

Powering Lifelong Learning & Workforce Transformation

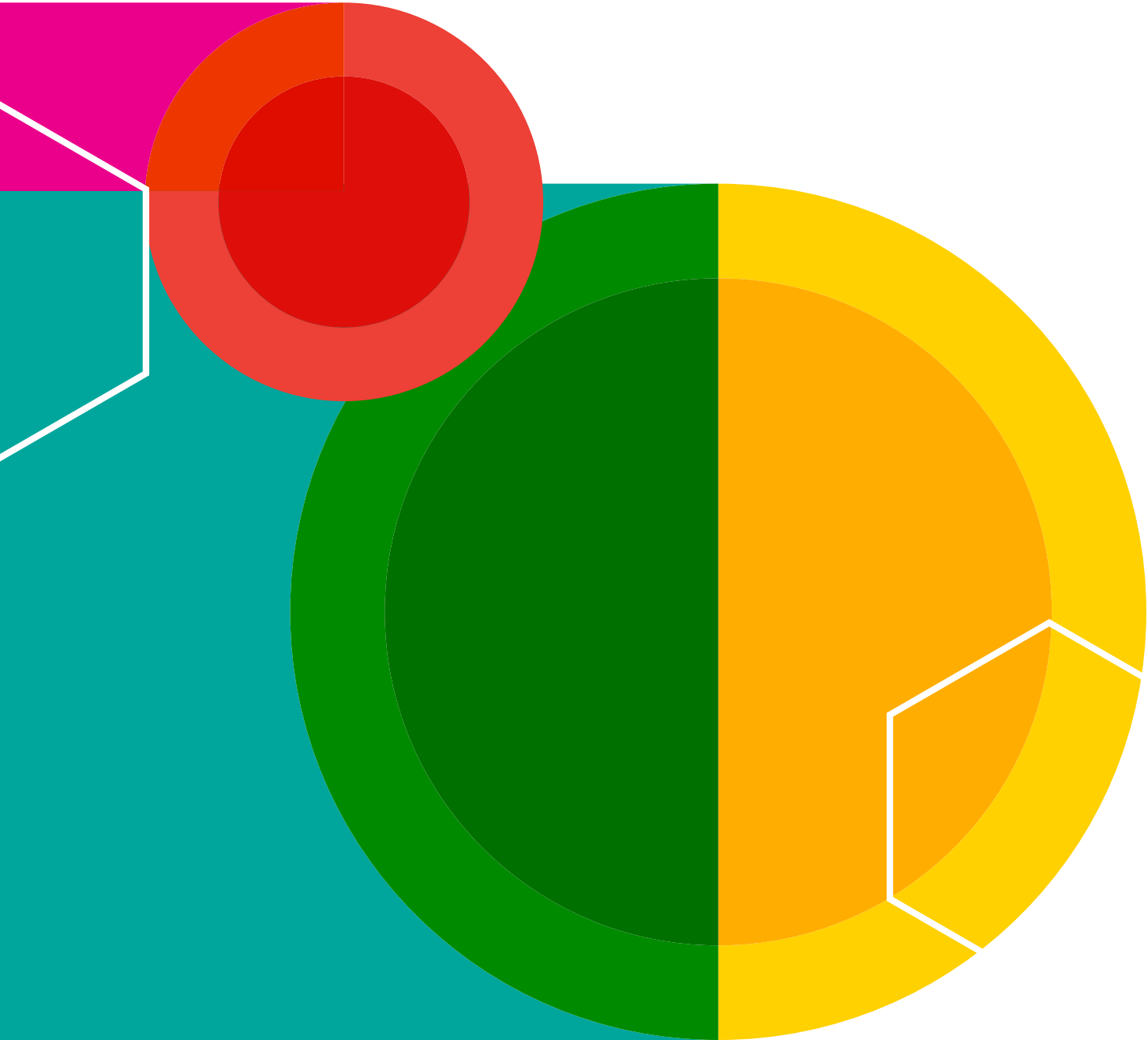
SOLAS Corporate Plan 2024–2026



SOLAS
learning works

Powering Lifelong Learning & Workforce Transformation

SOLAS Corporate Plan 2024–2026



Our Strategy in Summary

Our vision for SOLAS is to power the potential of individuals, communities and enterprise through lifelong learning and workforce transformation. With one-in-ten adults now impacted in some way by the learning supported by SOLAS (some 425,000), our ambition is to grow this further to half-a-million people by 2026, and take the next steps to becoming an OECD world-class skills leader.

This will require funding and focusing of investment in order to respond to the rapidly evolving environment in which further education and training (FET), construction schemes and apprenticeships sit. The transformation journey which SOLAS and its partners have been taking over the last few years must continue apace. Megatrends like climate action, digital transformation, global disruption and ageing demographics have already had a major effect on FET, and this will only exacerbate in the years to come. The particular challenges of AI, and its impact on learning, the learner, the skills needed for work, and the wider world in which we live, will be profound and this plan must ensure they are anticipated and met. We will be expected to be at the forefront of ensuring Ireland has the capability to deliver on its housing and infrastructure needs. At the same time we will be a pivotal driver of equality and inclusion, ensuring access to education for all and pathways that will allow everyone to realise their true potential.

The recent OECD review of Ireland's Skills Strategy made clear the need for a more balanced skills system and a ramp-up of lifelong learning participation to keep pace with international peers. With our department committed to a joined-up tertiary system, the key will be in ensuring that system allows people to dip in and dip out of learning throughout lifetimes and careers, and provides a key resource to enterprise in evolving workplace skills to meet the needs of the future.

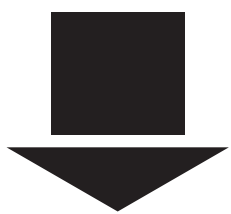
Against this backdrop, there are five overarching themes which will guide the work of SOLAS over the next three years.



These themes will provide a platform for the development of the new FET strategy, the successor to **Transforming Learning**, which will run from 2025 to 2029 and must be submitted to Government by early next year. To effectively develop and drive this strategy, oversee transformation in construction and support growth and reform in apprenticeship, the following page sets out our high-level Corporate Strategic Plan for 2024 to 2026, and an overall ambition in terms of what that work can help achieve.

SOLAS Corporate Plan on One Page

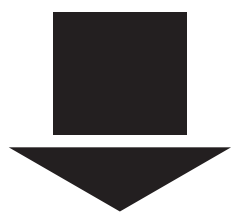
Collaborate for Success	Get Things Done	Work Smarter
<p>We will consult, engage & collaborate with all our key stakeholders to ensure success in following, informing & influencing policy; steering effective, responsive and impactful FET & apprenticeship systems; and ensuring the needs of the learner are reflected in everything we do.</p>	<p>We will focus resources on the most critical SOLAS challenges and continue to build a reputation as a state agency which drives transformation and delivers major initiatives.</p>	<p>We will strive to continually improve our performance, become more innovative and productive, and use data and evidence to drive the approach and strategy across our organisation.</p>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Drive Development of Specialist Skills Centres 2. Target Enterprise 3. Bring Learner Voice to the Heart of SOLAS Decision Making 4. Agree a Full Integration Model for Apprenticeship 5. Foster Agility in Course Development and Delivery 6. Integrate FET within Communities and with Other Services 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Establish the new Construction Licensing Authority 2. Ensure no one waits 6m+ for Apprenticeship Training 3. Realise the Vision of the FET College of the Future 4. Reform Funding and Financial Systems 5. Launch new Strategy aligned with new Strategic Performance Agreements 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Complete the Journey to Outcome-focused FET Delivery 2. Continuously Improve SOLAS Processes 3. Develop Next Generation Learner & Apprenticeship Data Systems 4. Progress a Digital Learning Platform and Framework for the Future 5. Make Evidence-based Decisions & Anticipate Future Skills Needs



500k participating in FET, construction & apprenticeship



15% growth in FET learner base (250k unique learners)



20% growth in FET progression, certification, participation & critical skills needs outcomes

Make it Count

We will make every € of state investment count, deploying it effectively and efficiently to generate impact from FET and apprenticeships, ensuring good governance, accountability and maximum contribution to climate action.

1. Lead on Sustainability Education, Training & Behaviours
2. Fully align Funding, Strategy & Performance
3. Amplify our Capital Investment
4. Be Exemplary in Governance
5. Demonstrate our Reach & Expansion

Live SOLAS

We will be recognised outside of our organisation as a great and progressive place to work, with an adaptable, supported and empowered workforce, where collective leadership and accountability drives success.

1. Embed a Permanent Structure to Reflect our Evolving Remit
2. Champion Change through an Empowered & Flexible Workforce
3. Be Best in Class on Diversity, Inclusion & Wellbeing
4. Evolve our Modern and Progressive Workplace and Culture



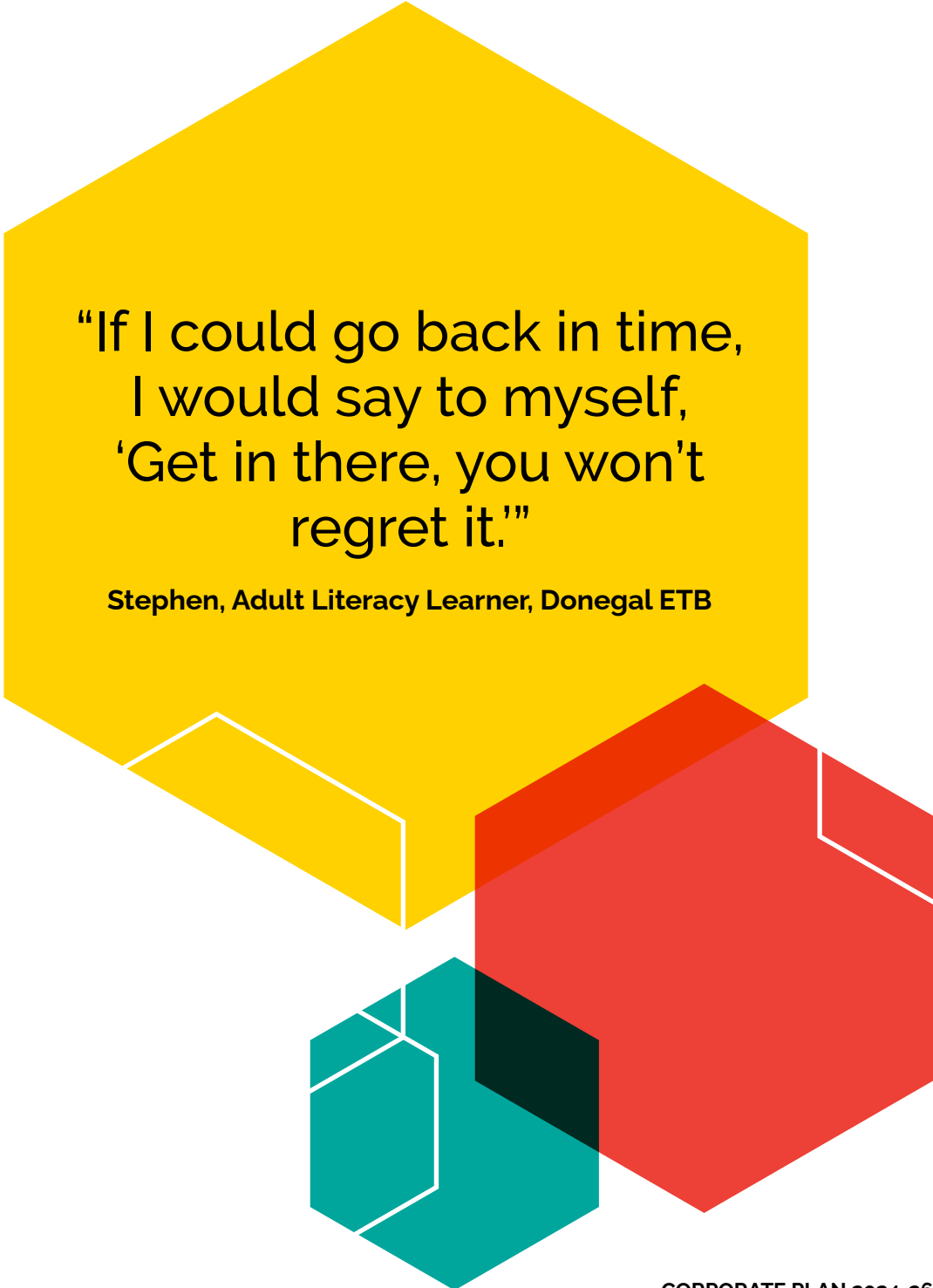
10k new apprentice registrations per year

The ambition does not seek growth for growth's sake, but rather reflects an essential increase in capacity if we are to meet Ireland's upskilling and lifelong learning needs. It will be delivered in the context of a challenging funding environment, with investment for at least the first year of the plan channelled towards apprenticeship as we aim to work with our partners to finally eliminate craft backlogs. This is constraining the finances available to continue the recent expansion in other FET and the programme of FET system reform. So while 2024 will be about consolidating progress and the momentum built up in recent years, there should then be a platform to grow the system further in 2025 and 2026.

This growth will be the core assumption in putting in place the new strategic performance agreements with ETBs and the respective contributions to new national FET system targets, which will formally be agreed with the Minister and Department in the lead-up to 2025. Demand for FET, construction skills courses, and apprenticeships continues to grow like never before, with a real culture change evident in how these pathways are viewed across society. Navigating the funding challenges to continue to grow over the life of the corporate plan is essential, while continuing to drive transformation within the FET system. This transformation will be reflected in more progression within FET and onto HE; in more certification of transversal skills; in increased participation, particularly from key target groups; and in more concentrated focus on our critical national skills needs. Alongside these quantitative measures, change will be reflected in clearer and more consistent learner support; a digital savvy sector offering tailored learning experiences; more recognition of the wider benefits of learning; and a more college-type experience for all engaging in FET.

SOLAS is unrecognisable from where it was five years ago. It is a digitally transformed workplace, with a people culture centred on inclusion, collaboration, development and performance. We have seen new leaders emerge and thrive in a more flexible and supportive working environment, passionate about the value of what we do and driven by the need to push the boundaries and evolve our approach to ensure success. We are already recognised for our work on diversity and wellbeing, but we are wholly committed to being the most progressive public sector organisation in Ireland. Part of this journey will also entail taking a real leadership role in sustainability, where we have an opportunity to enact change not only in SOLAS but also in wider society via the national access to learning we oversee. We also desperately need a permanent organisational structure to reflect the transformed remit of SOLAS and the new challenges that await.

It is thus a truly exciting time for SOLAS and the FET, apprenticeships and construction activities it supports. The ultimate goal of **Transforming Learning**, to substantially grow the contribution and impact of FET, has been realised with incredible expansion through 2022 and 2023 to well beyond COVID levels. It represents the fruits of our labour over the past five years as we sought to work with Government, ETBs and other partners to raise awareness of these other options, make access easier, simplify pathways, offer a consistent quality learner experience, and drive demand via a stronger identity. This plan provides a platform to grow further, and to set out the direction to fully realise FET's potential as a driver of social and economic change.



“If I could go back in time,
I would say to myself,
‘Get in there, you won’t
regret it.’”

Stephen, Adult Literacy Learner, Donegal ETB

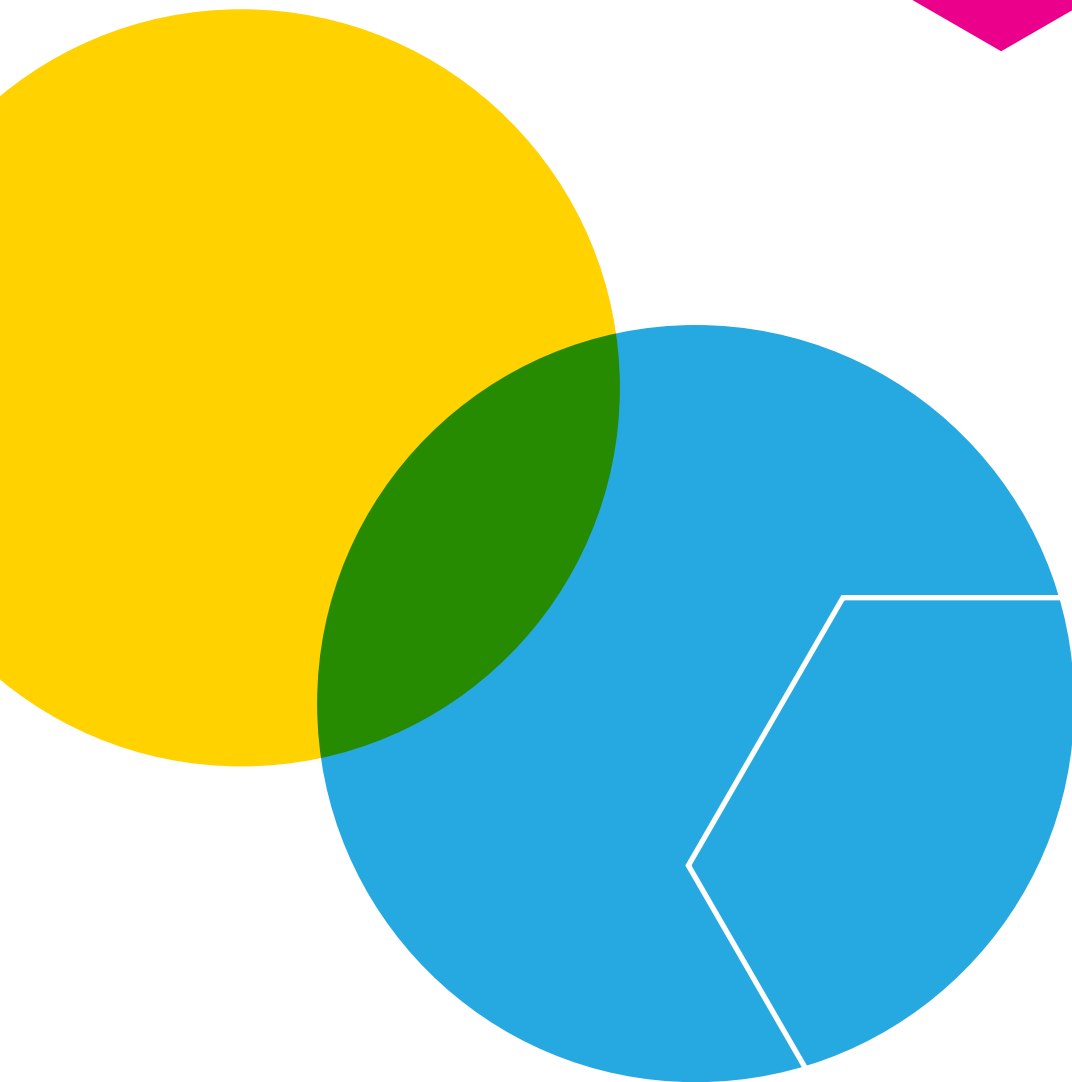
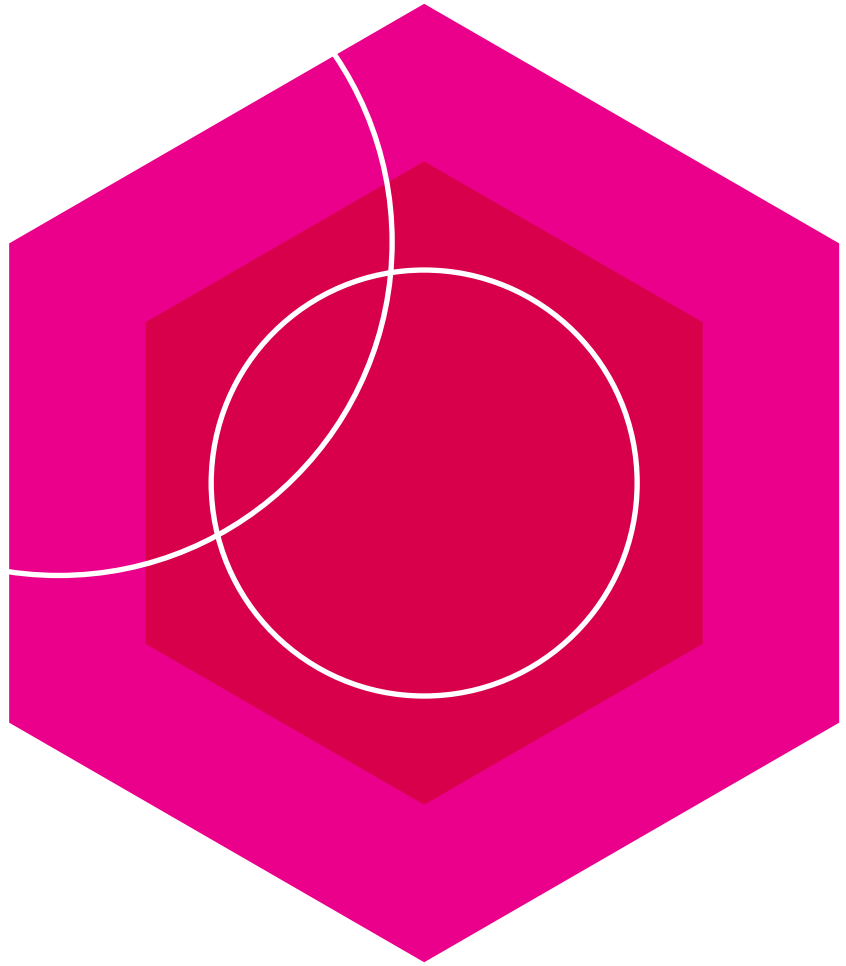
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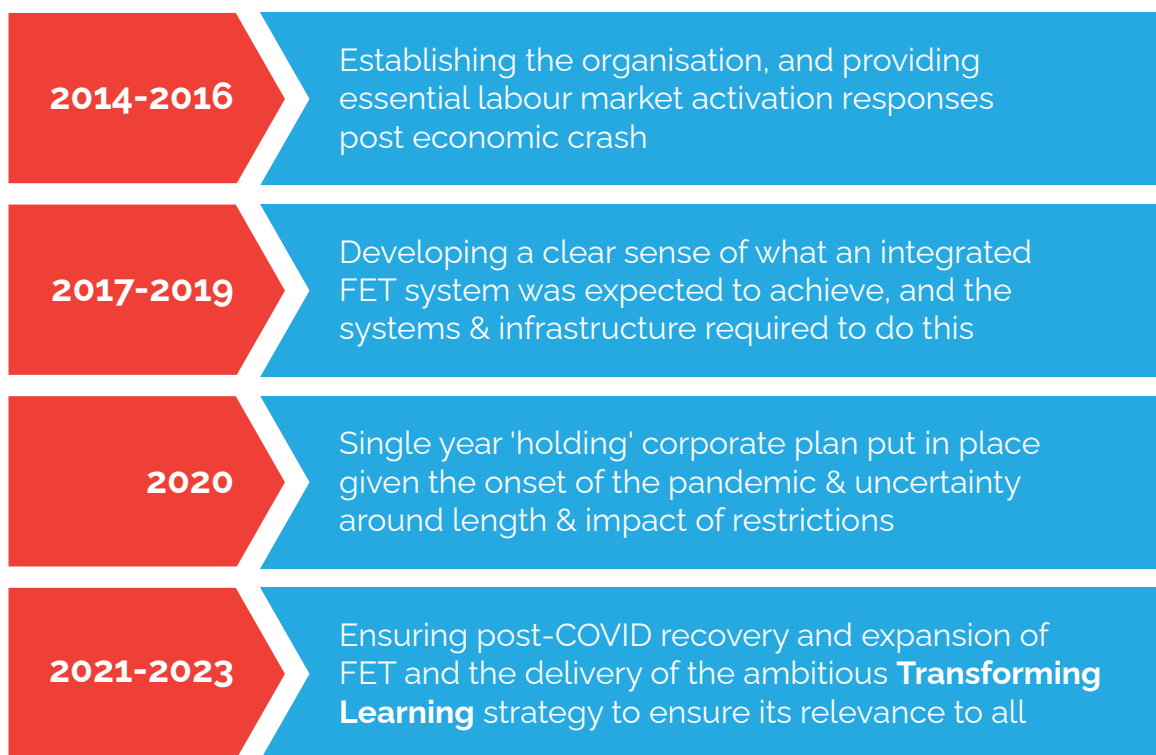


1. Introduction

1.1 Background

This is the fourth corporate plan produced by SOLAS since its inception in 2013, and it marks a pivotal moment for the organisation and the further education and training (FET) and apprenticeship systems it seeks to support and develop. As set out in the diagram below, it arguably marks the culmination of a journey through establishment, development, COVID response and recovery, and ultimate transformation and expansion, where FET and apprenticeship opportunities are now enjoyed by more people than ever before.

Figure 1: Previous SOLAS corporate plans



Such has been the extent of the recovery, growth and transformation across FET and apprenticeship, we have seen 2023 demand extend way beyond pre-COVID levels. In fact, we now stand in the proud position of knowing that **one in ten** people, equating to over 425,000 people, benefited in some way from FET and apprenticeships in 2023. This includes:

Over 150,000 undertaking construction safety training via CSCS, QSCS and Safepass, with a new online renewal system introduced in January 2023, fuelling the workforce required for this critical industry, and driving the delivery of Housing for All. Add to this approaching 5,000 people trained in the NZEB and retrofitting skills essential to retrofit 500,000 homes by 2030, and the construction of a new Modern Methods of Construction (MMC) demonstration park at Mount Lucas by LOETB.

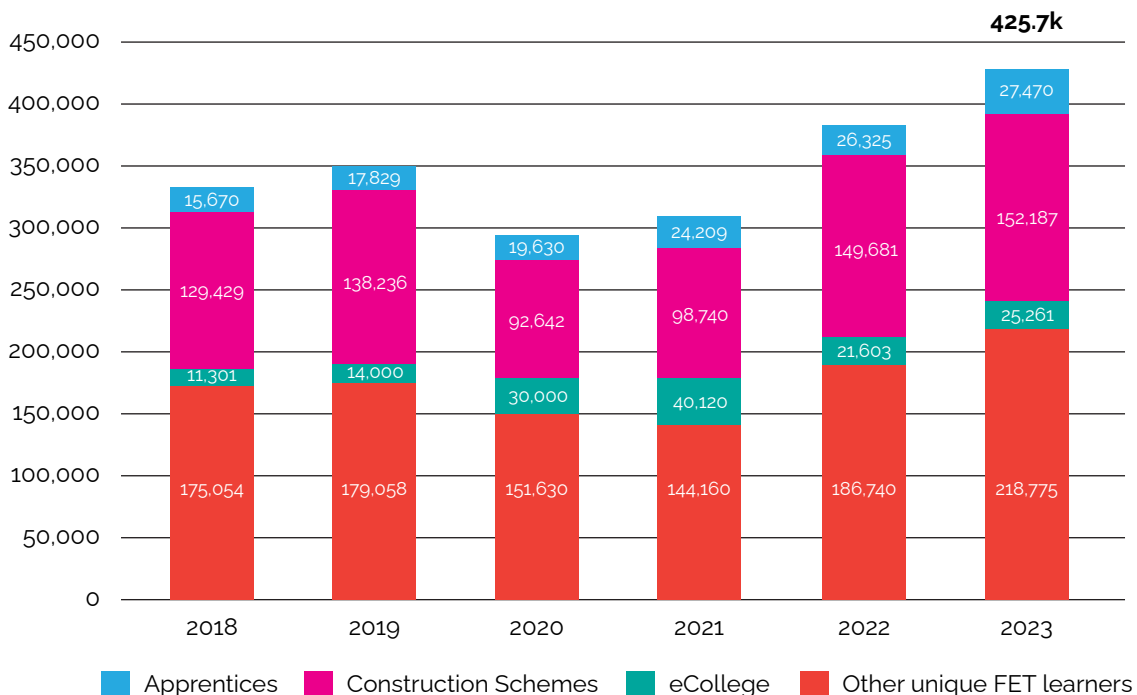
An apprenticeship population of over 27,000, with apprentice registrations hitting their highest annual number ever (8,712), and up 5.1% on 2023. There are now 73 different apprenticeship offerings, and over 9,000 employers with apprentices working for them. The COVID legacy of waiting lists for craft apprenticeship training remains a stubborn issue, and will be the foremost priority for SOLAS and its partners in 2024, but it is important to stress that the number of those waiting over 6 months for this training has reduced from 8,253 at its peak, to 4,018 at end December 2023 (of which 3,919 are waiting for Phase 2).

Around 219,000 unique learners taking other further education and training courses, with some 375,000 places taken up during the year (as many of our courses are short and many FET learners take more than one in a year). This is up around a fifth on 2022 levels, which is an amazing achievement.

Trends within FET underlining its growing importance to everyone across our communities. PLC enrolments (a prime destination for school leavers) are up 11% year-on-year, the sector is supporting over 30,000 Ukrainians in English language and other skills, and 23,440 employees are upskilling via the Skills to Advance initiative, up by 48% on 2022 levels.

Participation on our eCollege courses growing by around 33% to 25,000 learners, gradually approaching the mass demand levels seen during COVID when we opened up the online resource to everyone. This has been fuelled by diversifying the offering, with green skills now part of the eCollege portfolio, and further plans to develop it as a gateway into FET in 2024.

Figure 2: People impacted by SOLAS Work 2018-2023

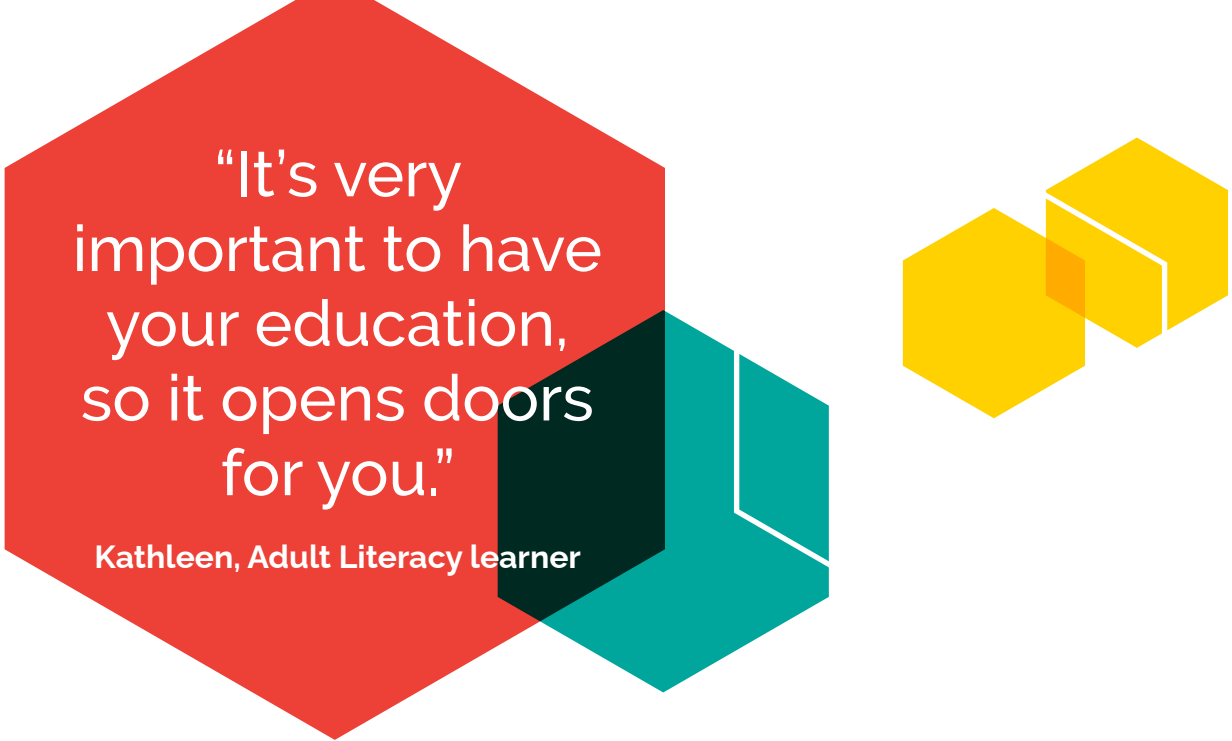


Mirroring the fact that more people than ever before are impacted by the work of SOLAS and the Education and Training Boards (ETBs), other providers and support organisations SOLAS funds, the level of state investment in FET and apprenticeships has grown substantially in recent years. In 2016, €624million was allocated to SOLAS to meet its own costs and disperse throughout the system. For 2024, SOLAS is responsible for an allocation of €1,121million. Although this includes the transfer of responsibility for PLC funding from the Department of Education to SOLAS during that period (equivalent to circa €150million) it nonetheless represents a step-change in resourcing. It has allowed the reach and impact of FET and apprenticeships to extend into every community, and every aspect of society and the economy across Ireland. Over the same time period we have gone from a position of no capital investment to an allocation of €66million for 2024, including support for the development of 12 exciting major FET College of the Future projects and 19 strategic infrastructure upgrades across the 16 ETBs.

Now the challenge is to take the next step in ensuring that FET and apprenticeship are equally valued pathways to higher education (HE) choices. Their scope to lead directly into exciting careers needs to be more widely recognised, along with the opportunities to progress to HE at some stage via joined up tertiary programmes and approaches. While one-in-ten currently benefit from the learning supported by SOLAS, there is an economic and societal imperative that our reach must not stop there. An initial ambition must be to take this from 425,000 to 500,000 and beyond over the three year period. This must be done in the context of rapidly evolving technological, environmental, economic and societal change, where the traditional delivery model for education must fundamentally transform. At the same time, we must realise that full access to education for all adults regardless of background or circumstance can only be achieved by delivery of wraparound supports and services, and this requires integrated working across organisations at national, regional and local, and indeed all-island, level.

People are a scarce resource, with both declining and ageing populations in many large countries, and mobility much easier between countries. Therefore, how we develop our people through an intensive, integrated and inclusive system of lifelong learning and nurturing is central to Ireland's success (or otherwise) in the 21st century.

As we sit on the cusp of developing the new 5-year FET strategy as the successor to Transforming Learning during 2024, these factors must drive our work as an organisation, and be reflected in our own ethos and ambition to remain the most progressive public sector organisation in Ireland. This corporate plan puts the platform in place for continued success and continued transformation in SOLAS and the learning we support.



“It’s very
important to have
your education,
so it opens doors
for you.”

Kathleen, Adult Literacy learner

1.2 Developing the Plan

We commenced the development of the plan via a dedicated Board strategy day in July 2023, which set out a broad framework of key areas of focus, followed by an intense period of research, consultation and development to turn this into the concrete plan set out in this document. This included:

- Reviewing all relevant Government policy and strategy material (the policy context in which this plan is developed is further set out in Section 2.4)
- Continual discussion on priorities with our Senior Leadership Team and an opportunity for all our SOLAS staff to provide ideas and input on how SOLAS needed to shape the next three years
- Review of the SOLAS Public Sector Duty ‘Assessment of Equality and Human Rights issues’
- Ongoing engagement with the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS)
- Consultation sessions with senior leadership from Education and Training Boards
- Workshops and dialogue with a wide range of external stakeholders including IBEC, CIF, HEA, Enterprise Ireland, National Disability Authority, DETE, DSP, DPENDER, Aontas, AHEAD, NALA, QQI, NCCA, Skillnet Ireland, THEA, IUA, TUD, IGC, Regional Skills Fora, individual employers, Directors of the NTO and NAO and FET staff representatives
- Input from learners and apprentices who benefit from the work of SOLAS and the ETBs across FET and apprenticeships
- Review of the emerging draft material by the Senior Leadership Team, Strategic Planning Committee and SOLAS Board.

This draft corporate plan builds on all this work and has been approved by the SOLAS Board. It has also been circulated to DFHERIS. It will then be finalised based on feedback received and submitted to the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science for formal endorsement.

1.3 Learning from the Previous Plan

An important part of the development process was reflection upon the delivery of the previous corporate plan and the identification of any learning in formulating this document. To improve access and understanding, and reinforce critical messages, it was felt important to make this plan more succinct with fewer sections and higher-level objectives. It was also agreed to use more active rather than passive language in defining priorities and commitments, with clearer SOLAS ownership of their delivery.

In terms of the focus of the 2021-2023 plan, the vast majority of the actions set out remained valid and were progressed during this period. There was major success in embedding our values across the organisation, rolling out a new performance review and development process and Learning@SOLAS to upskill staff. The funding model review was completed, and new performance agreements were put in place, the National Apprenticeship Office was established, and Adult Literacy for Life heralded an innovative cross-Government programme to address unmet literacy needs with SOLAS at its centre. Work on community education, apprenticeship waiting lists and construction licensing continues and needs to remain a focus of the new plan.

While Skills to Compete has become established as a single, flexible and tailored FET offering for those seeking employment, at the time the previous plan was conceived, it was envisaged that it would have to respond to major post-COVID structural change in the labour market. At the same time there were new requirements placed on SOLAS that were not expected at the time, including the Ukrainian crisis, new responsibilities around Housing for All and green skills, partnering with the HEA on the National Tertiary Office and of course the shift to hybrid working in the post-pandemic world. The learning from this is that SOLAS must always be ready to adapt to change and new challenges that emerge, and deliver major initiatives on behalf of Government. It also underlines the importance of funding to facilitate new and additional roles, and the ambition set out in this plan must also be reflected in adequate resourcing from the Government.

In organising SOLAS for success, while the past has proven the value of establishing dedicated teams and resources to get things done, we must also be prepared to stop doing things that are no longer essential or which can be delivered more effectively elsewhere. This will be a key focus of our work, particularly in the first year of the plan as we navigate the periodic critical review.

1.4 Responding to a Volatile World

The digital transformation experienced in recent years, fast-tracked by the pandemic, has changed the way we live, work, learn, do business and even interact with each other. As we navigate these changes, an even greater challenge seems to have arrived via digitalisation, with recent advancements in artificial intelligence (AI). Unlike more 'traditional' automation technologies that perform narrow routine tasks, AI is able to improve over time, solve complex problems and generate innovations with little or no human supervision. The paper produced by the OECD for their 2024 skills summit identified AI as a megatrend in itself, and noted the major disruption it will cause to skills systems. There are three immediate challenges around AI on which SOLAS must focus over the lifetime of the corporate plan:

- Maintaining the integrity and quality of FET provision, ensuring that the learning, or the work of the learner, is not undermined by deployment of AI tools.
- Anticipating and delivering via FET the new skillsets required for our workforce to understand and use AI appropriately.
- Understanding the impact of AI and automation on the types of jobs required in the future world of work, and pivoting FET and apprenticeship provision as a result.

Alongside this digital disruption, there are at least three other critical megatrends that will have major influence on how SOLAS needs to shape and steer the FET system. Global conflict has already had massive implications, with tens of thousands of Ukrainians accessing learning in 2022 and 2023, and this need will continue. Climate action will only be effective if the skills and the agents of change exist which can reduce our carbon footprint and drive success in greener industries. Finally, ageing demographics must not be overlooked, and could present a real opportunity for FET, providing access to education for older people and maintaining the relevance of their skills while in the workforce.

While we have some idea of the emerging impact of these megatrends, part of the problem lies in understanding what the full impact and direction will be in each case. SOLAS and FET must operate in a volatile world for the foreseeable future, where adapting to further change, patterns of demand and technologies will be a prerequisite.



“I really enjoyed it. We have a very broad range of ethnicities. There’s people from Nigeria, parts of Asia, Poland, all stuff, so you’re getting completely different perspectives of how people were raised and how their views formed. I find it very easy to learn in settings like that where I’m listening.”

FET Learner Forum Participant



2. What is SOLAS?

2.1 Our Legislative Mandate

SOLAS is the statutory authority for further education and training (FET), including apprenticeships and construction schemes, in Ireland. Its legislative mandate is principally set out in the **Further Education and Training Act 2013**. This requires SOLAS to:

1. Promote an appreciation of the value of FET
2. Consult with the Ministers for Social Protection and Enterprise, Trade and Employment and employers to determine which classes of FET programmes should be supported
3. Fund Education and Training Boards (ETBs) and other bodies engaged in the provision of FET
4. Provide for the provision of training and retraining for employment
5. Assess whether or not ETBs and other funded bodies engaged in the provision of FET perform their functions in an economic, efficient and effective manner
6. Promote, encourage and facilitate the placement of persons in FET belonging to such class or classes of person as may be specified by the Minister for Social Protection
7. Promote cooperation between ETBs and other bodies involved in the provision of FET
8. Promote equality of opportunity in relation to the provision of FET
9. Facilitate the development of FET programmes including the establishment of systems to monitor the quality of the education and training provided and that it serves its purpose
10. Provide or assist in the provision of training
11. Conduct research as respects any matters relating to the functions of SOLAS.

We also have statutory responsibilities around apprenticeship, set out in the **Industrial Training Act 1967**. The Act gives SOLAS the remit to approve new areas of industrial activity for apprenticeship, approve employers of apprentices, maintain a register of apprentices, and make statutory rules for the conduct of apprentices.

2.2 Our Remit

Essentially the legislative mandate set out in the Further Education and Training Act means we have responsibility for steering, funding and coordinating FET activity through a network of 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs) and other FET providers. In addition the Skills and Labour Market Research Unit (SLMRU) provides analysis to inform policy development and shape skills provision in response to regional and national needs, and is evolving further to become a national skills observatory. We are also responsible for ensuring construction workers have the requisite skills to ensure safe workplaces, overseeing Safepass (with a new online renewal system launched at the start of 2023), the Construction Skills Certification Schemes (CSCS) and the Quarries Skills Certification Schemes (QSCS).

However in recognition of the fact that apprenticeship provision extends across both further and higher education, the **National Apprenticeship Office (NAO)** was established in 2022, with responsibility for the management, oversight and development of the apprenticeship system, and is jointly managed by SOLAS and the HEA, with a Management Board involving the CEOs of the respective agencies and the Director of the Office. SOLAS hosts the budget and staffing and is the underpinning legal entity for the NAO, providing access to essential support services including finance, HR, IT and communications. SOLAS also currently serves as the coordinating provider, a role which, while not enshrined in legislation, was inherited from its predecessor organisation Fás.

The NAO is one of two new shared offices set up to reflect the joined-up whole of tertiary education policy approach set out by DFHERIS. The HEA hosts the **National Tertiary Office (NTO)**, and is similarly responsible for its budget and staffing, with equivalent governance and oversight arrangements in place involving both organisations. In 2021, a decision was also taken to establish a national cross-Government **Adult Literacy for Life (ALL) Programme Office**, which would be hosted in SOLAS. The whole-of-society approach of ALL extends the remit beyond FET, across all sectors of Society, a new departure but complementary to the values and mission of SOLAS.

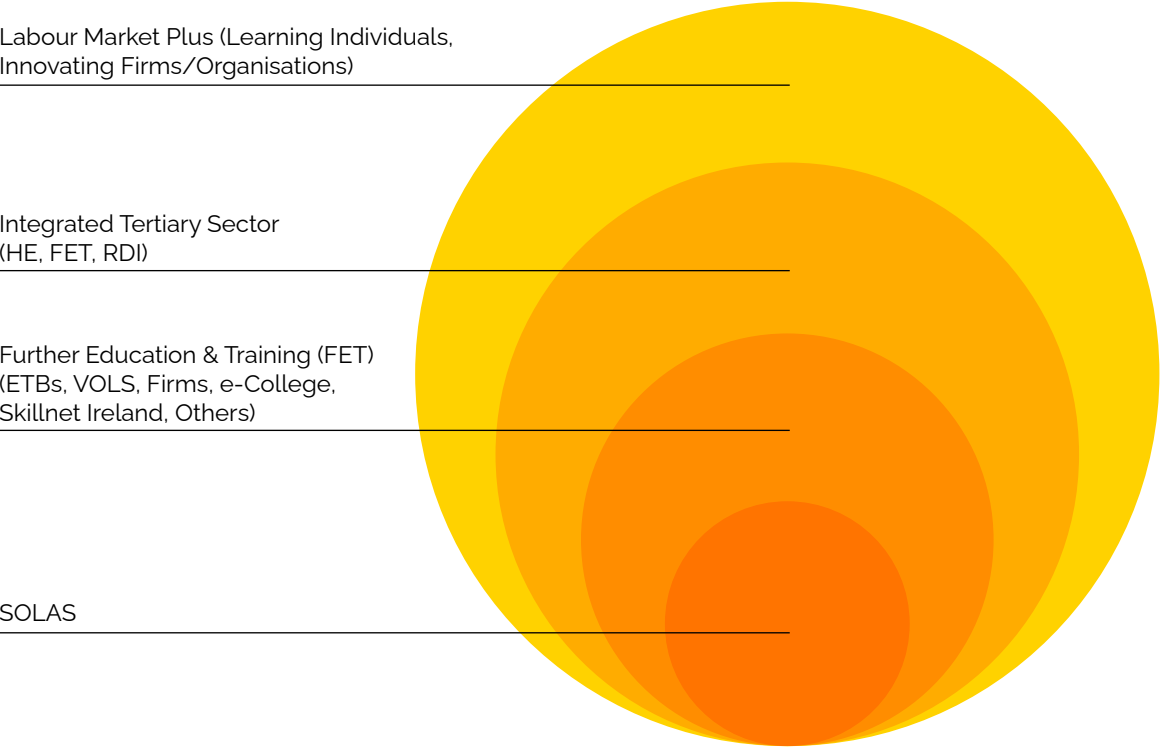
Our parent department is the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS). It channels funding to SOLAS via annual allocations for FET and apprenticeship provision, with just over €1billion funding to be provided for 2024. The Department sets out expectations from SOLAS within annual performance delivery agreements (PDAs) and multi-annual oversight agreements.

In line with our responsibilities and legislation, SOLAS is required to present a strategy for the development of FET every five years to the relevant Minister, and submit a three-year corporate plan focused on the role of the organisation itself. This new Corporate Plan has been written with the current Further Education and Training Strategy (2020 – 2024) **Transforming Learning** still in place and work has continued apace on its implementation with significant milestones being achieved.

However, it is an important bridge to the next FET strategy which will run from 2025 to 2029 and which will be prepared and submitted to Government in 2024. It must put in place the conditions to ensure that SOLAS can drive the next critical stage of FET and apprenticeship development, with lifelong learning and continuous upskilling at its heart, through to the end of the decade.

SOLAS does this by being part of an education and training ecosystem which brings individuals in need of learning, support and upskilling together with enterprise skills requirements to maintain and grow competitiveness. The lines drawn in the past between FET, apprenticeship and HE, and with industry focused skills initiatives via Skillnet Ireland and Enterprise Ireland, are becoming increasingly blurred in a more joined-up tertiary system which will depend on fluid, flexible skills development offerings to remain relevant to the future world of work. An overview of this ecosystem is provided in Figure 3.

Figure 3: SOLAS and the Wider Skills Ecosystem



Our funding reflects this ecosystem, with around half of the resources made available for FET and apprenticeships originating from the National Training Fund, reflecting their role in generating a talent pipeline for employers and facilitating upskilling while in employment. The remainder is sourced from the Exchequer, with a proportion typically co-funded by the European Social Fund¹, reflecting the focus on access and inclusion which characterises so much of FET too.



“Generation Apprenticeship
– it has just given me the
industry experience on top of
the college experience and
the college degree so it has
just transformed my education
and my working life.”

Overall Apprentice of the Year 2023,
Hazel Johnston, DePuy Synthes

¹ The European Social Fund (ESF) is the EU's key instrument for investing in people, focusing on improving employment and education opportunities as well as enhancing social inclusion and tackling poverty. ESF is a shared management programme and the ESF Managing Authority (DFHERIS) holds responsibility for the implementation of ESF in Ireland. SOLAS's role in the ESF Cascade is that of Intermediate Body and the EU Finance team function as the liaison between the Managing Authority and the Education and Training Boards (Beneficiaries). The current programming period, the Employment, Inclusion, Skills, and Training (EIST) programme, runs from 2021 to 2027.

2.3 Our Organisation

On the cusp of the launch of the previous corporate plan, we put in place new ways of working and a revised organisational structure based on three divisions: Support, Delivery and Transformation. The structure and approach have served us well as we have driven the implementation of **Transforming Learning** and negotiated the challenges of COVID. However there have also been significant changes to the landscape with direct implications for our governance and management arrangements and overall remit. These have included additional responsibilities around green skills; the introduction of the NAO; capital investment and the delivery of FET College of the Future; and coordination of the Adult Literacy for Life (ALL) programme office. The senior level management structure has had to adjust to take account of the changes, with temporary reporting arrangements put in place. The changes necessitate finding an appropriate permanent management and organisation structure, and this must be a clear early objective in the lifetime of the corporate plan.

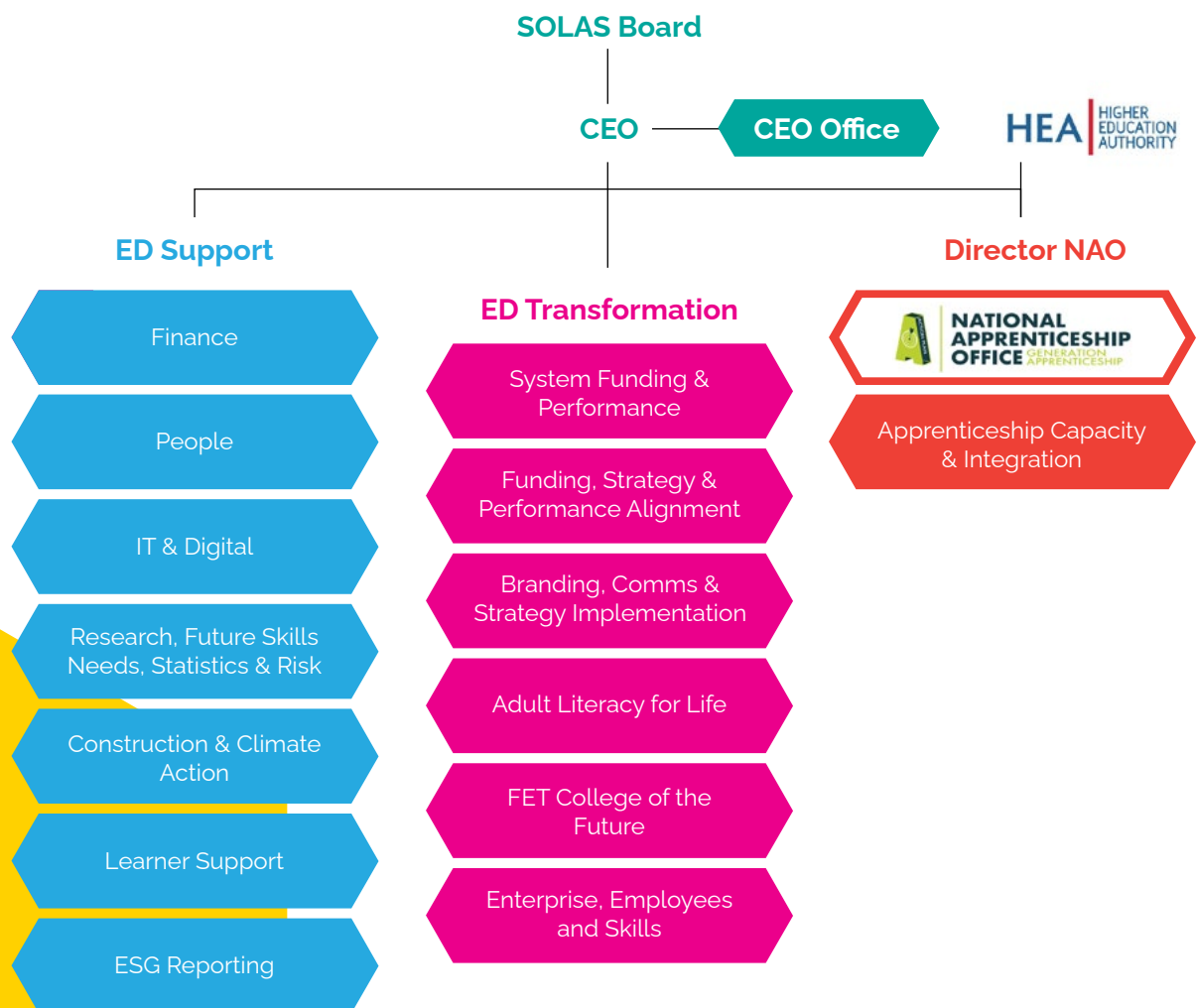


The SOLAS Senior Leadership Team



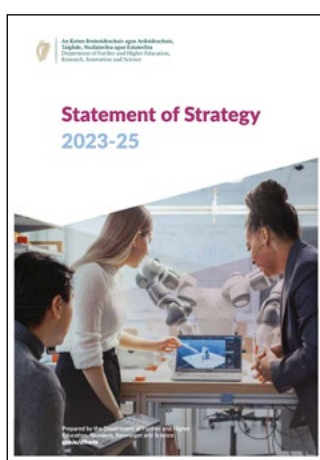
It is thus timely that SOLAS has been selected for a periodic critical review, coordinated by our parent Department at the request of the Department of Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform (DPENDR). The Code of Practice for the Governance of State Bodies requires that all have periodic critical reviews undertaken from time to time to ensure their remit remains relevant and appropriate and that the structure and resources of the organisation reflect the scale and requirements of its Governmental responsibilities. This review should be completed by the end of quarter 3 2024. This will enable Government agreement on a permanent and sustainable management structure for SOLAS, reflecting a critical and complex organisation with a current approved headcount of 261. In the meantime, we are adapting the organisational structure for 2024 to facilitate a priority focus on addressing apprenticeship challenges, continuing to drive transformation of the FET system and ensuring a modern, progressive organisation underpinned by strong governance. Figure 4 sets out this 2024 structure, with the completion of the review during the year feeding into a new permanent structure for 2025 and beyond.

Figure 4: SOLAS 2024 Reporting Structure



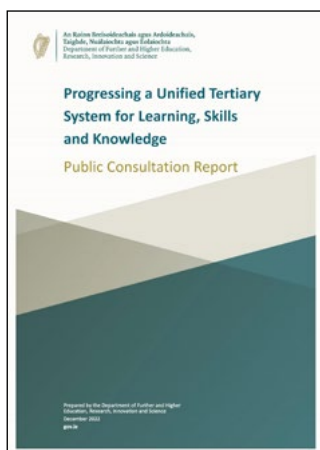
2.4 Our Role in Delivering Government Policy

While SOLAS has legislative responsibilities outlined in 2.1 above, there are a range of Government policies which frame the activities and outcomes it must drive throughout FET and apprenticeship. SOLAS has a central implementation role in critical cross-Government policy like the National Development Plan, Housing for All and the National Digital Strategy. We recognise that our work in skills development is as essential an investment in future infrastructure as housing, health and transport. Over the next three years, we take our overall lead from our parent Department's statement of strategy, but other policy documents, and these other cross-Government frameworks, feed into the SOLAS agenda. These are considered in turn below, along with their implications for this Corporate Plan.



DFHERIS Statement of Strategy 2023-2025:

The strategy of our parent Department sets out 'develop talent' and, 'support inclusion' and 'system performance and reform' as three of its key goals. Each of these goals aligns with the corporate plan actions outlined in Section 4. Specific commitments of relevance to SOLAS include construction licensing legislation; green skills development; seamless pathways between FET & HE; apprenticeship reform; an integrated career guidance system and portal; access to literacy, numeracy and digital skills; and a major capital investment programme. A central ambition is also to realise a unified tertiary system, with much more seamless pathways within and between FET and higher education. This was also the subject of a separate policy platform document and SOLAS is working closely with the HEA on advancing the tertiary agenda, with a suite of new tertiary programmes launched.





Transforming Learning: As we have noted, this Future FET strategy is the central driver of everything SOLAS does. As we move into the final year of the strategy, much has been achieved, but there remains a need to focus on key areas to ensure full success and delivery. FET staffing reform, community education, delivering on apprenticeship and programme harmonisation are key Transforming Learning priorities where further attention is needed within the corporate plan.



Apprenticeship Action Plan 2021-2025: This action plan will run over the first two years of the new plan. The realisation of a single integrated apprenticeship system, including migration of the coordinating provider role from SOLAS to education and training providers, is the overriding focus for 2024 and 2025. Key steps to ensure this can be facilitated will include addressing apprenticeship waiting lists and modernising craft curricula, while continuing to support and develop the National Apprenticeship Office in partnership with the NAO.



OECD Skills Strategy Ireland: The OECD carried out a review of Ireland's skills strategy which was published in May 2023. It made recommendations on priority areas to ensure Ireland meets its skills ambitions. The review acknowledged the value of further education and training and the need for it to make a greater contribution in delivering on Ireland's future skills needs. Specific recommendations of relevance to SOLAS and its plans for FET and apprenticeship include: building school-FET pathways; curriculum development hubs in ETBs to drive specialist skills capacity; universal FET-HE transition requirements and more co-developed tertiary programmes; training incentives for companies to release employees for upskilling; expanding flexible learning resources like eCollege; investing in skills forecasting; coordinating a lifelong guidance approach; and a tailored and targeted approach for disadvantaged groups.



DPENDR Statement of Strategy 2023-2025: It is also important to note the statement of strategy produced by DPENDR for 2023-2025. This sets out three core pillars of enhancing governance, building capacity; and delivering effectively. We believe SOLAS is a leader across the public service in measuring performance both as an effective organisation and in terms of the FET and apprenticeship systems it supports, and this very much chimes with the DPENDR goal of better performance budgeting. We are proactive in supporting Government initiatives to secure and manage funding from sources such as the ESF and NRRP. We also have a key role in helping to realise Project Ireland 2040 and in advancing FET College of the Future proposals to deliver on the NDP. Along with our parent Department, we must focus on ensuring that SOLAS and FET alignment with the clear strategy for state investment is evidenced and communicated.

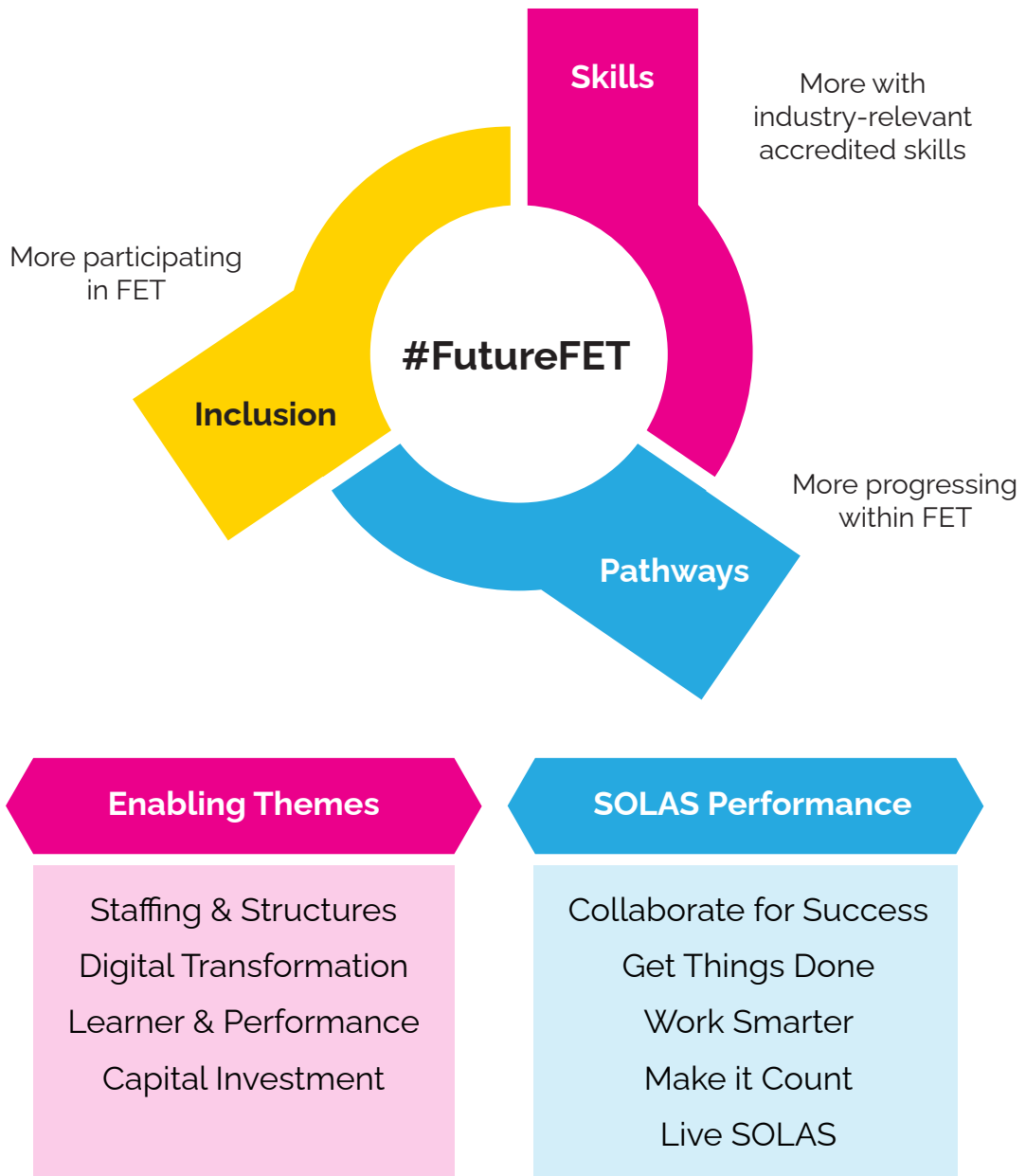
Other key policy documents with implications for SOLAS, FET and apprenticeships include: Pathways to Work; the Roadmap to Social Inclusion; the Adult Literacy for Life Strategy; the Climate Action Plan; the National Development Plan; Housing for All; Healthy Ireland; the National Digital strategy; the White Paper on Enterprise; the Smart Specialisation Strategy for Innovation; Project Ireland 2040; and Enterprise Ireland's Leading in a Changing World strategy.

2.5 Our Success and Effectiveness

Ultimately, the long-term success of SOLAS will be judged by the degree to which vibrant and respected FET and apprenticeship systems are functioning and attracting a large, diverse and growing number of participants. As a consequence, Ireland should have a better chance to move up on the OECD Skills Strategy Dashboard, especially in strengthening the foundational and broad skillsets of adults, bringing new people into the labour market; using our skills more intensely in the workplace; and designing workplaces to use skills effectively. Measuring SOLAS success and focusing the SOLAS business is complex as we can only steer and influence the FET and Apprenticeship systems through strategy, funding and accountability. The **Transforming Learning** strategy is clear about the three core strategic priorities: building skills; fostering inclusion; and facilitating pathways. The Strategy also identifies four enabling themes that will allow these priorities to be delivered: staffing and structures; digital transformation; a learner and performance centred approach; and capital development. SOLAS must drive the delivery of the strategic priorities and commitments set out under each of the enabling themes, but it cannot fully control their implementation, nor ignore the fact that success will be dependent upon many external factors and the wider societal and economic environment.


This corporate plan must therefore focus on what SOLAS **can do and deliver** to drive the implementation of the **Transforming Learning** strategy and the key desired outcomes. In effect, we can think of it as a windmill, with SOLAS performing effectively across a range of objectives that will then in turn generate the 'power' to support delivery of the enabling themes and FET strategic priorities, as demonstrated in Figure 5 below.

Figure 5: SOLAS Action Driving FET System Performance



In the course of the last corporate plan, we worked with our Board to develop a balanced scorecard that would benchmark SOLAS performance and changes in the external environment in which we operate. This is aligned with the five core corporate objectives that have been in place throughout the last three years. In Section 6 it is updated to reflect the revised corporate objectives set out as part of this new plan.

While the balanced scorecard gives us the core benchmarks from a SOLAS perspective, ultimate success as defined above will only be achieved via the effectiveness of the system in growing performance and outcomes. The strategic performance agreements between SOLAS and the ETBs provide a framework by which this is tracked. These agreements measure the key outcomes that are expected of FET; from securing sustainable employment post-course; to progressing within FET and onto HE; to growing certification of transversal skills; to widening participation; to upskilling employees; and to rebalancing provision towards critical skills needs. 2024 is the final year of the current strategic performance agreements, and a key focus during the first year of this corporate plan will be putting in place new agreements for 2025 onwards which also reflect the newly emerging FET strategy for 2025 to 2029. In Section 6 the trends across key system indicators are set out for the period 2018-2023 to provide a foundation for gauging future success. Figure 6 sets out the types of levers available to SOLAS to drive this system performance, pursue our mission and realise our vision.



“In my first year I was really the technophobe. I was full of fears and all sorts of difficulties, and I was really wary about social media and everything. And I never had a smartphone or anything. So, when I started my first word processing [class], I knew I needed a bit of extra help – all those in the class were just more in the world of technology than I was.”

FET Learner Forum Participant

Figure 6: SOLAS Tools to Drive Performance

Control	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Collaborative development of strategy – Governance & financial controls – PMO approach to delivering key projects – Live dashboard monitoring of performance
Leverage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Strategic performance agreements – Outcome-based funding allocations – Competitive funding
Educate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Invest in capability building in ETBs via core funding – Growth of ETB learning & development hub – ETBI networks – Support quality enhancement & agile programme development
Influence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – SLMRU and data analysis to provide evidence base for policy – Stakeholder plan and strategic communications strategy to support effective policy development
Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Wrap-around supports and services to facilitate access to learning – Work to ensure childcare, transport supports are available – All-year round access – Provision free-of-charge
Understand	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Use OECD research & benchmarks – EU best practice sharing and networking, including CEDEFOP – Leadership networking via the College Alliance



3. Mission, Vision and Values

3.1 Our Mission

Our mission has been updated on the basis of feedback from staff and stakeholders during the consultation process:

SOLAS drives the continuing responsiveness, innovation, transformation, sustainability and success of the FET and apprenticeship systems. It does this by setting strategy, channelling investment, leading implementation and ensuring accountability across providers, with an overriding focus on the needs of their learners and apprentices.

3.2 Our Vision

We are in an age where continual upskilling and reskilling throughout lifetimes and careers will be essential, and the way in which education and training is delivered must evolve and adapt in line with this. SOLAS and the ETBs already drive a significant base of lifelong learning, with a long history of developing and delivering short, focused, flexible courses to respond to the needs of adults of all ages. We want FET to become the 'go to' place for lifelong learning across Ireland, with a vision of:

Powering the potential of individuals, communities and enterprise through lifelong learning and workforce transformation.



“SOLAS’ ambition is to become one of the most progressive public sector bodies in Ireland.”

Andrew Brownlee, CEO SOLAS

3.3 Key Themes

Building on this vision, and thinking about the essential Government imperatives and the need to respond to a rapidly evolving environment, we believe there are five overarching themes which should focus what we do over the next 3 years. These themes permeate through, and across, all of the high level actions which are set out in Section 4. SOLAS will work with our partners to:

Figure 7: Overarching themes for 2024-26



3.4 Our Values

We are very proud of our values, **T-R-I-B-E**, developed by our staff and underpinning everything we do. We continue to roll-out **T-R-I-B-E** leadership roundtables across the organisation to ensure our staff continually reflect on how these values can permeate through their work. They are an intrinsic part of the performance review and development process, where they frame the performance conversations at all levels and underpin the objectives that are set for everyone. The SOLAS Values Committee continue to advise to further ensure that they are reflected across all aspects of the work we do. We benchmark views on how values are being embedded in comparison with previous years via a staff engagement survey, with the next iteration planned for the first half of 2024. The Senior Leadership Team will continue to monitor this and strive to ensure that they become increasingly reflected in everything we do.

Figure 8: SOLAS TRIBE Values



3.5 Our Objectives

In setting our corporate objectives, we want each of them to resonate across all staff, rather than be identifiable with a specific section of the organisation. This worked effectively in the corporate plan 2021-2023, where we specified five objectives to which we felt all staff, regardless of Division, Directorate or Team, could perceive a common role in their realisation. The five objectives – Making it Count; Working Smarter; Living SOLAS; Engaging our Stakeholders; and Driving a Delivery Focus, also created a clear distinction from the three core pillars and four enabling themes of the wider FET strategy Transforming Learning. We are proposing to keep the same approach for this new plan, but based on feedback that the objectives could be less passive (both in tense and in language and definition) and clearer in logic of impact, we have slightly revised the set of objectives and definitions, set out below.

Figure 9: SOLAS Objectives 2024-26

Collaborate for Success	We will consult, engage and collaborate with all our key stakeholders (especially learners) to ensure success in following, informing & influencing policy; steering effective, responsive and impactful FET & apprenticeship systems; and ensuring the needs of the learner are reflected in everything we do.
Get things done	We will focus resources on the most critical SOLAS challenges and continue to build a reputation as a state agency which drives transformation and delivers major initiatives.
Work Smarter	We will strive to continually improve our performance, become more innovative and productive, and use data and evidence to drive the approach and strategy across our organisation.
Make it Count	We will make every euro of state investment count, deploying it effectively and efficiently to generate impact from FET and apprenticeships, ensuring good governance, accountability and maximum contribution to climate action.
Live SOLAS	We will be recognised outside of our organisation as a great and progressive place to work, with an adaptable, supported and empowered workforce, where collective leadership and accountability drives success.

4. Objectives into Action

In this section we take the five corporate objectives for the period 2024-2026 and set out the high-level actions that will be delivered over the next three years. We also highlight how actions relate to the overall strategic goals of our parent department: with those aligned with developing talent in red; supporting inclusion in green; and system performance and reform in orange. Other actions are related to SOLAS organisational development. The framework links each objective to a summary of the associated actions, with the actions then discussed in greater detail in sections 4.1 to 4.5.

Figure 10: SOLAS Corporate Plan Framework

Collaborate for Success	Get Things Done	Work Smarter
<p>We will consult, engage & collaborate with all our key stakeholders to ensure success in following, informing & influencing policy; steering effective, responsive and impactful FET & apprenticeship systems; and ensuring the needs of the learner are reflected in everything we do.</p>	<p>We will focus resources on the most critical SOLAS challenges and continue to build a reputation as a state agency which drives transformation and delivers major initiatives.</p>	<p>We will strive to continually improve our performance, become more innovative and productive, and use data and evidence to drive the approach and strategy across our organisation.</p>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Drive Development of Specialist Skills Centres 2. Target Enterprise 3. Bring Learner Voice to the Heart of SOLAS Decision Making 4. Agree a Full Integration Model for Apprenticeship 5. Foster Agility in Course Development and Delivery 6. Integrate FET within Communities and with Other Services 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Establish the new Construction Licensing Authority 2. Ensure no one waits 6m+ for Apprenticeship Training 3. Realise the Vision of the FET College of the Future 4. Reform Funding and Financial Systems 5. Launch new Strategy aligned with new Strategic Performance Agreements 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Complete the Journey to Outcome-focused FET Delivery 2. Continuously Improve SOLAS Processes 3. Develop Next Generation Learner & Apprenticeship Data Systems 4. Progress a Digital Learning Platform and Framework for the Future 5. Make Evidence-based Decisions & Anticipate Future Skills Needs

Make it Count	Live SOLAS
<p>We will make every € of state investment count, deploying it effectively and efficiently to generate impact from FET and apprenticeships, ensuring good governance, accountability and maximum contribution to climate action.</p>	<p>We will be recognised outside of our organisation as a great and progressive place to work, with an adaptable, supported and empowered workforce, where collective leadership and accountability drives success.</p>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Lead on Sustainability Education, Training & Behaviours 2. Fully align Funding, Strategy & Performance 3. Amplify our Capital Investment 4. Be Exemplary in Governance 5. Demonstrate our Reach & Expansion 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Embed a Permanent Structure to Reflect our Evolving Remit 2. Champion Change through an Empowered & Flexible Workforce 3. Be Best in Class on Diversity, Inclusion & Wellbeing 4. Evolve our Modern and Progressive Workplace and Culture

4.1 Collaborate for Success

We will consult, engage and collaborate with all our key stakeholders to ensure success in following, informing & influencing policy; steering effective, responsive and impactful FET & apprenticeship systems; and ensuring the needs of the learner are reflected in everything we do. Working with our parent Department, DFHERIS, and across other Government departments and agencies, will be pivotal to ensuring the skills challenge around areas like housing, digital transformation and climate action is understood and addressed in national policy.

- 1. Drive Development of Specialist Skills Centres:** We are starting to see ETBs develop specialist skills centres (e.g. construction in Mount Lucas, retrofitting in six locations, catering in Limerick, pharma in Cork). This is in line with national skills and enterprise policy and the smart specialisation strategy driven by DETE. We want to become the 'go to' place for core areas of industrial activity where FET, employee development and apprenticeship are essential to an adequate future talent pipeline. There is a significantly untapped role around technology, and the new challenges and opportunities brought by AI must be a central focus. A whole suite of upskilling requirements exist around climate action, from retrofitting to energy to eMobility to sustainable agriculture, and FET must continue to lead this response. In advanced manufacturing (particularly biopharma, medical devices, product and process engineering and agrifood); digital industries (cyber, software development, digital business services, fintech); hospitality, retail and the experience economy; and healthcare, we can build on ETB strengths to establish poles of expertise aligned to sectoral clusters at regional, state and all-island levels. This means driving the development of an ecosystem of specialist centres by investment in market-aligned, best-in-class infrastructure and agile programme development; and supporting and developing pathways from school into FET and from FET to HE within these areas. It is also essential that we remain open to new areas of emerging skills need where an agile response from FET can help our economy keep pace with change.
- 2. Target Enterprise:** With FET now on the map, we must build on the specialisation approach to target enterprise with our ETB partners over the next 3 years by building skill capabilities in and with such enterprises. There is a particular opportunity to target smaller and micro enterprises, and self-employed, taking advantage of the FET reach into every community in Ireland. This means supporting ETBs to co-design traineeship-type offerings with local industry, and upskilling opportunities via Skills to Advance, coordinated via a robust and consistent CRM tool. Closer co-operation at regional and local level between the ETBs and the LEOs will facilitate greater focus and impact on the micros and smaller companies and self-employed. There should also be mutually beneficial opportunities for ETBs to work with Skillnet Ireland's regional and sectoral networks, linking their skills demand


with our skills supply. There are opportunities for FET to play a key role in Ireland's transversal skills challenge, with adaptability to change and team working identified by our SLMRU as key cross-enterprise needs, and to drive responses and initiatives to improve Ireland's number of high performance workplaces, an area where it lags behind OECD counterparts. To reinforce all this work, SOLAS must strive to develop its profile and become a thought leader in offering enterprise solutions. Building on the experience of Enterprise Engagement Units and similar structures in a range of ETBs, an enterprise-facing one stop shop co-ordination role will be developed within each ETB, to facilitate access, especially for smaller and micro-enterprises and self-employed.



- 3. Bring Learner Voice to the Heart of SOLAS Decision Making:** There has been a major programme, channelled through our partners AONTAS, to develop learner voice as a tool to improve ETB targeting of FET, and the focus, support, quality and improvement of that FET. However, within SOLAS, there is more scope to bring the learner voice to the heart of our own decision-making. We will do this by ensuring regular exposure to learner experiences and stories as part of staff events and communications, by ensuring learners are increasingly represented on any groups involved in decision-making around the FET and apprenticeship systems, and by progressing with a learner survey tool that can support benchmarking and continuous improvement alongside qualitative input. Most critically, as we move to

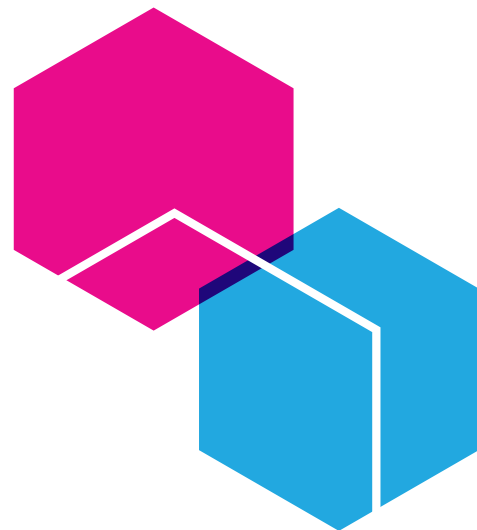
develop our new FET strategy in 2024, learner voice must drive its focus and priorities, and ensure the learner is at the heart of the further development of the system from 2025-2029.

- 4. Agree a Full Integration Model for Apprenticeship:** SOLAS still currently serves as coordinating provider for the 25 craft apprenticeships, although the Action Plan for Apprenticeships requires this role to migrate to ETBs/HEIs as part of the move to a single integrated apprenticeship model. The location of this role within education and training providers makes sense and will allow SOLAS to focus on its core function as a funding, strategy and oversight body, but its ultimate realisation will be dependent on external agreement on that future integration model. We will work to ensure that a model can be agreed, and that we support the NAO in implementing the single integrated system, and that a smooth transition of coordinating provider responsibilities proceeds within the lifetime of this plan. This will work in tandem with driving continued growth in the new apprenticeships established since 2016 to levels of real scale as part of this integrated system.



“I love the blend – being able to take what you learn at college and instantly put it into industry.”

**Brendan Giles, Apprentice,
Abbott Ireland Diabetes Care**



- 5. Foster Agility in Course Development and Delivery:** Fundamentally changing the way we deliver FET is a mammoth long-term task, but there is already a platform in place that can be incrementally developed over the next three years to start to create a system which facilitates and encourages dipping in and out of learning and upskilling throughout lifetimes and careers. Over the lifetime of the previous plan, we have seen incredible year-on-year growth of Skills to Advance; expansion and diversification of eCollege; development of a suite of almost 30 micro-qualifications; and ETB providers with a maturing model of QA and an expanded portfolio

of blended, online and short course offerings. We will support ETBs to build on this platform by modularising longer, full-time courses; further developing shorter, focused, flexible upskilling opportunities and micro-qualifications; and working with partners in QQI and HE to consider how credits can be built up across a tertiary system. Key to this will be the collaborative development of a comprehensive skills map that will act as the foundation underpinning all FET/HEI skills development and so facilitate modularisation, mutual recognition, progression and pathways (similar to e.g. the UK's Open University modular system). School to FET pathways (via TY module development and roll-out) and FET-HE pathways (via more consistent criteria for university access and an expanding portfolio of tertiary programmes) will be other critical actions to deliver a more fluid and flexible education journey.

- 6. Integrate FET within Communities and with Other Services:** There has been significant progress in recent years on expanding provision around literacy, English language support, and adult and community education. The establishment of the Adult Literacy for Life (ALL) office and associated national and regional infrastructure, and the Reach Fund stimulating collaboration at local level, are pivotal to the core challenge of linking learning to wider community and support services that can enable sustainable access to the education opportunities. Adult and community education has a very important function in a democratic society in shaping active citizens empowered to grow, engage and contribute. The new community education framework will place cross-Government, cross-society and cross-community inter-agency approaches at its heart, leading on from ALL, and their implementation will widen participation for all. Key priorities will include year-round provision, seamless referrals and support from the social welfare system, education working in tandem with community development, and link up with health, transport and childcare services. This is essential to ensure everyone who needs supports can avail of them to ensure they succeed in their journey through FET. It must allow full realisation of consistent learner support, alongside enhanced learner experience, across all FET settings and all FET learners, with a universal design for learning approach, underpinned by a commitment to the ALTITUDE Charter.



4.2 Get Things Done

We will focus resources on the most critical SOLAS challenges and continue to build a reputation as a state agency which drives transformation and delivers major initiatives.

- 1. Establish the new Construction Licensing Authority:** The ongoing transformation of Safepass and our construction schemes will be underpinned by the establishment of a construction licensing authority, with legislation currently passing through the Oireachtas, and the intention to house this function within SOLAS. We must set ourselves up to deliver on this new remit, ensuring adequate governance, management, operational and legal arrangements are in place, and that the authority links to a modern licensing based system which reflects the changing dynamics of a construction sector central to future growth and Project Ireland 2040. This will reflect the need for an all-of-Government approach to realising the construction workforce of the future of the scale emphasised by recent ESRI analysis.²
- 2. Ensure no one waits over 6 months for Off-the-job Apprenticeship Training:** The impact of COVID on craft apprenticeship provision was disastrous, with training workshops closed for 9 of the first 12 months of the pandemic and capacity restricted for a period of two years. This led to significant waiting lists for off-the-job training, which peaked at almost 8,400 waiting over 6 months in 2021. Good initial progress was made on reducing this, and the 6 month waiting list fell to a low of 4,401 in March 2022, helped by an increase in Phase 2 capacity of 46% on pre-COVID levels in 2023. However, with registrations increasing rapidly and capacity failing to increase further during the year, waiting lists started to rise. It is unacceptable for anyone to have to wait over 6 months for apprenticeship training, and it will be our overriding priority to deliver the emergency plan and fully eliminate these waiting lists as soon as possible. While there are many interdependencies to this process, with the intake employer-led, training delivered via ETBs and HEIs and significant additional funding required from the State, SOLAS and the NAO will drive the full delivery of the emergency backlog plan.
- 3. Realise the vision of the FET College of the Future:** We have noted the importance of the pipeline of FET College of the Future major capital projects and a key focus of the next three years will be moving them from business case stage to the prioritisation and active construction of FET campuses on the ground, while making the case for further capital investment to support the full delivery of the programme. However, the FET College of the Future is about more than buildings. It is about full integration of further education and training; it is about a college brand and experience; it is about consistent and clear learner support; it is about practitioners from

² The National Development Plan in 2023: Priorities and Capacity, the Economic and Social Research Institute, January 2024

different backgrounds working in one setting; and it requires the strategic and management structure and capacity to establish it as a beacon of learning within the community. Other projects have progressed in this vein outside of the capital programme, but we need focused attention to ensure full realisation of the vision across all ETBs and all regions. The FET transformation agenda is key in this regard. We will work with DFHERIS to develop an appropriate governance framework including management and reporting structures and learner supports for the FET College of the Future, and consider potential harmonisation of FET Practitioner roles to meet evolving FET needs and to address emerging skills needs.



- 4. Reform Funding and Financial Systems:** One of the barriers which has held back FET transformation has been the lack of consistent financial systems across ETBs. In 2024, all ETBs will finally move across to a single financial system, and we are working with ESBS to set up this new financial system to support the implementation of the new FET funding model. This is a big and critical piece of work that must support the work to align funding and performance, and to replace legacy programmes. By the end of the lifetime of the corporate plan it will facilitate the full and final implementation of all recommendations of the FET funding model review.
- 5. Launch a new Strategy aligned with new Strategic Performance Agreements:** We now have the established strategic planning machinery in place to set clear direction for FET at national and regional level. In this regard 2024 will be a year of transition, with SOLAS charged under its legislative remit with submitting a new FET strategy to succeed

Transforming Learning before the end of the year, and with new strategic performance agreements needing to be put in place for the start of 2025 to regionally embed this new strategy and deliver on the new set of FET system targets which will be agreed with the Minister. This will all involve extensive research and consultation, ensuring learner and enterprise voices are at the heart of the process, and will be a big ticket item to be delivered in the first year of the corporate plan.

4.3 Work Smarter

We will strive to continually improve our performance, become more innovative and productive, and use data and evidence to drive the approach and strategy across our organisation.

- 1. Complete the Journey to Outcome-Focused FET Delivery:** For a decade now, SOLAS has considered the need to address the complex landscape of legacy programmes inherited from FÁS and the VECs. While funding reform has simplified how these programmes are categorised, and some ETBs have moved to the focus on subject, NFQ level and outcome as recommended in Transforming Learning, legacy staffing arrangements, historic guidelines and referral/eligibility approaches still prevent full realisation of an outcome-focused system. We will deliver a full transition plan to remove legacy programmes across the system over the 3-year period of this plan, including new cross-FET guidelines and the evolution of the new ETB financial system in line with this. Legislative changes may be required in certain areas such as PLC and Youthreach to complete this process.




- 2. Continuously Improve SOLAS Processes:** We have increasingly deployed continuous improvement techniques over the last two years to improve the efficiency of our processes and systems. A pilot lean training initiative demonstrated significant impacts, albeit mainly around projects and collaborative approaches. Now the challenge is rolling out a continuous improvement approach across the entire organisation, fuelled by roll-out of training, further embedding of a PMO approach and a focus on continuous improvement and reform in the way in which we deliver our services.
- 3. Develop Next Generation Learner and Apprentice Data Systems:** The investment in a comprehensive learner database (PLSS) has served FET immeasurably and has allowed the performance culture to develop which has driven growth and success, with live dashboard tracking against targets and a FET course application portal both products of the system. The apprenticeship data system has served craft apprenticeship well over the course of its lifetime however it requires a significant technology and platform upgrade. The move to a single system of apprenticeship presents an opportunity to move to a single upgraded technological solution that supports the data, reporting and funding needs of SOLAS and can interface with external systems within the wider apprenticeship ecosystem. PLSS will continue to evolve and support sectoral changes such as programme harmonisation, community education, and interfaces with external systems such as adult guidance, combined with enhanced security measures.
- 4. Progress a Digital Learning Platform and Framework for the Future:** SOLAS faces a critical challenge in how it supports digital learning across FET, and while the 2023 EY review sets out a roadmap, decisions will have to be made in implementing the Digital Learning Platform/Framework for FET on the priority given to necessary capacity and capability building, data & analytics, sourcing and infrastructure as well as the role of ETBs in developing, sharing and delivering digital learning content, in line with the OECD review recommendations. As part of this work, eCollege will become a gateway to FET, reflecting its diverse focus, and showcasing ETB learning offerings alongside its existing portfolio, including an expanded suite of micro-qualifications. As envisaged by the OECD, an extensive system of guidance for both individuals and employers, especially smaller employers, will also be developed within the e-college platform. The Digital Learning Platform/Framework will facilitate access to systems of guidance for both individuals and employers, especially smaller employers, with supports for Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), and supports for workplace-focused/ based training and development (especially for SMEs) in response to OECD recommendations.
- 5. Make Evidence-based Decisions and Anticipate Future Skills Needs:** The data revolution we have driven across FET, together with the long standing reputation of the Skills and Labour Market Research Unit (SLMRU) has provided an evidence base to channel effective investment in skills. In recent

years we have developed and commissioned approaches to forecast skills demand and supply, and this work has fed into key decisions around Housing for All, addressing apprenticeship waiting lists and underpinning business cases for exciting new FET College of the Future projects. It shapes plans and provision for FET, and will be an essential resource in the critical need for agile programme development across ETBs, and the advancement of specialist skills development centres to meet future needs. Following our recent forecasting work both the FET Data Analytics and Statistics teams and the SLMRU will continue to build their role in understanding skills of the future, constructing comprehensive scenarios and models of where overall labour supply needs can be met in the short, medium and long-term, with a strong focus on bringing new people into the active workforce. This will continue to foster a culture of evaluation and continuous improvement across FET, construction schemes and apprenticeships.

4.4 Make it Count

We will make every euro of state investment count, deploying it effectively and efficiently to generate impact from FET and apprenticeships, ensuring good governance, accountability and maximum contribution to climate action.

- 1. Lead on Sustainability Education, Training and Behaviours: SOLAS** responsibility for sustainability and climate action extends far beyond its own mandated contribution to the 51% energy and carbon reduction target, and fulfilling the new requirements on organisations in terms of ESG reporting. It funds a system that will be pivotal to wider environmental and societal change, by providing green skills for construction, green skills for careers, and green skills for life, reaching a potential audience of over 400,000 adults as the future agents of change on climate action. This responsibility must be reflected in a leadership role in ESG activities and CSRD reporting and year-on-year reduction of our carbon footprint and energy usage as we embed accountability across the organisation and the sector we oversee. We will produce the first of our sustainability reports in 2024.
- 2. Fully align Funding, Strategy and Performance:** Over the lifetime of the previous corporate plan we have seen a new funding model recommended, the second iteration of strategic performance agreements between SOLAS and ETBs launched, data infrastructure enabling live tracking of outcomes and performance and the ESBS project to establish consistent financial systems across all 16 ETBs nearing fruition. This gives us a platform for fully aligning funding, strategy and performance over the next 3 years and ensuring efficiency, effectiveness and value-for-money across FET and apprenticeships.



“Not only do you see your team coming back from training with a new or an improved skillset, they’re coming back feeling more engaged”

Alison Ritchie, Managing Director,
Polar Ice

- 3. Amplify our Capital Investment:** From a position of virtually zero capital investment in FET, this has been increased considerably to a position where €66million is available to be deployed in 2024. The expansion of investment must continue throughout the plan's life, underpinned by strong sustainability principles, continuing a pipeline of FET College of the Future projects, supporting new apprenticeship and green skills infrastructure, and addressing deficits in capital stock.
- 4. Be Exemplary in Governance:** Our robust governance and accountability systems and processes keep us safe and give us the platform to enact real change. We will continue to comply with the Code of Practice for the Governance of State Bodies, be exemplary in our financial, risk and data management practices, and robustly audit all aspects of our business to ensure compliance and continuous improvement. Our Board and its four active sub-committees will continue to be supported and empowered to make effective decisions each time they meet. Our Board and our senior leadership team will reflect on what worked well, what could have worked better and what will we do next time in continuing to ensure SOLAS demonstrates exemplary governance.
- 5. Demonstrate our Reach and Expansion:** We have made enormous strides in recent years in raising awareness of FET and apprenticeship across the general public, with this now turning into significant levels of demand for both. There is scope to improve recognition by Government, industry and all key audiences of the value of SOLAS, FET and apprenticeships, the story of its success and its reach to over one-in-ten adults across Ireland. This strategic communication must drive the case for the additional funding we need to deliver all aspects of this plan, particularly around building ETB core capabilities, FET learner support and sustaining growth.

4.5 Live SOLAS

We will be recognised outside of our organisation as a great and progressive place to work, with an adaptable, supported and empowered workforce, where collective leadership and accountability drives success.

- 1. Embed a Permanent Structure to Reflect our Evolving Remit:** SOLAS has taken on new responsibilities across many areas, including the National Apprenticeship Office and the Adult Literacy for Life programme office, around capital investment and green skills, and now with the prospect of a new construction licensing authority resting within the organisation. This has inevitable implications for our senior level structure, and while we have put interim arrangements in place, we now need a permanent structure with agreed grading that will serve us over the next 3 years and beyond, and that avoids the need for continual reliance on temporary sanctions for senior posts. By supporting the periodic critical review by our parent Department in 2024, we will be able to confirm a permanent structure, and fully embed that structure over the lifetime of the plan, linking this to wider SOLAS succession planning.
- 2. Champion Change through an Empowered and Flexible Workforce:** The evolution of our remit, the introduction of new ways of working in recent years, and the most fundamental change in office work practices in decades sparked by COVID restrictions, has meant a continual change process within the organisation. While change at individual and team levels has been supported, we will formalise this via adoption of a change management framework, ensuring an empowered and flexible workforce that can continue to respond to ongoing transformation in our responsibilities and the way we deliver on them.
- 3. Best in Class on Diversity, Inclusion and Wellbeing:** SOLAS will build on recognition received in recent years for our approaches on diversity, inclusion and wellbeing and ensure we are seen as best in class across the public sector. Continued transparency around the gender pay gap and the diversity of our workforce will work hand-in-hand with proactive steps to drive further progress, with a gold Investors in Diversity award one goal. Central to this will be our continued efforts to embed Public Sector Duty and support wellbeing, building on our KeepWell mark, and using this as a key selling point in attracting new talent to the organisation.
- 4. Evolve our Modern and Progressive Workplace and Culture:** We want people to recognise the professionalism and excellence of SOLAS from the second they walk in the door, join a Teams meeting, read one of our publications or experience the learning and support which we fund. This depends on our support services, and we will continue to offer high quality facilities management, support staff learning and development, adopt

sustainable practice in areas like procurement, energy use and waste management, build on our digital infrastructure, cybersecurity and technical assistance, support budgeting and decision-making, upgrade or replace the current finance system and embed people practices and culture that reflect a modern, flexible, learning and adaptive organisation driven by collective leadership and accountability.

“I’m learning how to communicate with people more, my social skills are improving and I’m getting lots of presentation skills.”

FET Learner Forum Participant



5. Our Public Sector Obligations

As a Public Sector body SOLAS is subject to obligations under a number of national laws and policies. These include the following in the areas of human rights, equality, environment/sustainability and good governance.

5.1 Public Sector Duty on Equality and Human Rights

Under Section 42 of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Act 2014, SOLAS is required to have regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, promote equality, and protect human rights, both of our staff and of anyone affected by our services, policies and plans. An internal working group was set up to implement this Public Sector Duty on Equality and Human Rights (PSD) in 2021, developing: benchmarks for our equality and human rights ambitions; an assessment of equality and human rights issues relevant to our functions; and an implementation plan for the PSD. In 2022 the working group organised an internal information campaign on equality and human rights issues and progressed work on embedding the PSD in HR policies, procurement, and the Strategic Performance Agreements. During 2023 the working group continued to embed PSD in HR policies, draft guidelines for embedding PSD in business planning, develop a communications plan for the Duty, engage with various teams within SOLAS on the Duty, and provide updates on PSD activities to the HR forum, the SOLAS SLT and the SOLAS Board. Full annual reports are prepared each year and are available on the SOLAS website at <https://www.solas.ie/about/public-sector-duty/>

During the drafting of this Corporate Plan the [assessment of equality and human rights relevant to SOLAS functions, and the benchmarks for SOLAS equality and human rights ambitions](#) were considered. During the consultation process to support its development, stakeholders including staff, union representatives, and groups such as the National Disability Authority, AHEAD, NALA, and AONTAS were asked for their input into SOLAS strategic priorities and this input informed the drafting of the plan. The Public Sector Duty cuts across all of SOLAS's work, but is perhaps most clearly reflected in this plan in the objectives around bringing Learner Voice to the heart of SOLAS decision making (4.1.3), integrating FET within communities and with other services (4.1.6) and our ambition to be best in class on diversity, inclusion and wellbeing (4.5.3).

The initial Public Sector Duty Implementation Plan developed in 2021 is available on the SOLAS website at the link above, alongside Annual Action Plans for 2022 and 2023. A renewed assessment of relevant issues and a new Implementation Plan will be developed to run alongside this Corporate Plan for the next three years, taking into consideration achievements to date and new organisational priorities.

5.2 Public Sector Climate Action Mandate


As a public body, SOLAS is subject to the legal underpinning for climate action by the public sector under the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act 2021 and the Climate Action Plan 2023. This act requires all public bodies to perform their functions in a manner consistent with Ireland's climate ambition. The public sector is to lead by example, demonstrating the necessary climate action to reduce Ireland's greenhouse gas emissions by 51% by 2030. Working closely with our parent department (DFHERIS), with the Department of Environment, Climate, and Communications (DECC), and the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI), a SOLAS Public Sector Climate Action Mandate Roadmap has been developed which will record actions taken to date, including via Corporate Social Responsibility activities, and which will set out plans to achieve the required targets. As we noted within our actions under 'Make it Count' in Section 4, we are committed being a leader on climate action and in responding to new ESG reporting requirements. We intend to implement the CSRD as our ESG reporting framework and the SEAI Public Sector Energy programme.

5.3 Adult Literacy for Life – Plain English

SOLAS is committed to delivering on the plain language action in the whole-of-Government Adult Literacy for Life Strategy, which will be done through:

- Coordinating a plain language project to train approximately 30 relevant staff across Government Departments and agencies, public services, health and community services to become plain language editors.
- Training our own staff across a number of units/sections in plain language to ensure our own information and documentation is written in plain language.

We will also fulfil all of our obligations under the Irish Language Act.



“Community Education creates a safe space that builds families within the community and supports integration and social inclusion. The women feel so happy for what they have achieved”

**Niera Belacy, Project Manager with
Amal Women's Association**

6. Measuring our Success

As we set out in Section 2, there are some things which SOLAS directly oversees and controls, and then there is the wider FET system performance, which depends on individual ETBs and many other externalities. Nonetheless if we do our job well it should follow that the system has a better chance of performing, and ultimately the long-term success of SOLAS as an organisation will be defined by our ability to grow FET and apprenticeship outcomes, performance and impact. We place a strong focus on measuring success on an ongoing basis, via a Balanced Scorecard approach and FET System Performance Framework.

6.1 The SOLAS Balanced Scorecard

The Balanced Scorecard is a tool which helps us to understand if we are achieving our organisational goals, and acts as an early warning system to let us know when a particular area of work is off target. It was introduced as part of the SOLAS Corporate Plan for 2021-23 and also appears in the annual Business Plans for 2021, 2022 and 2023. The scorecard was revised for 2023 to take account of learning from previous years, and to reflect regular updating of progress against National FET System Targets, and we have now revised it further to reflect the critical areas of focus in this corporate plan, as set out in Figure 11. The traffic light tracking system is also illustrated beside.

The indicators which comprise the Balanced Scorecard, along with the latest trends at the time of publishing this corporate plan, are included as Appendix A. It should also be noted that the Balanced Scorecard is a tool to assist Board and management in tracking key performance indicators and trends relevant to SOLAS. We will of course continue to measure other relevant indicators in agreement with our parent Department, including in areas of FET reform and FET College of the Future, and in addition to monitoring delivery against our formal system performance targets.

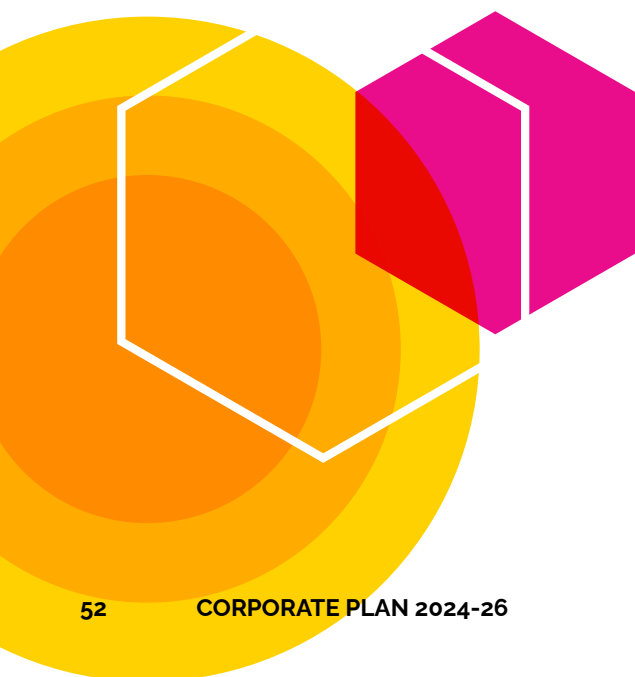


Figure 11: SOLAS Balanced Scorecard Structure



6.2 System Performance Targets

While the current FET system targets will be reviewed in consultation with our Minister and parent department in the course of 2024 in advance of new performance agreements from 2025, they stand as good benchmarks of the different outcomes and impacts which FET is expected to deliver for the economy and society. As such, they are largely expected to remain in place, and indeed maintaining such consistency now allows us to track performance trends from 2018 through to the present day. As noted in the introduction, the trends have been overwhelmingly positive since 2022, and this corporate plan will seek to create the conditions to maintain this growth trajectory in challenging funding conditions. The table below sets out key outcome and performance trends across the FET system for the period 2018 to 2023.

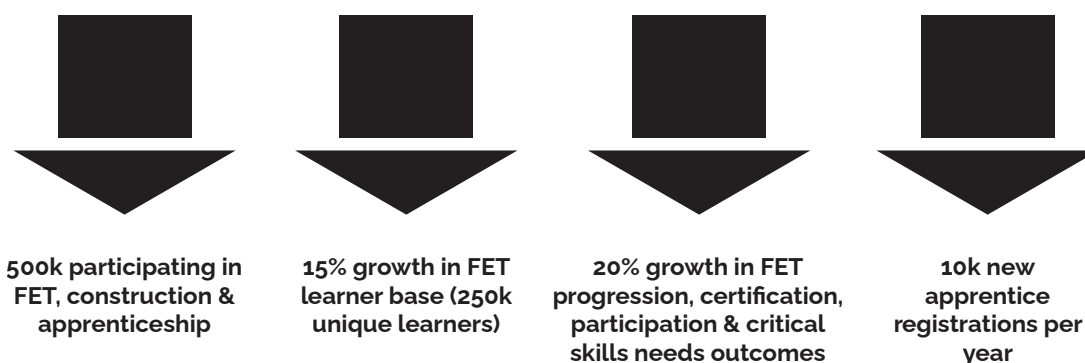
Figure 12: FET System Performance

Overall Funding and Outputs	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023				
FET Learners*	175,054	179,058	151,630	144,160	186,740	218,775				
FET Beneficiaries*	263,319	280,421	225,898	224,664	303,465	375,353				
Phase 2 Craft Apprenticeship Provision		4,220	3,551	3,283	5,557	5,613				
Apprenticeship Registrations	5,648	6,177	5,326	8,607	8,286	8,712				
Target	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023 Final	2023 Target	% Growth 22-23	2023 Final as % of Target	2024 Target
Supporting Jobs										
Jobs: Return employment outcomes to 2019 levels and grow by a further 10% by 2024	25,874	26,776	19,642	23,501	Not available yet	Not available yet	28,830	Not available yet	Not available yet	30,172
Skills to Compete: Deliver 50,000 places to support those who lost their job to find a pathway back to sustainable work	0	0	7,968	18,170	21,497	26,627	21,637	24%	123%	22,956
Creating Pathways										
Progression within FET: Return progression movements within FET to 2019 levels and grow by a further 10% by 2024	31,123	33,675	27,531	27,163	32,876	39,114	33,419	19%	117%	35,958
Progression from FET-HE: Grow levels of progression from FET-HE by 10% by 2024	5,412	5,364	5,553	Not available yet	Not available yet	Not available yet	6,238	Not available yet	Not available yet	6,672
Fostering Inclusion										
Transversal Skills: Return certification at NFAQ levels 1-3 to 2019 levels and grow by a further 10% by 2024	26,869	29,328	24,406	19,549	29,319	40,984	29,639	40%	138%	32,398
Widening Participation: Return participation levels by key target groups to 2019 levels and resume growth	11,930	17,271	14,803	13,803	18,810	23,763	18,266	26%	130%	19,474
Adult Literacy for Life (ALL): Increase provision for literacy and numeracy	52,609	59,325	44,279	40,740	69,136	84,937	64,987	23%	131%	70,095
Upskilling Through Lifetimes & Careers										
Lifelong Learning: Return engagement in lifelong learning to 2019 levels and grow by a further 10% by 2024	103,603	105,783	88,656	83,981	114,238	135,814	106,176	19%	128%	113,605
Skills to Advance: Continue to grow workforce upskilling enrolments	479	5,605	8,758	10,558	15,954	23,591	18,501	48%	128%	22,290
Targeting Key Skills Needs										
Key Skills Needs: Grow the number of places addressing key skills needs	27,880	30,290	30,330	30,447	29,538	33,439	32,502	13%	103%	35,008
Retrofitting Skills: Expansion of reskilling provision to meet retrofitting needs	49	500	342	749	2,069	4,452	5,270	115%	84%	1,739
Green Skills for All: Embedding of core green skills module across FET courses	0	0	0	0	153**	15,648	41,000	1,167%	38%	64,000

*Inclusive of unique learner enrolments as reported on PLSS 2018-2022. Not including eCollege. Please see published 2018-2022 System Outcomes Report for further detail.

**Green Skills Module made available in December 2022

In the context of these strong outcome and performance trends, and given the incredible footprint of FET, construction skills and apprenticeship in Ireland highlighted in Section 1, it is important to set an ambition that will continue this momentum and reflect the need for a more balanced skills system to drive Ireland's future competitiveness. The last two corporate plans have provided such an ambition via overall FET system targets that were then embedded via strategic performance agreements. The timing of this plan prevents detailed targets being set for 2025-2027, and the provision of adequate funding will also be critical to ensuring continued growth for FET and apprenticeships. Nonetheless we can set out overall aims in terms of the scale, performance and impact of the activities we fund and support and the individuals that benefit from them. Over the period 2024-2026 therefore SOLAS will strive to ensure:



We have made considerable progress in recent years in defining relevant outcome indicators for the system, allowing individual ETBs to compare and contrast performance with their peers, and this has proved a dynamic force in driving growth and transformation across them. While overall sector performance has been encouraging, it is important that we also look outside of Ireland in order to benchmark how Irish FET is doing relative to other comparable economies. The 16 metrics in the OECD Skills Dashboard provides a platform to do this and with 9 of them directly relevant to FET, we will incorporate this analysis, along with international benchmarking, into our ongoing monitoring activities. Ireland in general has an average ranking via this dashboard, well behind OECD skills 'leaders' like Finland and Sweden. The new FET strategy will consider how it can drive improvement in this relative performance and drive Ireland to become a global skills leader too.

7. Conclusion

This plan will provide an important anchor in a time of radical change, as we steer and influence the FET, construction and apprenticeship systems to fully reform and realise their potential. We have set out the challenges and interdependencies in a complex ecosystem; the impact of megatrends and the urgent need to adapt and lead in response to AI; and the evolving policy environment in which we sit. Nonetheless SOLAS retains a clear legislative remit, but with many additional strings added to our bow in recent years, requiring a move to a new permanent organisational structure. We have defined a clear vision to guide our work in the next three years, leading into themes, corporate objectives and actions which we will now progress. Measuring our success not only in delivering these actions, but also in terms of the outcomes and wider impacts we hope they will generate, will continue to be a central component of how we work and continuously improve.

The tools are therefore in place for the next stage of SOLAS and FET development. This plan will provide a foundation from which a new FET strategy and new strategic performance agreements can come to life, powering lifelong learning and workforce transformation from 2025 and beyond. We look forward to working with you all on that journey.





“This has been my
best year yet.”

FET Learner Forum Participant



SOLAS

learning works

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