

National Adult Literacy Agency

Board Meeting

Wednesday 2 September 2020

15:00 – 16.50

Virtual

Present: Mary Bambrick (MB), Chairperson, David Heylin (DH), Ciaran Casey (CC), Pat Ayton (PA), Hazel Cryan (HC), Marie O’Gorman (MO’G), Kevin Kelly (KK), Anna Touhy Halligan (ATH), Michael Duffy (MD)

Apologies: Lee Mitchell (LM) Olive Phelan (OP)

In Attendance: Paul Cahill (PC) Clare McNally (CMcN) Elaine Cohalan (EC)

Minute Taker: Niamh O’Connor (NOC)

Decisions taken at the meeting:
The Board approved the minutes from the board meeting on the 24 June 2020 in addition to the redacted minutes and minutes for publication from board meetings on 5 February 2020, 13 May 2020 and 24 June 2020.
The Board approved the minutes from the subcommittee meetings.
The Board approved the Health and Safety Statement.
The Board approved the Equality and Diversity Policy.

1. **Declaration of any conflict of interest** – none.

2. **Previous minutes and matters arising.**

The minutes of the previous meeting on the 24th of June 2020 were adopted. The backlog of redacted and minutes for publication were approved subject to one additional redaction in the minutes from the meeting on the 13th of May 2020 in relation to personal information. Other minor edits in the minutes from the meetings on the 13th of May and the 24th of June were also recommended.

3. **Reports from all Sub-committees:**

a. **Student Sub-committee**

The draft minutes of the meeting of the Sub-committee on 8 July 2020 were taken as read.

b. **Audit and Finance Sub-committee**

The draft minutes of the meeting of the Sub-committee on 19 August 2020 were taken as read.

DH gave an overview of the matters dealt with at the meeting. He noted the surplus in the accounts of €64,000 and that this was primarily due to decreased expenditure, noting that spending has not been what it usually is at this time of year in light of recent circumstances. He acknowledged that there would be more expenditure over the next few months in relation to International Literacy Day and other campaigns. He informed the board that some of student development fund has not been used this year due to COVID-19, and the income from the Plain English service has increased, however due to the uncertainty of recent times this could be up and down. He also informed the board that the mid-year report to Solas had been submitted on time. He noted that two internal audits were completed last year and that the committee decided that there was no need for another at this time.

DH also mentioned the risk register which is a standing item for the subcommittee and noted that it had been discussed at length in previous meetings. MB informed the board that there is a set format for the risk register, which covers a number of different areas across the organisation. The subcommittee had suggested that there needed to be additional column added where the organisation could record each year's specific threats particularly in light of recent circumstances. MB noted that PC will go back to staff and collate a 2020 commentary on the risk register and that in addition to this, a wider piece of work will be done in relation to a possible overhaul in the risk register process. PC has captured the commentary from the subcommittee on this. MB suggested that this comes back to the board in March 2021 so they can re-evaluate. MB also added that there may be new board members who will be knowledgeable in this area and could contribute. PC agreed that when 2020 piece is finished it should be circulated to the board before March and that this was a good opportunity for the new board to comment on same.

c. Staff and Policy Sub-committee

The minutes of the meeting on 19 August 2020 were taken as read. MB gave an overview of the matters dealt with at the meeting. She updated the board on the recruitment process for the new CEO, noting that they have completed the first round of shortlisting for the role. She noted that herself, PA and an external reviewer will sit on the interview panel and that the first round of interviews will be conducted by the end of the next week. She stated that if possible, they intend to keep the interview panel the same but may need others from the board to participate in the process.

d. Education, Training and Assessment Sub-committee

MB informed the board that there hasn't been a meeting for this subcommittee since the boards last meeting.

4. Health and Safety Statement and Covid-19 Response Plan

MB introduced this document and informed the board that the Staff and Policy Subcommittee had gone through the standard document at their last meeting on 19 August 2020. She noted that they did not review the COVID-19 Response Plan at that meeting.

PC informed the board that the Health and Safety Statement is required to be updated every year and that a new Health and Safety Plan had been drafted for inclusion in this document. In relation to the plan, PC noted that in light of COVID-19, a number of actions in the plan in relation to training may not be possible this year. He added that that they may be able to implement some of these actions by the end of the year. In relation to the COVID-19 Response Plan, he informed the board that the organisation felt that it had done a lot in relation to responding to the pandemic; however, it had not been documented in a cohesive way to date. He stated that in the COVID-19 Response Plan they wanted to highlight a number of actions taken by the organisation so far such as operational actions taken in response to the initial lockdown, remote working risk assessments that were completed by staff, and a return to work protocol. He noted that overall, the remote-working risk assessment results were positive.

PC further noted that remote working is likely to continue to the end of year and perhaps into the New Year. In response to this, the organisation will be populating the COVID-19 Response Plan with more detail over the next few months. MB further highlighted that the response plan is a living document and will outline more than just the practicalities. She mentioned that areas such as health and well-being of staff, training and socialisation of new staff are all things the organisation will need to start looking at it as part of the response plan. EC agreed that the well-being of staff and peer support elements of remote working were areas that would be looked into and also other relevant training for staff.

KK mentioned formatting issues on page 81 (Return to Work Protocol). He also commented that the phrase 'use phone or video conferencing instead' should be amended to 'use phone or video conferencing where possible' He also queried the restrictions outlined in the return to work protocol on the number of staff allowed in the NALA office. He noted that perhaps this could be subject to change given the large amount of space in the NALA office. PC noted that the restrictions are in relation to the use of bathroom facilities. KK highlighted the importance of version numbers and MB agreed that this will be very important in future meetings to highlight amendments. She further noted that when this document is amended it should be marked as version 1.1. KK also mentioned that in the return to work protocol it states that no visitors allowed in the buildings and this could be something that could be re- evaluated also.

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PC highlighted that they are mainly presenting the Health and Safety Statement at this meeting and noted that they wanted to acknowledge the COVID-19 Response Plan as an appendix. KK noted that he thought both documents were very well put together.

PA mentioned that on page 71 in Part 1 of the COVID-19 Response Plan the words 'workers' and 'staff' are used and that it would be better to just use 'staff' to keep the document consistent throughout.

MB stated that the board were happy to sign off on the Health and Safety Statement and noted that the COVID-19 Response Plan does have a wider remit and that PC and NOC will be looking at this in relation to the board's comments today. She proposed this as a set item on the agenda and as it sits under the Staff and Policy Subcommittee, it can be built in as part that subcommittee update in future.

5. Equality and Diversity Policy

CC noted that there is an amendment needed in Section 3B in relation to the phrase 'membership of the traveller community membership' and in addition, the same change to be made in Section 7.

The board approved the policy subject to the above changes being made.

6. T2 Report

MB noted this was the second phase of the report and highlighted the importance of any comments on this from both staff and the board members. MB called on the management to discuss the different areas of the report.

EC discussed the following with the board in relation to the T2 reports:

- **Report on Strategic Plan – Objective 1 'Work in partnership in the delivery of the Further Education and Training Strategy (Planning with Solas and ETBI)'**

EC commented that this work is carried out on a continuous basis and that an operational approach is taken in relation to working with Solas and the ETBI. She noted that they meet with Solas once a month on this. She also commented on the Learn with NALA feedback from centres and noted that there was a little confusion in terms of the signing up process. She informed the board that there is a new process from the QQI panel from last year and they have signed off for signatory power from these centres. She added that there has also been queries coming back in relation to how QQI process works. In relation to this, she noted the impact on Solas funding and how it interacted with NALA membership. She informed the board that a clarification note went to all parties in relation to a minor adjustment to the memorandum of understanding.

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She commented on the future implications of this and possibly reviewing our membership process going forward in relation to ETB's signing up as a member organisation. She noted that multiple centres were signing up multiple times and in addition signing Memorandums of Understanding multiple times.

She also added that FET Directors suggested a single point of contact in the ETBI, she highlighted that this is a positive result and would be a welcome development.

- **Report on Strategic Plan - Objective 1.2 CITO Project**

EC noted that the CITO project is an Erasmus project which will run over three years. She noted that currently, they were a year and a half into the project and that the product was now complete. She informed the board that they will now be organising trial tests with stakeholders and that this had been initially planned for earlier but COVID-19 had delayed the process. She noted that they had received the report from the commission approving funding for a second year.

- **Strategic Plan – Objective 1.3 E-Learning platform for professional development**

EC informed the board that in relation to this project, they were just about to launch the first stand-alone online course and there would be three others to follow this year. One project will be outsourced to an ELearning company.

- **Strategic Plan – Objective 1.5 Expand learning opportunities through our Elearning platform**

EC noted that there were seven ongoing projects in part 1.5 of the plan and that there had been different levels of performance across all projects. Overall, these projects were going well. She noted that resources had to be re-organised in relation to some projects and there is also an ongoing recruitment process for an ELearning Project Officer. She noted that the project is consuming a lot of resources in terms of staffing but is positive overall.

MB commented that the Elearning projects will be interesting to monitor when students return to classrooms and noted that it is a wonderful opportunity to have an online learning platform like this. She also noted that the piece of work will be a good opportunity to work with FET Directors and the ETBI and this will be very useful.

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EC discussed the Solas digital transformation group with the board and the digital opportunities it makes available for centres. She noted they are in discussion with them in relation to having Learn with NALA as part of this and highlighted that this could be a huge opportunity in the future.

EC also mentioned that as part of the new package there will be a new reporting function. She highlighted that this will be an important tool for NALA to know how the platform is performing and this will also be available for centres. She noted that training with centres for this has gone on over the summer and that there were some complicating barriers that have since been reduced. She further noted that the project is currently not reaching the projected levels of performance that they were originally hoping for. MB commented that this is to be expected in light of COVID-19 and is not a reflection on the work gone in to this project to date. She further noted that the CPD element for tutors will be interesting to see as finding something specifically for literacy is difficult.

KK noted that the use of Learn with NALA is low at the moment as they need to have the learners in centres to use it. He stated that a few things are complicating this at the moment, but if learners get back in the centres they may see the use of this increasing. He thought the timing of the launch was very unfortunate in terms of the difficulties in getting literacy learners working from home in general. EC agreed that there are difficulties getting literacy learners working from home and noted that there had been a marked increase in interest from centres in relation to this.

- **Strategic Plan Report – Objective 1.6 Strategy for increasing adult numeracy learning issues**

EC updated the board on the Marking Progress and Briefing papers projects. She noted that both started in June but due to staffing, they have had to re-organise internal resources to get them back on track. She noted that planning for these is based on new hires.

- **CMcN then briefed the board on a number of points in the Strategic Plan Report - Objective III: To increase literacy, numeracy and digital skills through research, innovation, and effective communication**

CMcN informed the board that NALA have decided to cancel the Dublin Student Day that is usually hosted in person. She further noted that a student fund of €40,000 had been allocated, however in light of COVID-19 she feels that students and centres will be reluctant to use this. She noted that they have given centres until September to notify NALA on whether they have plans to use the funding or if they would like it to be allocated to something else.

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MB suggested communication with centres for ideas on what other activities they might like to do. KK noted that students really appreciate these days and centres really value the fund, however he highlighted that due to COVID-19, centres are under pressure to open up and simple broad guidelines from NALA on reallocating the funds may be useful as opposed to leaving each centre to make a decision on this. CMcN agreed that NALA need to give them other options.

CMcN went on to brief the board on the different awareness campaigns that will take place in the September period. She noted that they received a large amount of calls after the RTE campaign. She noted that they are meeting Solas this week in relation to the book, which is a compilation of Irish authors and President Michael D Higgins. She added that the book is currently not ready so they are pushing that back to the end of September. She noted that they will be communicating with ETB's about the book and that free copies will be available for adult learners. In addition to this, she noted that An Post will be supporting the campaign with virtual readings with authors and that there may be another launch with Minister Simon Harris and Minister Heather Humphries. She informed the board about the webinars that will be held for International Literacy Day. She noted that they intend to do a soft advertising campaign in relation to this over the next two months.

KK noted that ETB's are under pressure to return to their classes by the end of September and noted that usually a lot would be done in relation to literacy awareness but in light of COVID-19 this has not been easy this year. MB agreed with CMcN in relation to the idea of advertising later on.

- **PC then updated the board on some key points in relation to the Governance Report**

He informed the board that the August accounts have now come back and they will have them complete today. He also noted that there will be a management budget meeting on Friday afternoon to plan expenditure.

MB noted that there has been lot of changes within the organisation across a number of different areas, together with some external changes. She commended the management on the work they have put in over the last few months.

7. CEO's Report

MB noted that a lot of this was included in the T2 update from the managers. CC had a query in relation to a figure in the Operations Report - Point 1.1 (Learner Support and Administration). EC agree to review to amend this. CC noted that the reports are

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very easy to follow and thanked the management for that. MB agreed that these overviews were really important and the work is much appreciated.

8. Date and Venue of AGM 2021

The board noted that this is to be decided at a future date. MB added that the AGM will come up quite quickly again taking into account a number of resolutions and changes in the constitution which will potentially need to be completed, including a facility for proxy voting. MB noted that if the AGM is March, potentially changes will need to be signed off by the board in December. She added that, taking into account the likelihood that the meeting will be held virtually, this is something that would need to be resolved. She highlighted that having it in September is not ideal and this will need to be discussed at the next board meeting. MB also added that if the meeting is held in March, they will need to discuss whether this will be taken as a term for board members. KK agreed that this is something that they need to clarify adding that if they have an AGM physically is there a possibility of limiting numbers for this.

9. Private members discussion.

None.

10. Date of next meeting

The board agreed the date of the next meeting will be the 21st of October, time to be confirmed. MB noted that Margaret Kelly (MK) will be the chair at the next meeting. As MB would not be at the next board meeting, she thanked the board and added that they have been a pleasure to work with. She added that she would be in contact in relation to the CEO recruitment process.

11. AOB

None.

Actions from the meeting:
Risk Register to be presented to board in March 2021 – PC
Ongoing work on the COVID-19 Response Plan –PC/EC/CMcN/NOC
Amendment of figure in 1.1 of Operations Report – EC