



CONTRIBUTION TO THE SOLACE PERIODIC REVIEW

Derek Myers, Chair of the Management Board

Introduction

These notes were discussed at the SOLACE Management Board on 19 November 2009.

The purpose of the paper is to provide the basis for the next round of business planning for the year 2010/11 and beyond. The text below represents the consensus reached in that discussion.

What is SOLACE for?

Inevitably a lot of our debate will come back to this question. My purpose is not to labour it at this stage. I believe we are a professional body whose membership believes in, and wishes to support, public service excellence. We believe we can contribute to this excellence by promoting professional management. Fundamentally we buy into a model of professional management, made accountable through political leadership and control.

We have agreed to revise our current key objectives to include something more overt about our belief in a mixed economy of provision and our consequent commitment to work with private sector partners in order that they can understand the business of local government and therefore best make their contribution. I see an advantage here in putting our business partnership arrangements on a more high minded basis.

How does SOLACE pursue its objectives?

I think we can say that SOLACE pursues its objectives by:

- Bringing together, encouraging and sustaining the talents and contributions of its members.
- By forming and sustaining relationships with business partners
- By making common cause with other professional organisations.

By what means does SOLACE pursue its objectives?

We can continue to commit to taking forward our objectives by:

- Owning and running a business which provides useful services and generates a surplus
- Providing services to members to encourage them to improve and sustain their confidence and competence, on a full cost recharge basis
- Sustaining a Foundation which can contribute to the promotion of learning and the support of research.

and when we are in good form we will:

- Be giving voice to the concerns, ideas and experience of our members when public policy is being debated

- Be influencing the delivery of public policy through meetings with civil servants and Ministers
- Be promoting a range of materials and opportunities for members to sustain their professional development
- Be trading in a way which upholds the good name of the profession and contributes to the longer term sustainability of our efforts
- Be supporting the Foundation in a range of learning, research and other charitable activity
- Be promoting relationships with others so as to make common cause.
- Be sure about our values and consistent in our behaviours.

But in order to be focused we need to be realistic about our limits

Therefore I propose that, at least for the next few years, we agree that:

- Work with other colleague organisations internationally can only be agreed where costs are very small or covered by a third party offering support
- We support international conferences only on the basis that once a year one member of the Society will attend one international conference, with their reasonable expenses paid
- But we will continue to work with others where we can achieve more, at a reasonable cost.

At the current time we can name these strengths

- Our membership is the highest we have ever had
- Our business partners are staying loyal and other new potential partners can be identified
- Our Annual Conference continues to be well supported
- The activity through our website continues to grow
- We have a loyal and competent staff who understand their tasks
- Our trading company continues to have a healthy turnover in excess of £9m
- We are continuing, despite the recession, to trade successfully overall.

But we are not blind to our weaknesses

- Our policy work can seem somewhat haphazard and episodic
- Our relationship with our trade union colleagues in ALACE can sometimes appear confused
- The size of our operation makes us vulnerable to sudden losses of income.

And we are also mindful of a number of future threats

- That councils might decline to fund professional fees.
- The pattern of our membership means that we need to ensure a lack of nourishment for senior manager members does not lead to a high rate of churn and an overall reduction in the attractiveness of the offer to that group.
- That allegations of conflict of interest where SEL are advising on recruitment terms, might be taken as a market deterrent.
- That contingencies against staffing loss or upheaval may prove insufficient
- That business partner income might fall off sharply and be irreplaceable
- That a further round of local government reorganisation would reduce the number of chief executive members
- That some only just imaginable scandal might yet torpedo our reputation

- That the expectations from an incoming Government might overwhelm our ability to provide policy insight and advice.
- That the consensus about the role of professional managers recruited on merit, might yet be threatened.

As part of this periodic review we recognise that successful organisations:

- Keep their governance under repair
- Review their objectives regularly and focus capacity around delivery
- Learn from and communicate well with their stakeholders
- Think long term
- Ensure that predictable costs are in line with their predictable revenues
- Ensure the organisation is understandable to its members.

Therefore we resolve as part of the business planning for 2010/11 and beyond to:

- Ensure our governance instruments are up to date
- Refocus our objectives and review how we focus on delivery
- Maintain a steady improvement of our website as the prime channel of communication with our stakeholders
- Review our finances to ensure that we make a reasonable trading surplus for the Society in 2010/11 and 2011/12
- Adopt long term objectives for strengthening our leadership of SEL and make the Foundation a more influential contributor to our mission

In particular as part of the review we agree to:

On policy

- Focus on 1 – 6 zeitgeist issues that we wish to influence at any one time.
- Appoint a SOLACE lead from Management Board or from 'members in good standing' as policy spokesperson, assisted by a deputy policy spokesperson and no less than six members.
- Refocus the SOLACE policy office on coordination, commissioning and message management.
- Commit to spending a target amount of 20% of overall income on influencing work.
- Ensure members know of our influencing work through the weekly email and website.

On partners

- Commit to maintaining up to twenty business partners, with no more than five at Gold Partner level.
- Aim to see that business partner income, net of necessary costs, is within the agreed proportions alongside income from SEL, Members and elsewhere.

On professional development

- Recommit to the conference as the key networking and professional development event in the membership calendar. Work more closely with SMCE and ACCE.
- Position SOLACE as the meta commissioner for training and development opportunities on behalf of the sector.

On support to members

- Play our part with others in promoting the reputation of professional management in local government.
- As a support to ALACE, assist members who are in doubt, distress, or crisis, subject to an agreed protocol, saying who does what.

- Encourage peer to peer support and learning through the website.
- Encourage SOLACE mutuality in the nations and regions where members show that they want to organise themselves in this way.
- Maintain our current membership criteria and ensure all members have an opportunity to serve in at least some SOLACE structures.
- Anticipate membership will normally be between 1,500 and 2,000 persons, including SOLACENet & Graduate scheme members.
- Ensure the deal for those who offer to serve in leadership positions is clear, and that high standards are maintained.
- Use technology well to maximise choice for members.
- Pilot regional meetings to nurture senior manager members.

And to run the SOLACE Group most effectively we agree that:

- SEL should not be incorporated as part of the Society but should be made more independent; allowed to develop brands that are not strictly linked to the SOLACE name and have a board which is made up of more people with commercial experience who can hold the management accountable and yet still add commercial insight.
- We should work toward a CPD offer from the Society that is not run exclusively through the trading company and is available for members through the Society website.
- That we should continue to develop the website and its virtual footfall

Derek Myers

Chair, SOLACE Management Board

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The following have been agreed as the overarching objectives for the Society across the next three years:

1. REPRESENT: *to defend and promote the interests and concerns of Members.*
2. INFLUENCE: *To position the Society to influence central government policy.*
3. POLICY: *To be proactive in policy development.*
4. GROW: *To grow the business and protect income streams.*
5. ENGAGE: *To actively engage with the membership and involve them in SOLACE activities.*
6. MANAGE: *To provide high quality products and events, and pro-actively manage our risk, performance and cost base.*
7. MARKET DEVELOPMENT: *To offer consultancy and expertise to private sector business partners in return for a fee, as part of a commitment to a mixed economy of suppliers for the local government sector.*