

SOLAS – Further Education and Training Authority
Ordinary Board Meeting No. 089
Wednesday, 31st January, 2024
Meeting Note

Present: Mr. S. Aylward - Chairperson
Mr. A. Brownlee - Chief Executive Officer
Ms. O. Coughlan
Mr. P. Cremmins
Ms. S. Gallagher
Ms. Y. McNulty
Mr. K. Marshall
Mr. N. O'Donnellan
Dr. N. O'Reilly
Ms. S. O'Shea
Ms. C. Sheridan

Mr. C.J. Dunne - SOLAS Executive
Ms. N. White - SOLAS Executive

Apologies: None

In attendance: Ms. M. Walshe - Secretary
Ms. T. Dunne - Board Secretariat
Dr. M-L Trant - National Apprenticeship Office
Ms. N. White - SOLAS
Dr. A. Behan - SOLAS
Mr. G. Gasparro - SOLAS
Mr. R. Tierney - SOLAS
Mr. P. Seery - SOLAS
Ms. K. O'Rourke - SOLAS
Ms. L. Pakenham - SOLAS
Mr. C. Ferry - SOLAS
Mr. P. Kivlehan - SOLAS

PART 1 – Ordinary Board meeting

Chairperson's Opening Comments

The Chairperson welcomed Board members to the meeting.

Conflict of Interest

At the outset of the meeting, Board members were invited to declare any potential or actual conflict of interest.

There were no conflicts arising.

1. Minutes

(i) (Draft) Minutes – No. 088 – Thursday, 14th December, 2023

The Board approved the minutes of Board meeting No. 088 held on Thursday, 14th December, 2023, subject to typographical amendment.

(ii) (Draft) Meeting Note (*for publication*) - No. 088 – Thursday, 14th December, 2024

The Board approved the Meeting Note of meeting No. 088 held on Thursday, 14th December, 2023, subject to typographical amendment.

2. Matters Arising

There were no matters arising.

3. Report from Chief Executive Officer (+ Balanced Scorecard – PPT)

The Board noted the CEO Report which had been circulated in advance of the Board meeting.

Items covered in the CEO Report and highlighted on the day included:

- Noting of the draft SOLAS Corporate Plan 2024-2026.
- The Board noted the details of initial guiding allocations to ETBs for 2024 as presented by the CEO. Detailed funding, strategy and performance meetings with each ETB were to be held through February and early March 2024 to allow for the presentation of final allocations for Board approval at the 21st March 2024 meeting.
- Detail of changes to internal reporting arrangements.
- An update on work to address the craft apprenticeship backlog with a reduction to 3,919 waiting over six months at year end and further reductions anticipated when end of January 2024 levels were confirmed.
- The formal launch of a suite of twenty-four (24) micro-qualifications by Minister Simon Harris TD and Minister Neale Richmond TD, reflecting their co-design by ETBs and enterprise partners.
- An update on communications activity since the last Board meeting.

Balanced Scorecard

The CEO reported on the current assessment of the RAG status on the Balanced Scorecard. Reforming apprenticeships remained at status red, ETB Funding and ETB Saving remained at status amber until ETB budgets are confirmed, Capital funding was at green.

Investors in Diversity – Silver Award

The CEO advised that on the morning of the Board meeting it had been confirmed that SOLAS had been awarded the Investors in Diversity - Silver Award.

The Chairperson and Board thanked the CEO for the comprehensive update and discussed the report.

4. Further Education and Training (FET) College of the Future (CotF) – Capital Plan 2024

Proposal

The Board was asked to: -

- (i) Approve the confirmed costs of site purchases for FET College of the Future (CotF) Major projects at Dunboyne (LMETB) and Kilkenny (KCETB).
- (ii) Approve, in principle, the allocation of funding against the potential cost of site purchase for the FET College of the Future (CotF) Major project at Swords, Co. Dublin
- (iii) Note current progress on 12 FET College of the Future Major project submissions.

College of the Future Major Projects

The Board was provided with a comprehensive update on progress since the last update at the 14th December, 2023 Board meeting.

The Board was advised that following its approval in principle of costs for two site purchases at its 14th December, 2024 Board meeting. Details of final costs for LMETB's Dunboyne College of Further Education and Training for lands comprising 24.91 acres at Station Road, Dunboyne, Co. Meath and KCETB's Kilkenny College of Further Education and Training comprising 12 acres at Blanchfield Island, Kilkenny, Co. Kilkenny.

The Board was advised that Dublin Dun Laoghaire ETB was engaged in discussions with Fingal Local Authority and with a Chartered Valuation Surveying consultant to identify and secure a site in Swords, Co. Dublin for the development of the Fingal College of Further Education and Training.

The Board was asked to note that on 12th January, 2024, twelve (12) Preliminary Business Cases (PBC) for the College of the Future Major projects were received, of which five (5) PBCs were deemed incomplete pending the

completion of Site Acquisition processes. All twelve (12) submissions will be evaluated against the requirements of the Infrastructure Guidelines.

The Board approved the proposals set out in the Board paper. A further update will be provided to the Board at its next scheduled meeting on 21st March, 2024.

Board Decision

The Board:-

- (i) Approved the confirmed costs of site purchases for FET College of the Future (CotF) Major projects at Dunboyne (LMETB) and Kilkenny (KCETB).
- (ii) Approved, in principle, the allocation of funding against the potential cost of site purchase for the FET College of the Future (CotF) Major project at Swords, Co. Dublin.
- (iii) Noted current progress of 12 FET College of the Future Major project submissions.

5. **SOLAS Capital Plan 2024**

Proposal

The Board was asked to note and authorise the SOLAS Capital Plan for 2024.

Overview and Discussion

The Board was advised that the 2024 total SOLAS capital allocation is €66.0m, of which €65.5m is to cover ETB capital requirements and €0.5m to cover SOLAS capital requirements. Approval was sought for overall ETB capital grants amounting to €65.5 the utilisation of which would be set out in a separate Board paper. Board approval was also sought for the utilisation of the SOLAS €0.5m capital funding allocation in 2024.

SOLAS Capital Budget

The Board was provided with an overview of the proposed plan for expenditure of the €500,000 for SOLAS capital needs in 2024 which will be spent on planned equipment needs and other IT upgrades as set out in the Board paper.

Board Decision

The Board noted and approved the SOLAS 2024 Capital Plan.

6. **Open Framework Agreement for supply of IT Contractors**

Proposal

The Board was asked to approve the creation of a Framework Agreement for the supply of IT contractors, the purpose of which is to assist SOLAS ICT and relevant business units in fulfilling existing and future business demands. These contractors will supplement the existing in-house ICT and Digital team.

It is expected that the Framework will run for two years from March 2024 to 2026, with the option to renew for a further two years.

Overview and Discussion

The Board was advised that following Board approval to proceed to tender in November 2023, a tender process had taken place, details of which were in the Board paper, and approval was sought for the awarding of the contract.

The Board was advised that, in event of a new resource being required, a mini competition will be run using the proposed Framework.

Board Decision

The Board approved the creation of a Framework Agreement for the supply of IT contractors, the purpose of which is to assist SOLAS ICT and relevant business units in fulfilling existing and future business demands. These contractors will supplement the existing in-house ICT and Digital team. The Framework will run for two years from March 2024 to 2026, with the option to renew for a further two years.

7. Communications Plan 2024

Proposal

The Board was asked to:

- (i) Note the approach and outline plan of communications activity across all SOLAS business units in 2024.
- (ii) Approve planned 2024 media expenditure under the new media buying contract with Havas Media for all SOLAS business units.
- (iii) Approve the award of a contract for creative services for SOLAS over a period of up to four years following a tendering process which utilised an Office of Government Procurement (OGP) Framework.
- (iv) Approve expenditure on the Adult Literacy for Life (ALL) direct mail activity planned for Q1 of 2024.

Overview and Discussion

Following a request at the 14th December 2023 Board meeting, the Communications team presented an overview of the 2024 Communications Plan which included details of planned campaign activity as well as the approach to strategic communications for SOLAS.

Outline Communications Plan 2024

Details of the planned campaign activity in 2024 which will include communications and marketing activities using paid (media buying), earned (press releases, events, stakeholder engagement) and owned media (social media channels and websites) for campaigns including Generation Apprenticeship, Adult Literacy for Life, a school leaver campaign, construction and Enterprise, Employees and Skills.

SOLAS Strategic Communications Plan 2024

The Board was informed of the proposed actions under the SOLAS Strategic Communications Plan 2024, as detailed in the Board paper including media and stakeholder engagement, targeted events and thought leadership.

Approval of Planned Paid Media Expenditure 2024

The Board was asked to approve planned media expenditure by all business units in 2024. The Board paper provided a breakdown of these costs for each of the SOLAS business unit campaigns (p.5 of Board Paper 089.7 refers).

Award of a Contract for Creative Campaign Services for SOLAS

At its meeting on 9th February 2023, the Board approved the 2023 SOLAS Procurement Plan which included a tender for Creative Campaign Services (Board Paper 080.6 refers). Following a tender process which was detailed in the Board paper, approval was sought for the awarding of the contract. It will run for three years, with a possible one-year extension.

Adult Literacy for Life - Door Drop Campaign

A key deliverable of the Adult Literacy for Life Strategy is to run a major national campaign around literacy awareness and highlight the supports available. During 2023, two phases of the campaign were run details of which were included in the Board paper.

The Board was advised that the ALL National Programme Office (NPO) proposes to complement Phase 2 of the paid media campaign by delivering a targeted national leaflet door drop in Q1, 2024. Board approval was requested to for expenditure on this direct mail campaign.

The Chairperson and Board welcomed and approved the approach set out in the SOLAS Communications Plan 2024 and provided feedback on the plan.

The Executive thanked the Board for its feedback which will be incorporated into the plan.

Board Decision

The Board: -

- Noted the approach and outline plan of communications activity across all business units in 2024.
- Approved planned media expenditure under the new media buying contract with Havas Media in 2024 for all business units.
- Approved the award of a contract for creative services for SOLAS up to a maximum over a period of up to four years following a tendering process utilising an Office of Government Procurement (OGP) Framework.
- Approved expenditure on the Adult Literacy for Life direct mail activity planned for Q1, 2024.

**8. National Apprenticeship Office (NAO)
Progress Report 2023 and Plans 2024**

Proposal

The Board was asked to note and discuss the following Reports and updates: -

- (i) 'Eliminating Phase 2 training days for Craft Apprenticeships' – (January 2024)
- (ii) 'Apprenticeship Capacity Oversight Reports' - Key Dashboards – (January 2024)
- (iii) 'Apprenticeship Action Plan - Draft Progress Report 2023 and Plans 2024'

Overview and Discussion

The National Apprenticeship Office (NAO) monthly Report (January 2024) provided an update on the emergency plan to reduce Phase 2 craft apprenticeship waiting lists [Board Paper 089.8(i)].

- (i) *Eliminating Phase 2 Training Delays for Craft Apprentices – January 2024 Project Report*

The Board noted the project report that had been circulated in the Board packs and was advised that the report provided detailed updates on the emergency plan to eliminate Phase 2 training delays in 2024. Included in the report were key 'input' trackers, to track delivery of training in ETBs and other Phase 2 partners, on a month-to-month basis.

- (ii) *Apprenticeship Capacity Oversight Report for January 2024 – Key Dashboards (January 2024)*

The Board was advised on the areas of note from the January 2024 Apprenticeship Capacity Oversight Report.

- (iii) *Apprenticeship Action Plan - Draft Progress Report 2023 and Plans 2024*

Throughout 2023, the Board was updated on progress against the Action Plan for Apprenticeship 2021-2025 with implementation due to be completed at end 2025.

A draft report was included in the Board pack detailed progress, learnings from 2023 and implementation plans for 2024 across each of following objectives: -

The Board was advised that the two key priorities for 2024 are to eliminate the craft training delays and the implementation of the new single integrated apprenticeship system.

Board Decision

The Board noted and discussed the following Reports and updates: -

- (i) 'Eliminating Phase 2 training days for Craft Apprenticeships' – (January 2024)
- (ii) 'Apprenticeship Capacity Oversight Reports' - Key Dashboards – (January 2024).
- (iii) 'Apprenticeship Action Plan - Draft Progress Report 2023 and Plans 2024'.

9. Outline Budget 2024 Exchequer & National Training Fund (NTF) Allocations

Proposal

The Board was asked to note the allocations as presented, for information purposes only. More detailed papers are to be considered at the March 21st March 2024 meeting, outlining the cost of the SOLAS Further Education and Training (FET) Plan and the resources required and seeking formal approval to implement same.

Overview and Discussion

The Board was advised that on 8th December, 2023, the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) provided a breakdown of the 2023 Exchequer and National Training Fund (NTF) non-capital allocations to SOLAS, the latter being subject to DPENDR approval. The allocations were detailed in Board paper 089.9. The Board was advised that SOLAS was awaiting a formal letter from DFHERIS confirming the 2024 allocations which will provide additional detail regarding the funding and outline where ringfenced funding has been provided for specific purposes.

Allocations

The Board was advised that the total amount allocated to SOLAS for 2024 is €1,121.460m, including capital of €66m as outlined in the revised book of estimates. This comprised of €590.190m in Exchequer funding and €531.270m in respect of the National Training Fund. The total budget, when estimated other income of *circa* €6.0m is added, will be *circa* €1,127.5m.

It was noted that the combined Exchequer / National Training Fund (NTF) allocation represents an increase of *circa* €39.3m or 3.6% as compared with the original 2023 allocation of €1,082.2m.

A summary of the full 2024 allocations compared with 2023 allocations were set out in a table in the Board paper.

Funding of ETBs and Other Organisations during January – April 2024

To ensure continuity of service in early 2024, the Board, at its December 2023 meeting authorised pre-funding to grantees for the first four months of 2024 up to a limit of €316m for ETBs and €5.0m for other FET providers while 2024 allocations were being finalised for Board approval. The Board was advised that following this authorisation, the first tranche of funding to ETBs of €157.151m was paid in January 2024.

Board Decision

The Board noted the allocations presented above, for information purposes only.

The Board noted that a detailed paper is expected to be presented to the Board at the 21st March 2024 Board meeting outlining the cost of the SOLAS FET plan and the resources available to finance the plan.

10. SOLAS Finance Report For the 12-month period to 31st December, 2023

Proposal

The Board was asked to note the Financial Results for the 12-month period to 31st December, 2023 compared with the budget.

Overview and Discussion

The Board was provided an overview of income and expenditure for the twelve-month period ended 31st December 2023 compared with budget.

Total income for the year was €1,084.961m compared with expenditure of €1,076.608m, resulting in a surplus of €8.353m or 0.8%. Total expenditure for the year was €1,076.608m which was €10.092m or 0.9% behind the annual budget of €1,086.700m.

For the period, SOLAS operational costs were under the annual budget by €2.159m or 7.9%. Of this, payroll was underspent by €1.174m or 6.2% and overheads were underspent by €985k or 11.8%. Of this, €630k related to an underspend in Communications & Information Technology. The Board was advised that pension costs of €33.589m for the twelve-month period to 31st December, 2023 were under budget by €1.867m.

SOLAS actual programme costs of €11.849m were under budget by €3.551m compared with the annual budget of €15.4m.

Grants to ETBs and Non-ETBs

At its meeting of 16th of November 2023, the Board approved the maximum ETB non-capital funding allocation of €946.919m. This was based on ETB 3rd Quarter returns and additional funding allocated to SOLAS by DFHERIS following the

supplementary estimates process. The Board was advised that six phases of non-capital grants to ETBs amounting to €925.276m were paid to the end of 2023. The balance of €21.642m was financed from the retention of the 2022 net surplus by ETBs.

Annual Report and Accounts

The Board was advised that the Annual Report and Accounts for 2023 will be presented for noting at the 21st March, 2024 Board meeting.

Board Decision

The Board noted the Financial Results for the 12-month period to 31st December, 2023 compared with the budget.

11. Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) Reporting Framework

Proposal

The Board was asked to note the adoption of the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD) as SOLAS' chosen Environmental, Social & Governance (ESG) reporting framework.

Overview and Discussion

The Board was advised that in preparation of the proposal being considered, SOLAS had researched the significant number of Environmental, Social & Governance (ESG) reporting frameworks in use by various public and private organisations as detailed in the board paper and categorised under four main headings:- Guidance Frameworks, Reporting Frameworks, Mandatory Frameworks and Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD) - 2022/2464/EU: A mandatory EU directive that requires limited independent assurance.

The selected reporting framework, CSRD was published on 5th January, 2023, has an implementation date for prescribed organisations of 1st January, 2024.

The Board was advised that attached to Board Paper 089.12 was a comprehensive SOLAS ESG "footprint" report which identified current SOLAS ESG activities using 2022 data as a baseline and will be further updated with data on 2023 SOLAS ESG activities.

The Board welcomed the proposal that SOLAS becomes an early adopter of the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD), the SEAI Public Sector Energy Programme and, the development of SOLAS' ESG Strategy.

Board Decision

The Board noted the adoption and implementation of the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD) as the SOLAS ESG reporting framework.

12. Board Committees and Advisory Committee

**(i) Committees & Advisory Committee – Revised Terms of Reference
Strategic Planning Committee (SPC)– Revised Terms of Reference**

Proposal

The Board was asked to approve the (revised) Terms of Reference for the SOLAS Strategic Planning Committee (Appendix 1 to Board Paper 089.12).

Background

At its meeting on 31st August, 2023, the Strategic Planning Committee (SPC) reviewed its Terms of Reference which were previously agreed in June 2020. A number of amendments were proposed, and the revised Terms of Reference were circulated at the SPC meeting on 11th December, 2023 and approved for circulation to the Board.

Board Decision

The Board approved the (revised) Terms of Reference for the SOLAS Strategic Planning Committee (SPC).

**(ii) Committees & Advisory Committee
Update from Committee Chairpersons**

Audit and Risk Committee (ARC)

The Chairperson advised that the minutes of the Audit and Risk Committee meeting of Monday, 27th November, 2023 had been circulated with the Board Papers.

A new Chairperson of the Audit and Risk Committee was nominated and approved who will succeed the current on the conclusion of their term of office on the SOLAS Board on 24th March, 2024.

Strategic Planning Committee (SPC)

The Chairperson of the Strategic Planning Committee reported that the Committee had last met in December 2023 and provided an overview of items discussed.

Workforce and Organisational Development Committee (WOD)

The Chairperson of the Workforce and Organisational Development Committee reported that the Committee were due to meet in advance of the next Board meeting and will report on the work of the Committee at the 21st March 2024 Board meeting.

National Apprenticeship Advisory Committee (NAAC)

The Chairperson of the National Apprenticeship Advisory Committee reported that there was no update of significance to report.

(iii) Committees & Advisory Committee - Minutes

(i) Audit and Risk Committee – Minutes – Monday, 29th January, 2024

The Board noted the minutes of the Audit and Risk Committee meeting held on Monday, 29th January, 2024.

(ii) Strategic Planning Committee – Minutes – 31st August, 2023

The Board noted the minutes of the Strategic Planning Committee meeting held on Thursday, 31st August, 2023.

13. Any other Business

The Board discussed planning for an offsite Board meeting and succession planning for Board members.

15. Date of Next Meeting

The next Board meeting will take place on Thursday, 21st March, 2024.

Board Private Session

The Board met in private session.

APPENDIX 1



Time: 09.30am to 15.00pm (Approx.)
Venue: SOLAS - Castleforbes House, Dublin 1

Board of SOLAS Meeting

No. 089 – Wednesday, 31st January, 2024

A G E N D A

PART 1 – Ordinary Board Meeting

[09.30am – 13.00pm]

Note: Declaration of Interests (if any)

- * 1. Minutes
 - (i) (Draft) Minutes – No. 088 – Thursday, 14th December, 2023
 - (ii) (Draft) Meeting Note (*for publication*) - No. 088 – Thursday, 14th December, 2023
- 2. Matters Arising
- * 3. Report from Chief Executive Officer
(+ Balanced Scorecard – PPT)

DECISION ITEMS

- * 4. FET College of the Future (CotF)
Capital Update
- * 5. SOLAS Capital Plan 2024
- * 6. Award of Contract
Open Framework Agreement for supply of IT Contractors
- * 7. Communications Plan 2024

DISCUSSION ITEMS

- * 8. National Apprenticeship Office (NAO)
Progress Report 2023 and Plans 2024
- * 9. Outline Budget 2024
Exchequer & National Training Fund (NTF) Allocations
- * 10. SOLAS Finance Report
For the 12-month period to 31st December, 2023

INFORMATION ITEMS

- * 11. Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) reporting Framework
- * 12. Board Committees and Advisory Committee
 - (i) Committees & Advisory Committee - Terms of Reference
 - Strategic Planning Committee (SPC)
- Revised Terms of Reference
 - (ii) Committee & Advisory Committee
Update from Committee Chairpersons
 - (iii) Committee & Advisory Committee - Minutes
 - (1) Audit and Risk Committee (ARC)
Minutes – Monday, 27th November, 2023
 - (2) Strategic Planning Committee (SPC)
Minutes – Thursday, 31st August, 2023
- 13. Any Other Business
Board Strategy Day 2024
- 14. Date of Next Meeting

Note: **Private Session**

[12.30pm – 13.00pm]

Break

[13.00pm – 13.30pm]

PART 2 – Strategic Planning

[13.30am – 15.00pm]

- * (1) SOLAS Corporate Plan (2024-2026) (*DRAFT*)
- (2) Closing Comments

* (*Denotes Paper*)