SCOTTISH QUALIFCATIONS AUTHORITY   B170/1.4 i

BOARD OF MANAGEMENT – 28 MAY 2025

Minutes of the meeting of the Board of Management meeting held at 10am on Wednesday 30 April 2025 in Lowden.

Members

* *   Ms S Rogers (Chair)
* *   Mr J Booth (Interim Chief Executive) (until 4.4)
* *   Ms A Davis
* *   Mr R Erskine
* *   Mr S Hagney
* *   Ms C McFarlane
*   Mr S Hewitt
* *   Mr J Morton
* *   Mr G Smith
* *   Professor K Thomson
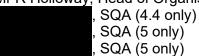* *   Ms M Wailes

Officers

* *   Ms J Blair (until 4.4)
* *   Mr M Campbell (until 4.4)
* *   Mrs D Mahmoud (until 4.4)
* *   Ms S McLaren (until 4.4)
* *   Mr J McMorris (until 4.4)
* *   Ms D Stewart (until 4.4)
* *   Mr M Ware (until 4.4)
* *   Mr D Walsh (until 4.4)

* *   Indicates present

In attendance

Mr S Borley, Head of Chief Executive's Office, SQA
█████████████, SQA
, SQA
, SQA
Mr R Holloway, Head of Organisational Development & Change (4.4 only)
█████████████, SQA (4.4 only)
, SQA (5 only)
, SQA (5 only)

1   OPENING REMARKS

1.1   Welcome and Apologies

Chair welcomed Board members to the meeting, noting that apologies had been received from Simon Hewitt.

1.2 Declaration of Any Conflicts of Interest

There were no conflicts of interest raised in relation to the agenda, however Caroline McFarlane updated the Board on her new position and Shirley Rogers advised the Board that she had been appointed to Chair the Strategic Advisory Board on pensions and that the register of interests had been updated accordingly.

1.3 Minutes of the previous meeting

The minutes of the meeting on 26 March 2025 were approved by the Board.

1.4 Matters Arising

There were no other matters arising that would not be covered in the course of the agenda.

2 UPDATES

2.1 Chair's Update

The Chair provided an update on several key matters, noting in particular the commencement of the examination diet. She expressed thanks to colleagues across the organisation for their efforts in reaching this stage, recognising that the coming weeks will represent a period of high activity for the organisation.

The advertisement for the Chief Executive role was now closed. There was a strong response, with a substantial number of credible candidates. The selection panel, which would be chaired by Ms Rogers, was in place. The Remuneration Committee would be convened in due course to approve the necessary salary and other arrangements.

The Chair reported that the job description for the Director of Accreditation role had been developed and evaluated, and discussions were underway regarding the appointment of this new position.

Initial discussions had taken place with the Scottish Government regarding the development of a sustainable financial model. Work is ongoing to develop a strategy in this area. The internal audit plan for the coming year had also been finalised and agreed with the auditors. The Chair expressed thanks to Ms Wailes and Mr Walsh for their support in this process.

The Chair provided an update on the Bill. It has been confirmed that the Chair and Board members appointed on a transitional basis would transfer to the new Qualifications Scotland (QS) body. She noted that the structure of the QS Board would be more prescribed and significantly larger than the current arrangement.

The Chair updated the current Bill position on accreditation. As a result, efforts were being made to seek a solution prior to Stage 3. As convenor and on behalf of the Accreditation Committee, Mr Smith emphasised the understandable anxiety and uncertainty this situation is causing for the Accreditation team and welcomed the organisation's commitment to keeping them informed and supported even in the absence of full clarity.

Mr Borley provided a brief update on a number of key areas of debate and amendments relating to the Bill.

The Board discussed the various options for Accreditation and considered the motivations driving recent committee discussions. Members agreed to consider any actions they could take to support these ongoing deliberations.

The Board noted the Chair's update. It was acknowledged that, as the transition date of 1 December 2025 approaches, there will likely be increased opportunities for Board discussion.

Ms Mahmoud closed by updating the Board that there were, as yet, no further developments regarding the appointee tribunal.

2.2 Chief Executive's Update

Mr Booth provided an update on his recent activities in his capacity as Interim Chief Executive.

As part of a programme of engagement with external stakeholders, he had been undertaking visits to various centres across the country. These visits are part of ongoing efforts to reset relationships, rebuild trust, and ensure visible, engaged leadership. The emphasis has been on active listening and fostering stronger local connections.

In addition to this, a range of internal engagement activities were underway. These include planned focus groups involving Executive Management Team (EMT) members and small groups of staff, aimed at checking in with colleagues, hearing their views, and encouraging open dialogue. Additionally, the latest staff pulse survey was currently live, results would be shared with the Board once available.

The Tertiary Education (Scotland) Bill was expected to progress through Parliament shortly and SQA had submitted a response to the recent call for evidence.

In closing, the Chief Executive noted that the confirmed transition date of 1 December 2025 was a key milestone. This date provides a clear target for the organisation and its staff to work towards.

3 PAPERS FOR APPROVAL

3.1 SQA Communications Strategy

Mr McLaren delivered a detailed presentation outlining the strategic approach to communications, engagement, and marketing as the organisation transitions from SQA to Qualifications Scotland (QS).

Mr McLaren reported that the strategy had been designed to be adopted across the organisation, beyond the Communications Directorate. Integrating communications with broader cultural transition efforts will help embed the approach in the work of all teams.

The Board noted that a collaborative approach would be essential. The organisation aims to act as an enthusiastic partner, working closely with stakeholders to collectively enhance outcomes for the education system. A key priority is ensuring stakeholders feel part of the transition journey.

As part of the development process, engagement had taken place with NHS24 to learn from their strategic engagement practices, informing the organisation's own approach.

The Board discussed the importance of the strategy acknowledging that rebuilding trust is a long-term journey rather than a single event.

In terms of measurement and evaluation, the Board noted that the strategy would include defined mechanisms for tracking progress, including research insights and feedback from engagement activities. These data points would inform continuous improvement and ensure accountability. Wherever possible, the feedback and experiences of learners and practitioners will be placed at the centre of evaluations and progress reporting.

The development of a new website was discussed. Feedback had indicated that users prefer continuity in functionality while adopting a refreshed look and feel. Efforts are being made to ensure that new branding, values, and tone of voice are consistently reflected across the site, rather than limited to the homepage.

Mr McLaren noted that the strategy had been deliberately pitched at a high level, with selective prioritisation based on analysis. While a social media strategy exists, the focus remains on strategic priorities that will have the greatest impact.

Whilst the Board supported the overall direction of the strategy members requested that further refinement could include closer alignment with the Schools Unit to maximise coherence and impact. Mr Morton, Chair of the Advisory Council agreed to work with Mr McLaren on further development of the strategy and the Chair asked Mr McLaren to work with her regarding the governance and Board involvement in this work.

3.2 Accreditation Committee Co-Option

Mr Smith presented the co-option proposal necessary to add additional members to the Accreditation Committee to ensure that the committee is quorate at every meeting. He also presented the recommendation that the Board approve one Committee appointment be terminated due to non-attendance, in accordance with the standing orders of the Committee.

The Board were content to approve the proposed co-option and termination as per the standing orders of the Committee.

3.3 2025/26 Budget Position

Mr Walsh provided the board with an update on SQA's budget submission to the Scottish Government, noting that we remain in the position that the Scottish Government will only confirm an initial portion of the budget, with the remainder to be access via the Scottish Government's 'Accountable Officer' process. A number of

members noted the suboptimality of these arrangements but acknowledged this was beyond SQA's control.

Mr Walsh highlighted that the budget submission figure was revised down by £2.2m compared to the initial Q0 budget position. This reduction was the result of work at individual budget level to remove costs and increase efficiency.

Mr Walsh also referred to the process now underway with the Scottish Government to work together on a sustainable financial model for Qualifications Scotland. Early engagement with officials has been positive. Members identified work on the financial benefits of both the Digital Awarding programme and work related to Education Reform, specifically the Portfolio Review, as being crucial in understanding the future model. The board requested future updates in this regard.

The Chair thanked Mr Walsh and the rest of the Executive Team for moving SQA's 2025/26 budget submission to this point and echoed her view that the engagement with Scottish Government officials on a sustainable model had been positive. She noted that this model, as well as considering the size and shape Qualifications Scotland would need to be, would also address the income mix across commercial, fees and charges, the levy and grant-in-aid. Members suggested that other public bodies have recently been given licence to retain all commercial surpluses without a corresponding adjustment to grant-in-aid funding. The Chair confirmed this would be covered in the ongoing work and considerations.

While noting the previously mentioned issue with the budget paper being presented prior to agreed funding being finalised, members were content to approve the budget pending outcomes of funding discussions with Scottish Government and noted that there may be need to revisit based on those discussions.

4 PAPERS FOR DISCUSSION

4.1 Financial Performance Report

Mr Walsh updated the board on the final position for financial year 2024/25, most notably that SQA has come in on budget for the year. This was achieved as a result of the difficult choices made to reduce expenditure, including the recruitment freeze which reduces SQA's headcount across the year by 48 FTEs.

The Board noted the update.

4.2 Awarding Programme Update

Ms Blair provided an update on programme delivery, reporting that the overall programme status is currently rated as Green. Key milestones have been successfully completed, with additional phases scheduled for delivery in the coming months.

The Board noted the challenge that had been encountered in recruiting markers for certain subjects. Engagement had taken place with representatives from ADES and SLS, and correspondence would be issued to Directors of Education outlining proposed contingency measures should shortfalls persist, along with long-term plans to address the issue. Additional issues experienced with question paper distribution

were being addressed through a full lessons learned review, which would be conducted this year.

Ms Blair reported that an increase in candidate entries, demand for assessment arrangements, and rising invigilation costs were all contributing factors under consideration in the current budget planning process.

4.3   Transition Board Update and Feedback from Cabinet Secretary's Commission

The Chair provided an update on the business and discussions of the Transition Board (TB). The TB received an update on the Programme Dashboard and high-level programme risks from Programme Manager, Mr Cullen, including a summary of Highlight Reports from all of the Project Boards that were now meeting monthly. Mr Cullen also included a summary report of spend to date and committed spend for FY 24/25.

Mr Ware had delivered an update on preparations for the Schools Unit that will lead Qualifications Scotland's engagement with the teaching profession and, with Ms Sinclair (SG) provided an additional update on proposals for the reform of qualifications and assessment in light of the Scottish Government's response to the Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment.

The Board noted the update.

4.4   Qualifications Scotland: Culture and Values

Raymond Holloway, Head of Organisational Development & Change, and ██████ ████ presented an overview of the organisation's newly defined Core Values: Open, Caring, Connected, Brave. This session was designed to engage the Board in a discussion on how these values can be actively and visibly demonstrated across the organisation.

Board members had been provided with a short introductory video ahead of the meeting, outlining the process used to develop the core values.

Members were split into two groups to facilitate focused discussion. Key points included the role of the Board in modelling and encouraging desired behaviours. It was agreed that such behaviours must be visible if they are to be reinforced effectively across the organisation. Attendance at internal events by Board members was suggested as one way to enhance visibility and engagement in addition to attending external events and visits where appropriate.

Discussions emphasised the importance of clarity around governance processes—specifically how information flows up through the organisation to the Board. It was suggested that staff should be able to see and understand how their input informs Board-level decisions, with evidence of internal consideration provided as part of Board papers.

The Board discussed the connection between innovation and organisational courage. To enable innovation, it was noted that the Board should adopt and communicate a clear risk appetite statement. This would provide parameters within which the organisation can take bold and creative steps confidently.

It was agreed that a further discussion session on culture and values would be arranged for the Board with Mr Holloway and ████████.

5   SQA BOARD ONLINE HUB INDUCTION SESSION

Mr Borley provided a brief intro to the session, outlining the purpose and rationale behind the development of the online hub for Board members.

████████ and ████████ then led Board members through setting up their access to the online SQA Board Sharepoint Hub that would be used to access Board information and materials going forward.

6   ANY OTHER BUSINESS

There was no other business raised.

7   DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The next meeting of the Board would take place on Wednesday 28 May 2025 on MS Teams.