

## SAAS Quarterly Review Meeting – Tuesday 4<sup>th</sup> September 2007 at 3.30 pm

Attending: Mark Batho (Chair)  
Stephen Kerr, HELS  
Chris McCrone, ETLLD Finance  
David Stephen, SAAS  
Graham Gunn, SAAS  
Audrey Heatlie, SAAS  
Audrey Shimmons, SAAS  
Linda Pender, SAAS (Secretary)

Apologies: Tracy Richardson, SAAS

### Minutes of the previous meeting

1. The minutes of the meeting held on 23 May 2007 were agreed subject to the following amendment at paragraph 9 – “ETLLD” should be changed to “SLC”.

### Quarterly Report

#### Customer Services Unit

2. Over 91,000 applications had now been processed (approx 70% of expected total). 66% of applications had been received online. This was a better performance than in any previous year. 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. CSU were working overtime over the weekend to catch up with mail.

3. Phones had been very busy after the exam results were issued. Although the number of phone lines had been increased, demand always outstripped supply at this time of year due to physical and financial constraints on the number of staff the Agency can realistically employ. The new phone system was working well and the call recording system was a benefit to SAAS. CSU were still working with contact central to fix the problem with management information and hoped to be in a position to begin providing call handling statistics again by next quarter.

4. There had also been an increase in phone calls due to various SLC issues. The SLC had introduced a new process to validate national insurance numbers with DWP before students receive their first payments which could result in a delay of up to 6 weeks in money reaching them.

5. ILA – 73,500 accounts were now open. A recent advertising campaign had been successful and over 3,000 new applications had still to be processed.

6. As over 66% of student support applications had been made online the Agency wanted to stop issuing paper applications to institutions as from 2008/09. However, paper forms would still be made available on request for those who, for whatever reason, could not or would not use the web service. It was agreed that this would be an operational decision as long as paper forms were still made available on request. It was also suggested that, in advance of withdrawing paper forms in this way, the Agency carry out some analysis by postcode of paper applications received to ascertain if there might be problems in using online applications in particular areas. **Action** : David

#### Finance

7. DRC's were on target in the June report. Baseline figures would be amended for ILA costs and a transfer of legal costs from programme to DRCs would be made in the autumn.

8. The programme expenditure budget and forecast outturn was being kept under review by Chris and Audrey and would require a number of adjustments in the autumn budget revision. It was agreed to run an exercise in October to check the accuracy of the student numbers estimated by economists for 2007/08. **Action**: Audrey Shimmons

9. It was noted that the number of students taking out loans had decreased.
10. Fraud – The lone parent child care grant exercise was now complete. The main problem it had revealed was that several students were using unregistered providers or family members to provide childcare. Recent examination of travel claims had resulted in a number of voluntary repayments by students who had been claiming reimbursement of expenses that they had not in fact incurred or to which they were not entitled. There had been a successful prosecution of a student who had forged signatures to claim DSA illicitly: sentencing was expected on 7<sup>th</sup> September.
11. Debt recovery – overpayment cases were increasing but it was hoped that monthly payments would begin to reduce the amount that needed to be recovered.
12. The legislative programme had been announced today and included the timetable for the GE bill. This would see the first stage debate take place in October – earlier than originally expected.
13. All policy decisions remained dependent on the outcome of the spending review. However, it seemed likely that the Agency would only be required to implement changes to means testing and part time funding for 2008/09.

#### Personnel

14. David and Tracy had recently met Jaqui Jones, Head of HR Pay Policy to discuss the current relationship between Agencies and 'the centre'. Discussion had been more positive than expected and it was hoped that the Agency would in future have more flexibility to align some of its terms and conditions of service more closely to business needs.

#### Information Systems & Operational Policy

15. The Agency had recently introduced its new website which had been well received by representatives from the HE sector at its launch.
16. GRASS Rewrite – The Agency had carried out a successful procurement exercise for new software. Staff training and workshops had already been held to produce the high level functional design and plan. The scope of the project had been amended to include the new means test. The new system would make the BSU less reliant on BT and savings would be made on support and development costs. It was also hoped that a shorter period of time would be required for programming new rules resulting from policy changes.
17. BSU recruitment – an in house recruitment campaign had successfully recruited 4 internal (3 for STEPS project) and 3 external candidates. This had been quicker and cheaper than waiting for the ISIS recruitment board which would be held later in the year.
18. The new system was well within budget at this stage and funding was available for bringing in external consultancy support should this prove necessary. Support for the software package would cost around £15k - £20k per year as in-house staff would be trained to fix system faults.

#### Date of the Next Meeting

19. The next meeting would be held on Tuesday 13<sup>th</sup> November @ 2.00 pm