

SAAS Quarterly Review Meeting – Thursday 20 November 2008

Attending: David Stephen, SAAS (Chair)
Andrew Scott, Director LL
Stephen Kerr, HELS
Chris McCrone, ELL, Finance
Graham Gunn, SAAS
Audrey Heatlie, SAAS
Audrey Shimmons, SAAS
Maureen Shevas, SAAS
Linda Pender, SAAS (Secretary)
Michael Jackson, SAAS (for StEPs presentation only)

Minutes of the previous meeting

1. The minutes of the last meeting held on 22 May 2008 were agreed.
2. In response to a query from Chris, it was noted that the Colsys system was not owned by SAAS but rented on a transactional charge basis.

Update since the last meeting

3. David updated the meeting on the following issues:-
 - on-line applications – the Agency would stop issuing paper applications as from next year which would increase the take up of online services to nearer 100%.
 - ILA – The Agency were developing a good working relationship with SDS. It was noted that as from 2009, funding for ILA 200 would have to be obtained from SDS to whom the budget was being transferred (ILA 500 money was held by SAAS).
 - Quality Scotland – Andrew Cubie had personally intervened and as a result the Agency would be permitted to participate free of charge in Quality Scotland's next excellence awards scheme.
 - Scanning services – The Agency had been contacted by Logica about a scanning contract recently advertised by SQA. It was agreed that SAAS should promote wider awareness within SG and associated public bodies of the scanning services the Agency could potentially offer.
 - ISO14001 – The Agency had achieved the standard for environmental management procedures in July 2008.
 - Forecasting – the annual statistical report had been issued this week and would be used to examine trends. Mark Batho was known to have spoken to John Ireland about the need to review the forecasting model but there had been no feedback.
Action: Stephen Kerr agreed to speak to John Ireland to establish where things had got to.

Quarterly Report

Customer Services Unit

4. CSU had completed the processing season by end October - 3 weeks earlier than the previous best ever performance last year. This had been due in part to increased take up of online applications (now 81%). CSU still had outstanding mail and e-mail correspondence but this would be dealt with within the 21 day target.

5. ILA500 – The scheme remained undersubscribed with only around 2,500 applications having so far been received.

6. Graduate Endowment – 900 cases (postgraduate deferrers) would be passed to the debt recovery team later this month. A number of complaints were still being received from students who remained legally liable to pay the GE despite its abolition. **Action:** Chris McCrone to be given a breakdown of GE debtors. Audrey Shimmons would provide Stephen Kerr with the number of students who had taken up the offer to pay GE in instalments.

Finance

7. Forecast outturn would be updated using end – October data (by when almost all applications had been received). **Action:** Audrey Shimmons would circulate revised figures.

8. There had been around 1,000 more student applicants this session but 2,000 fewer students were receiving bursaries and loans. It was noted that there had been a reduction in loan applications year on year and that the reduction in YSB payments might be due to an increase in EU ‘fees only’ students. On the basis of their own loan data, the SLC were forecasting an almost identical outturn.

9. Discretionary funds were shown as fully spent. This was because SAAS makes block payments to the institutions who actually spend the funds. The Agency then reallocates any underspent funding returned to us by individual institutions. **Action:** The Agency would be collecting information on institutional spend which would form part of the report back to the Committee on the effects of the new means test.

10. A new directive from John Swinney and the Head of Finance required approval for new expenditure proposals over £250,000. Any underspends had to be declared and not automatically transferred to other budgets under pressure. Andrew Scott emphasised the need for good communications on budgetary/finance matters to ensure that rigorous control could be maintained. Audrey Shimmons would provide revised budgetary information for the Spring budget review in mid December to Stephen Kerr.

11. There was discussion of the new international finance reporting standards and how these might affect the Agency. There were technical issues relating to the accounting treatment of IT software and the GVH lease which Audrey and Chris would discuss outwith the meeting.

12. GE – A law student had notified an intention to challenge GE legislation through the courts although his grounds for doing so were not yet clear. **Action:** Audrey Shimmons to let Stephen Kerr have more details in due course.

Human Resources

13. Homeworking project –The project team would assemble revised costs for IT broadband, installation of IT equipment and requirements for printing facilities before taking the pilot scheme forward.

14. Vacancies – The HR Team were currently carrying out a recruitment exercise but vacancies were being filled by Pertemps for the time being. The Team had taken part in a recruitment fair at the Gyle which had resulted in 25 notes of interest (this had been exceptional VFM at a cost of only £800 which included radio and press advertising).

15. It was noted that SG divisions were not being allowed to make special bonus payments this year but no similar prohibition had been notified to SAAS..

Information Systems & Operational Policy

16. BT proposals for strengthening the online system would only be partially implemented as they were felt to be excessive. The online system had proved to be sufficiently robust to cope with 81% of applications this year and should not require major enhancement to cope with nearer to 100% in 2009.

17. Policy Team visits had increased greatly over the last few years with 210 visits made so far this year. These now included attendance at European events in conjunction with HEI teams and others wishing to promote Scottish education abroad. Feedback from these events had been uniformly excellent.

Chief Executive's Office

18. Healthy Working Lives – The Agency had been assessed for the HWLs Gold Award and we would hear if we had been successful within the next two weeks.

19. The Agency's Environmental Report had been tabled. This showed considerable progress in reducing energy and water consumption, improving recycling and huge savings in paper usage. Copies of the report would be sent to Philip Rycroft and James Hynd for their respective interests in environmental matters.

Any Other Business

20. The Agency were currently looking at proposals for changes to DSA but would not be bidding for additional resources.

21. Means testing Evidence - The Agency were carrying out a survey of FE bursary officers on evidence requirements. A paper would go to Ministers early in 2009 seeking views on the overall approach they would wish SAAS to take to such matters in future.

22. SAAS had been asked to comment on proposed new powers for Scottish Ministers on data sharing which could help the Agency in a number of its functions.

StEPS Presentation

23. Following the decision not to go live with the new system in April, work had concentrated on ILA 500. This part of the system was currently in test and was being used as a proof of concept. As with any new system, a number of faults were being

found that had to be fixed but it was clear that the major components of the system were working and awards could be calculated. The one remaining major area of difficulty was the user interface which was still too slow to be used in a live operating environment. However, more help was now being provided by the software supplier who had experience of overcoming similar problems that had been encountered elsewhere.

24. It was confirmed that GRASS would have to continue to operate beyond the year end since the closing date for 2008 – 09 applications was June 2009. This meant that if by any chance StEPS was not ready in time for the start of next season, GRASS would still be available as a fallback. Andrew Scott asked to be kept in touch on this last point and stressed the need to ensure that nothing be allowed to disrupt normal service to the public.

Date of the Next Meeting

25. The next quarterly review would be in February 2009. Dates would be canvassed shortly.

SAAS
Chief Executive's Office
21 November 2008