

SCOTTISH QUALIFICATIONS AUTHORITY

B160/1.3

BOARD OF MANAGEMENT – 20 MARCH 2024

Minutes of the meeting of the Board of Management held at 1.15pm on Wednesday 24 January in Inglis, Livingstone and Macdonald, Lowden and by video conference.

Members

- * Ms S Rogers (Chair)
- * Ms F Robertson (Chief Executive)
- * Ms A Davis
- * Mr S Hagney
- * Mrs J Handley (virtually)
- * Dr W Mayne (virtually)
- * Mr G Smith (virtually)
- * Professor K Thomson
- * Ms M Wailes


Officers

- * Mr M Baxter
- * Ms J Blair
- * Mr J Booth
- * Mr M Campbell (virtually)
- * Mr M Ware
- * Mrs D Mahmoud
- * Mr J McMorris
- * Dr G Stewart (virtually)

- * Indicates present

In attendance

Mr S Borley, Head of Chief Executive's Office, SQA

, SQA
, SQA (virtually)
, SQA (virtually)

1 OPENING REMARKS

1.1 Welcome and apologies

The Chair welcomed members to the meeting, noting that due to adverse weather across the country, a number of colleagues were joining the meeting virtually.

No apologies had been received.

1.2 Declaration of any Conflicts of Interest

There were no conflicts of interest raised in relation to the agenda.

Whilst not a conflict of interest, it was acknowledged that Mr Hagney held an interest through his position as a Head of Centre. Furthermore, it was noted that Ms Wailes and Mr Hagney have children undertaking SQA qualifications.

The Chair noted her involvement as Chair of the Police Board of the Scottish Public Pensions Agency, whilst not a conflict in relation to this meeting agenda, it would be noted in future meetings if and when it was relevant.

1.3 Minutes of the previous meeting from 29 November 2023

The Board agreed the minutes as an accurate record of the meeting subject to some minor amendments.

1.4 Matters Arising

B158/3.2 - Contract Approval: Next Generation: HN Digital Transformation

Mr Campbell updated the Board that Scottish Government approval had been received on 23 January, with a number of conditions attached. A discovery exercise would now go ahead while SQA work with Scottish Government colleagues to explore any implications of the approval conditions.

Accreditation Committee Minutes

Mr Borley noted that a review of the inclusion of the Accreditation Committee minutes had been undertaken and all relevant minutes had been included in the Board pack. Mr Borley confirmed that internal processes had been amended to ensure continued practice. The Board noted the update.

B158/4.4 Contingency Planning

Ms Mahmoud provided a brief update on the current position around industrial action and the pay dispute, noting that there may be a need for further discussion with the Board to explore next steps. The Board noted the update.

There were no other matters arising that would not be covered during the agenda items.

2 UPDATES

2.1 Chair Update

The Chair provided an update on her engagements since taking post on 1 December 2023. She reported that she had undertaken a number of introductory conversations with the Chief Executive and colleagues from across the organisation and beyond. She had been impressed by the quality of these conversations and the support she had been given, there is much to be proud of.

Discussions were underway with the Scottish Government on Board member recruitment. In recognition of the crucial role the Board will play in leading the organisation through the transitional period ahead, the Chair noted that this recruitment was a priority activity.

Under the Executive Team's leadership, the development of the SQA Corporate Plan had been advancing, outlining a confident prospectus for change, alongside continuity of delivery.

To facilitate a smooth transition, the Chair will put in place appropriate governance arrangements for the transition.

The Board welcomed the Chair's update. Members welcomed the positive news on recruitment, to fill gaps which had emerged over time.

2.2 Chief Executive's Update

The Chief Executive thanked the Chair, congratulating her on her first Board meeting and recently awarded CBE, a well-deserved recognition for public service.

It had been a very productive and busy start to the year, with a focus on setting out the ambition, including the transition to the new qualifications body, through the corporate plan. Following the Deputy First Minister's draft budget announcement on 19 December, work was also underway to develop operational and resourcing plans for the coming year. This would be challenging given the 5% per cent reduction in grant in aid.

SQA welcomed the Minister for Higher and Further Education to discuss the Withers Review and there had been a meeting that morning with SQA colleagues and the Cabinet Secretary. This covered the ambition, work to consider our qualifications portfolio and the balance of assessment, following the Hayward Review, and our work on digital and engagement. Both meetings had been very positive.

The Chief Executive then asked Mr Booth to provide a brief update on work to improve the accessibility of the SQA website. Mr Booth confirmed that the SQA had been successfully audited.

The Chief Executive then asked Dr Stewart, as Responsible Officer, to provide a brief update on ongoing engagement with Ofqual.

3 PAPERS FOR APPROVAL

3.1 Procurement: Extension of RM Education Contract

Mr Campbell presented the e-marking contract extension proposal, noting that the current contract had been initiated through a full procurement process in 2018 and later extended during the pandemic to February 2025.

Mr Campbell outlined the available options, with the recommendation that the contract was extended.

The Board members discussed, focusing on alignment with SQA's risk appetite, both financially and operationally. Recognising the ongoing efforts with the current supplier to enhance services, particularly for appointees, the

Board acknowledged positive feedback, indicating confidence in the current system.

After full consideration, the Board were content to approve the recommended option for the e-marking contract renewal.

3.2 Awarding 2024: Establishing our approach to Grade Boundary Setting

Mr Ware presented an overview of the proposed approach, seeking high-level approval from the Board. As the next step in SQA's journey to pre-pandemic standards following more generous awarding in 2022 and 2023, the approach includes looking at the context of the post pandemic years, the approach and outcomes from 2022 and 2023, as well as considering the published approaches to be taken elsewhere in the UK in 2024. The approach proposes a return to established awarding processes in 2024 and to the use of SQA's rigorous, long standing and published approach to the setting of grade boundaries. Critically under this approach, the awarding meetings will take account of how course assessments have functioned and any factors that may impact on learner performance, including changes to the approach assessment resulting from the reinstatement of modifications put in place during the pandemic. The final policy would be brought for Board approval at their meeting on 20 March 2024.

The Board emphasised the importance of clear language to provide reassurance. It was acknowledged that there was a delicate balance to be struck between the integrity of qualifications, fairness to learners, and the return to stability in the system, recognising that impacts of the pandemic were still evident.

The Board approved the direction of travel as presented. Mr Ware thanked the Board for their valuable feedback noting that this approval set the stage for further rapid engagement and the development of the policy that would return to the Board on 20 March for final approval.

3.3 Ofqual & Qualifications Wales Statements of Compliance

Dr Stewart presented the Annual Statements of Compliance for Ofqual and Qualifications Wales (SoC). She reported that the arrangement for the SoC sign off had changed this year with Ofqual specifying that the SQA Chair and Board should now sign off the SoC for it to be a compliant submission.

As such, noting that Qualification Committee members had already signalled their approval, the Board were asked to approve the SoC for submission.

Taking assurance from Professor Thomson, in his role as Convenor of the Qualifications Committee, who confirmed that the Committee had seen and approved the SoC at the end of 2023, the Board were content to provide final approval for submission.

4 PAPERS FOR DISCUSSION

4.1 Financial Outlook 2024-25

Mr Baxter provided the Board with an update on the financial outlook for 2024-25 following publication of the Scottish Government's draft budget on 19 December 2023, including consideration of a number of associated strategic issues and risks for discussion and a proposed approach to address the medium-term financial outlook which will feed into the preparation of the 2024-25 base budget. Mr Baxter noted that, subject to the discussion and views of the Board, the approach set out would be the basis on which a base (Q0) budget will be prepared for Board consideration on 20 March.

The Board noted update and discussed the approach including efficiency in reducing costs, a review of income (including fees and charges) and the grant in aid requirement. Items for discussion included optimal utilisation of office spaces under the flexible working approach and the positive financial contribution of international business development and branding.

The Board discussed the importance of SQA's international role and outlining a vision for its future.

Mr Baxter thanked the Board the comments and feedback received.

4.2 Corporate Plan: progress to date and ambition

Mr Baxter went on to present the progress to date in developing the SQA Corporate Plan 2024-27, inviting the Board's comments and advice on the direction of travel in relation to the ambition that the plan articulates, including the supporting draft deliverables that would underpin the delivery of the three-year outcomes.

Mr Baxter reported that the plan seeks to capture the ambition for transformation, providing context and direction for the future. This ambition goes beyond a three-year corporate plan, aiming to set a longer-term direction with an emphasis on understanding how to effectively deliver on and achieve these ambitions.

The Board strongly endorsed the current direction of travel, noting the importance of partnerships, including the relationship with appointees who should see themselves as an integral part of SQA.

The Board acknowledged their crucial role in leading and supporting this work, to secure a successful transition to the new qualifications body, and ongoing successful delivery. The Board supported a programme of external engagement on the draft plan, which would begin imminently.

It was anticipated that the Corporate Plan would return to the Board in March for final approval.

5 PAPERS FOR INFORMATION

There were no papers for information.

6 COMMITTEE REPORTS

5.1 Accreditation Committee

Mr Smith presented the Accreditation Committee minutes from January 2022 to July 2023. He reported on the key focus areas of discussion including:

- Ongoing discussion around Education reform, including the Scottish Government's Short Life Working Group;
- Development of SVQs; and
- Stakeholder engagement being undertaken by accreditation to ensure services were being developed and improved to properly serve their users.

7 ANY OTHER BUSINESS

There was no other business raised.

8 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The next meeting of the Board will take place on Wednesday 20 March 2024. The Chair noted that the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills was expected to attend this meeting and that the location would be confirmed in due course.