. It was agreed to look at this but, given the frequency with which students/graduates moved around, it could only be a partial solution. In the majority of cases it would be necessary to employ trace agents and this would be expensive.

12. Donald reported that Debt Recovery in general was still showing positive results and the team had exceeded their target for recovery this year by 35%. Stephen confirmed to Chris that the £1.37m receipts included payments from Nursing students. The proportion received from Nurses would be allocated to the Nursing Directorate vote as SAAS administered that scheme on their behalf. Chris said he had heard about two Nurses who had been paid on different dates and asked if the payment date was meant to differ. David said that they should be paid on the same date and would investigate this with SEAS.

Personnel

13. Donald reported that he was awaiting the final results of the Special Bonus Scheme evaluation. Advance indications showed the scheme was not proving popular although this view was based on a very low response rate. It might be that since staff could take time off more easily under the new flexi arrangements, they would prefer bonuses to be in cash. Donald said that although statistical data for sick absence had not been available for the quarter, SAAS had still been taking action on the cases where staff had hit the ‘trigger’ point.

14. David asked about progress on filling vacancies as the report provided data only up to the end of March. Audrey said that the main difficulty had been in seasonally recurring posts where a number remained vacant but would be filled by student placements for much of the summer. Other vacancies would have to be filled with Pertemps staff. The new resourcing policy was unlikely to work for SAAS as the majority of ETLTD staff were based in Glasgow. Some consideration was being given to establishing a West Edinburgh consortium to facilitate staff moves but it was not as yet clear who was meant to be driving this forward or what form it might take.

Information Systems and Operational Policy

15. Graham reported that the 'proof of concept' for the SMS pilot had been successful. The next step would be to issue a questionnaire to students. This would go out on the 2 June. The development stage of Phase 2 (Universal) of the ILA scheme was now complete. Testing was underway and due to be completed at the end of June. "Go-live" was expected at the end of July/beginning of August.

16. David reported that he had only that morning been informed that the DfEs wanted SLC to have face to face meetings with the Devolved Administrations since they felt that the Company's IT development programme was being over stretched by our demands. However, the SLC had given no indication that they could not manage current projects and DfES' motives in asking for these meetings to take place were unclear.

17. A high level meeting with the Department was needed soon to discuss the principles on which we pay a proportion of SLC's running costs. Meantime, Stephen and Donald would have a working level meeting with Company staff to agree running cost figures which we had been given by DfES and SLC themselves but which were now being disputed.

18. Mark asked if the telephony system was still due to go live in July and if it was a standard system to install. Graham said that we were on target for July. The system was on a par with a medium sized ICT project in that it would be supported by servers and tailored to specific user requirements. If any unforeseen problems were to arise, it should be possible to fall back on the present system until they could be resolved.

Chief Executive's Office

19. David said that there was nothing to add to the updates in the Quarterly report. On benchmarking, Frances said that there had been delay in getting any further information from Hampshire LEA but this was being pursued. Other organisations were also being looked at including, for example, the staff turnover rates and call handling performance of the SLC.

Personnel Report

20. The contents of the report were noted. Donald commented that another table had been added to the report to show a comparison in sick absence levels with SPPA whose operations were broadly similar to those of SAAS.

21. Date of Next Meeting

To be arranged.

Chief Executive's Office

27 May 2005