

SAAS Quarterly Review Meeting – Wednesday 1st March 2006 at 10.30am

Attending: Mark Batho (Chair)
Chris McCrone, ETLLED Finance
Gavin Gray, FfL
David Stephen, SAAS
Graham Gunn, SAAS
Audrey Heatlie, SAAS
Stephen Blyth, SAAS
Tracy Richardson, SAAS
Linda Pender, SAAS (Secretary)

1. David explained that Gavin Gray had been invited to attend today's meeting primarily to discuss the pay loans project but also to see the quarterly review process in action.

Minutes of the previous meeting

2. Minutes of the meeting held on 8 December were agreed.

Matters Arising

3. The following action had been taken since the last meeting:-

- Race Relations Act – Because eligibility for support was dependent on residence and not nationality, many of the considerations departments were being asked to address were covered automatically. One point the Agency would look at would be whether there was a need to make guidance available in other languages for the benefit of parents who might not speak English. This was not necessary for students themselves since a qualification in English was necessary for entry to all HE courses.
- David had met the external review team appointed by SE to scrutinise budget setting and expenditure. It appeared that their report could have far reaching implications for the Department as a whole.
- SAAS staff had recently given evidence on Disabled Student Allowances to the Scottish Parliament's Equal Opportunity Committee. SAAS were closely engaged with FfL and external stakeholders in attempts to improve services to disabled students.

Quarterly Report

CSU

4. Statistics for the new telephony system would be available from the start of the next session. The Agency now had the ability to record calls which would be of great value for training purposes as well as helping settle disputes/complaints. It was well nigh impossible to monitor "lost" calls as many of these were due to the customer abandoning the call for reasons that could not be ascertained. However, it was agreed that it would still be useful to provide an aggregate figure.

5. Processing had been completed by end November for the first time ever. This had allowed CSU to focus on processing travel claims and making preparations for the new session (including staff recruitment and training).

6. A Working Group had been set up to review current targets as it had become clear that present methods of measurement were understating the true levels of performance being achieved.

Finance

7. Expenditure on legal costs for GE would be accrued as the Finance Team were still awaiting court bills.

8. Vote expenditure – The Agency were still awaiting confirmation of VAT provision for SLC. It seemed likely that approximately £1 million might have to be accrued.

9. It was noted that new arrangements to be introduced shortly would empower SLC to withhold loans from students with no NINO (currently only second and subsequent instalments were withheld). However, DWP had now agreed that applying for a student loan would be a valid reason for providing a person with a NINO and this should keep the numbers affected to a minimum.

10. Stephen was currently preparing journal entries for GE income as agreed with Chris's Branch. It was noted that Audit Scotland would look at SAAS's effectiveness in collecting GE in planned future audits.

11. Around 2,000 students had yet to reply to the final reminders and it seemed likely that a high proportion of these would have to be tracked down by trace agents and could result in court actions.

12. A number of EU students had not responded to our letters and SAAS would approach the SLC about using their European debt recovery franchises to pursue these cases. While it was necessary to pursue foreign debt rigorously, VFM could become an issue. Gavin said that FfL were awaiting a steer from Ministers on debt recovery in the EU and further abroad. SAAS would be kept informed.

13. Chris agreed to speak to Stephen outwith the meeting about a number of legal invoices which had not been paid within 30 days.

14. David said that an agreement had been reached with SE where SAAS could use CAB BACS software to make payments directly to students. Vote accounting would continue be done through SEAS post payment. A systems test was planned for June.

Personnel

15. The Personnel Team had carried out an in-house recruitment exercise for CSU. All application forms and documentation had been produced in-house and a simplified advert had saved £6k. Four campaigns had resulted in over 200 applications, and over 80 interviews. All posts had now been filled and some reserve candidates identified. Overall, this had been a much quicker and cheaper process than using SE's HR recruitment service and staff were expected to take up post in March.

16. It was noted that Agencies were now responsible for calculating Annual Leave entitlement. David raised some concern about the SE e-HR Project since it appeared that there had been major slippage and Agencies would be excluded from the initial roll-out.

IT & Operational Policy

17. Shortened web applications – the project was on schedule and was being developed in-house as the Team now have the capability to write code. More of this type of work would be carried out in-house if the project was successful.

18. EDM – A new B3 with experience in performance management systems was now heading EDM and hoped to reduce the target to get applications from EDM into GRASS from three days to one. It was noted that a reduction of even one day would be a significant achievement.

19. BCP – The BSU had started a programme of testing the BCP. This had highlighted a problem with the UPS which did not have the capacity necessary to cope with the new telephony system.

20. A workshop with FfL had been arranged to discuss communication and partnership working.

21. DfES consultants were due to visit SAAS on 3 March to look at our systems and how we process applications more quickly than LEAs.

22. Shared services – It was noted that a full costing of the scanning exercise for SPPA had been prepared. However, it remained unclear whether and when this project might go ahead.

Chief Executive's Office

23. The Agency had achieved the Shaw Silver Award and were considering working towards the Gold Award.

24. The Agency had had a Quality Scotland business excellence assessment on 23 February. A short list of finalists for the 2006 Public Sector Excellence awards would be announced at an event on 29 March.

Personnel Report

25. This report was tabled for information.

Any Other Business

26. Gavin agreed to copy the Internal Audit report on FfL's end of the GE operation to David as it raised points for SAAS.

27. An update on GE was being provided on a monthly basis which would be copied to Gavin Gray and Mark Batho.

Date of Next Meeting

28. To be arranged.

Chief Executive's Office
2nd March 2006