

SCOTTISH QUALIFICATIONS AUTHORITY

PC10/3 i

PERFORMANCE COMMITTEE — 17 MAY 2021

For approval

Minutes of the ninth meeting of the Performance Committee held on Wednesday 10 March 2021 at 10.30 am by Microsoft Teams.

Members

- * Ms E Craig (Convenor)
- * Ms A Davis
- * Mr H McKay
- * Mr R Stewart

Officers

- * Mr M Baxter
- * Ms J Blair
- * [REDACTED]
- Mr S Borley
- * Mr A Dickson
- * Mr L Downie
- Mrs D Mahmoud
- * Mr J McMorris
- Ms F Robertson
- * Dr G Stewart

* indicates present

In attendance

- [REDACTED], SQA (PC9/8 only)
- [REDACTED], SQA
- Mrs J Faulds, SQA
- [REDACTED], SQA
- Mr D Middleton, SQA Chair
- Mr S McLaren, SQA (PC9/8 only)
- Mr A Shaw, SQA (PC9/7 only)

Observer

- [REDACTED], Scottish Government

9/1 WELCOME AND APOLOGIES

The Convenor welcomed everyone to the ninth meeting including Mr Middleton, SQA Chair, Mrs Jacqui Faulds, Head of Appointee Management (deputising for Mrs Mahmoud) and [REDACTED] (seconded to the Corporate Office).

A welcome was also extended to [REDACTED] (Sponsorship Team at the Scottish Government) as an observer. It was noted that the Scottish Government would attend each meeting in this capacity.

Apologies for absence were received from the Chief Executive, Mr Borley and Mrs Mahmoud.

9/2 DECLARATION OF ANY CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

There were no conflicts of interest declared on the agenda.

9/3 PREVIOUS MEETING

i Minutes from previous meeting

Subject to minor typographical corrections, the minutes of the eighth meeting held on 23 November 2020 were approved as an accurate record of the meeting.

ii Action Grid

The Committee noted the updates and closure of the three actions within the Action Grid.

iii Workplan

The Convenor explained that to enable comprehension of the connections to the Performance Framework the workplan had been categorised into sections against the deliverables. The workplan reflected the changed deliverables for 2021-22, however, these were still subject to SQA Board approval.

The Committee noted the contents of the workplan.

9/4 MATTERS ARISING

There were no matters arising.

9/5 QUARTERLY PERFORMANCE REVIEW — Q3 2020–21

[REDACTED] reminded the Committee that work continued to develop the report, including the addition of a summary page detailing the overall RAG status of the outcomes and deliverables.

A comprehensive review of the report demonstrated that there was positive progress being made across the breadth of SQA's activities. Out of the seven deliverables within the 'Perform' stand four had been assessed at Green, and three at Amber; mainly due to priorities and change of direction for copious activities across SQA during the COVID-19 pandemic. All remaining deliverables within the 'Plan' and 'Progress' strands were assessed at Green or had been paused.

The following areas were covered in the course of discussion, and the Committee:

- Were reminded that due to the lead in time to produce the report some of the data may not be as current as desired. Options would be considered for next year to enable more timely data to be presented for discussion.
- Suggested that a semi-annual review of the deliverables was undertaken to ensure that they continued to reflect what was agreed in SQA's Corporate Plan 2020–23.
- Enquired why the 'National Qualifications Delivery to Plan' deliverable had been assessed at Green given that the Appeals Model consultation had yet to launch. In response it was advised that the status reflected the most recent Programme updates and SQA was on track to deliver.
- Welcomed that the snapshot of sales dashboard of some selected products would be further developed to include additional information, for example predicted compared to actual entries.
- Suggested that a portfolio analysis of all SQA qualifications could be of benefit to identify and understand what areas to develop products in and what areas to avoid due to competitors.
- Noted that the Q3 absence graphic was the average per business area. A small number of absences within one of the smaller business areas would result in skewed graphics and an alternative format would be investigated.
- Were assured that the Executive Management Teams (EMT's) priority continued to be the health and wellbeing of the staff. There were trained Scottish Mental Health First Aiders across the organisation and wellbeing workshops, hosted by an external speaker, would be held during March for all Directorates.
- Requested an update on the findings of the recent Pulse Survey. In response, it was noted that the findings had been broadly similar to previous results and no areas for concern had emerged.
- Commented the continuing progress in terms of staff engagement and communications.
- Suggested that the financial targets for income and expenditure table include percentage of movement against each entry.
- Suggested that it could be valuable for SQA to become accredited by Investors in People to support the People Strategy.
- Requested clarification around the breadth of SQA's Brand Strategy. In response it was advised that it was closely linked to the Stakeholder Management Strategy and was about SQA's overall reputation management approach, not refreshing logos/designs.
- Welcomed that the Values Led Leadership Programme would be rolled out across the organisation.

- Highlighted the importance for SQA to understand the ‘outside perception’ from stakeholders and customers to address any misconceptions.
- Commented the progress by SQA to strengthen relationships with key Scottish stakeholders and institutes to achieve more cross-organisational activity.

In closing, the Committee commended SQA for the continuing progress against the Performance Framework deliverables, particularly with the focus on activities around the 2021 Awarding Programme.

9/6 STRATEGIC BEST VALUE AND FINANCIAL IMPROVEMENT PROGRAMME

Mr Dickson advised that overall progress had slowed within the Programme in the last quarter, predominantly due to the COVID-19 pandemic and competing demands of key individuals.

Within the Finance team, Mr Dickson was pleased to report that:

- Outline templates that detailed the scope of each project and allocating resource for many of the initiatives in the Financial Improvements Programme had been completed.
- A Finance Governance Group had been established to review and monitor progress on internal and external audit action points, the teams Risk Register and areas of non-compliance for purchase orders.
- A template to complete a medium-term financial plan looking at income and costs over a three-year horizon had been developed.
- A Development Plan had been established to ensure that the team continued to develop and meet the evolving needs of SQA.
- The Cost Allocation project had initiated and would determine how best to implement the model successfully.

In the ensuing discussion the Committee:

- Welcomed the development of a three-year horizon templated, and that it was intended to form a report for the SQA Board in due course.
- Endorsed that a communication plan around the implementation of the model of the Cost Allocation project would ensure engagement across the business.
- Emphasised the importance of Best Value to enable a strong organisational culture and positive attitude towards it and improvement.
- Were reassured that although the Finance team was leading on the work on the Cost Allocation project, it was organisation wide and would support the overall Programme.

- Noted that an Operational Excellence Programme was launched within the Operations Directorate and this would be allied to the overall Programme.

The Committee noted the update provided.

9/7 COUNTRY HUMAN RIGHTS IMPACT ASSESSMENTS – UPDATE

Mr Alistair Shaw, Head of International, was welcomed to the meeting.

Further to the development of SQA's Human Rights Policy, Human Rights Impact Assessments (HRIA) were undertaken for all countries which deliver SQA qualifications. The HRIA was now embedded within SQA's Country and Centre Appraisal process and forms part of the due diligence process for international engagement. Additionally, a human rights alert service was implemented that would inform SQA of any serious human rights violations that may need to be escalated for consideration to continue to operate in any country.

During discussion, the Committee:

- Welcomed that further advice from Scottish Government was sought in operating in countries out with the Scottish Government's 'A Trading Nation' list.
- Noted that as part of any withdrawals from countries, teach-out periods would be undertaken where necessary to complete obligations to current candidates finishing their qualifications.
- Endorsed EMT's decision on withdrawal of SQA operations in the countries listed within the report.
- Commented that there were robust and well documented processes in place to ensure that all the necessary checks, including human rights assessments were undertaken and scrutinised.
- Noted that the human rights assessment was undertaken independently of any commercial analysis.
- Agreed that the Country Summary list should be shared with the SQA Board for awareness of action and implication.
- Noted that the SELT (Secure English Language Testing) for overseas UK visa applicants' contract was a commercial arrangement with the UK Home Office and not included in the Country Summary.

Mr Shaw left the meeting.

9/8 STAKEHOLDER AND CUSTOMER SURVEY FOLLOW-UP REPORT

Mr Stuart McLaren, Head of Marketing and Communications, and [REDACTED], Senior Research Manager, were welcomed to the meeting.

Following the stakeholder and customer research findings that was provided to the Committee in August 2020, a full and comprehensive update was provided, which included subsequent qualitative research work and a summary of actions undertaken to address those issues highlighted. In the course of discussion, the Committee:

- Noted that the Stakeholder research initiatives were centred on SQA Awarding Body, not SQA Accreditation.
- Suggested that although parent and learner groups were used as mechanisms to undertake pulse survey research pilots, an analysis of the participants could be carried out to identify any potential gaps geographically/demographically and ensure a fair representation of society.
- Supported the decision to contemplate the results of the 2021 Customer Survey before taking further action on the 2020 findings, particularly with the increased burden on both SQA staff and centres during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Enquired if SQA had e-mail addresses for all learners to enable electronic distribution of the information booklet 'What you need to know for 2021'. In response it was advised that only learners who had registered for the MySQA service had an associated e-mail address. The decision for a printed booklet was based on feedback provided from the Scottish Youth Parliament and SQA's Learner Panel, as well as to ensure fairness as there was not full digital coverage with all learners.
- Highlighted that SQA should be mindful not to set unrealistic expectations given the high number of research initiatives that were currently being undertaken.
- Welcomed the increased direct engagement with learners, however, SQA should be cautious to ensure that there were no unintended consequences, such as learners reducing engagement with their centres.
- Reassured that research carried out around SQA's website had indicate that most users were able to find the information that they are looking for, and that they had a relatively user-friendly experience when doing so. SQA was investigating to ascertain if the issues were around accessing specific content and services across SQA's digital estate rather than the website specifically.
- Were reminded that the establishment of the Higher National and Vocational Qualifications 2021 Group was to enable a system wide approach and ensure key information was communicated to all sectors.
- Acknowledged that SQA was continuing to operate in an ever-changing environment across all sectors.

In closing, the Committee expressed their support and acknowledged the work and dedication of Mr McLaren, [REDACTED] and the wider team for the extensive programme of work that continued to be undertaken during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Mr McLaren and [REDACTED] left the meeting.

9/9 FOCUS FOR NEXT MEETING

The Committee noted that the agenda would be established from the workplan.

9/10 ANY OTHER BUSINESS

Enabling Functions Programme

Mr Downie, as Executive Sponsor, reminded the Committee that the Enabling Functions Programme commenced in 2018 with a clear vision to provide SQA with robust and resilient technology platforms that would reduce risk and support the digital transformation of SQA's products and services in future years.

He was pleased to report that the Digital Assurance Office (formerly the OCIO - Office of the Chief Information Officer) at the Scottish Government had concluded the Stage Gate reviews for the Programme, with SQA submitting a closure report in December 2020. SQA's Portfolio Board had formally approved the closure report on 23 February 2021.

The Digital Assurance Office had provided positive feedback on how well SQA had performed throughout the delivery and an executive summary report would be presented to the next meeting of the Audit Committee.

A report on the Programmes outcomes and benefits would be presented to the SQA Board in due course.

The Committee commended the collaborative effort by everyone in SQA for the success of the Programme.

9/11 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The next meeting of the Committee would take place on Monday 17 May 2021 at 10.30 am via MS Teams.

ANNUAL REVIEW OF COMMITTEE EFFECTIVENESS

Following the meeting, members of the Committee met separately (in the absence of SQA Officers) to undertake the annual review of its own effectiveness.