MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE INTERFACE STRATEGIC BOARD

20TH August 2020 AT 10:30AM, HELD ONLINE VIA MICROSOFT TEAMS

PRESENT:

Professor Andrea Nolan (Chair), Professor Donald MacRae, Dr Siobhán Jordan, Dr Stuart Fancey, Johnny Mone, Brian Brown, Jo Bisset, Dr George Baxter, Gillian Galloway, Dr Colin Cooper, Liz Connolly, Professor Russel Griggs

IN ATTENDANCE:

Gary Bannon (SFC), Shelley Breckenridge, Howell Davies, Heather Rattray, Nicola Brooks and Laura Goodfellow (Interface).

1.   WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS

The Chair opened the meeting and explained the agenda to the Board. She welcomed Professor Russel Griggs who has recently joined the Board to represent South of Scotland Enterprise.

2.   APOLOGIES

The Chair noted the following apologies from the following: Jim Watson, Marc Crothall, Stuart Bain, Yekemi Otaru and Lorraine Thomson (Interface)

3.   ORAL UPDATES

Professor Andrea Nolan (AN) provided an update to the Board on the progress being made by Scottish Universities and Colleges with respect to teaching and research in accordance with the continued COVID-19 restrictions. Along with many businesses, Universities and Colleges face considerable financial uncertainties in the coming months. Liz Connolly (LC) outlined the blended learning approaches being delivered by Colleges.

Dr George Baxter (GB) highlighted that many laboratories within University of Edinburgh had continued to operate undertaking significant COVID-19 related research.   Furthermore, commercialisation and industry engagement had significantly increased over the past 12 months with a record number of patents filed. Jo Bissett reminded the Board that many businesses have remained open through the past few months with ongoing work to support critical infrastructure.

In response to the update from Dr Siobhán Jordan (SJ) on Interface staff continuing to work from home, Gillian Galloway (GG) noted that Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE) are not planning to open their offices until 2021.   Professor Russel Griggs (RG) highlighted the virtual establishment of South of Scotland Enterprise (SOSE) where the staff and Board have not yet been able to meet in person.

4.   MINUTES AND ACTION POINTS ARISING FROM PREVIOUS BOARD MEETING (PAPER 1)

 The Board agreed that the minutes were a true and accurate reflection of the discussions held on 26th May 2020. They noted progress against the actions as outlined in the table (Appendix 1) including the submission of information from Interface's best practices for monitoring impacts to EKOS Ltd who are supporting the Enterprise and Skills Board Innovation mission.   SJ noted the

considerable engagement with Scottish Universities' Business Schools through inspiring webinars and supporting Tourism & Hospitality businesses via the Adopt a business campaign.

The Board agreed that the actions with respect to inspiring more businesses outlined in Appendix 2 were now completed.

5.   PROGRESS REPORT INCLUDING Q4 MONITORING AND EVALUATION FRAMEWORK FOR FUNDERS (PAPER 2)

This presentation provided a summary of the data contained in the year end monitoring and evaluation framework.

A wide-ranging discussion followed with Board members noting
- The sterling performance by team members in delivering the targets, outcomes and impacts and whether virtual / online meetings had resulted in enhanced productivity.
- The "hunger" for businesses to innovate and the significant levels of engagement with tourism, hospitality, and technology sectors, particularly in Q4.
- The considerable innovative practices being adopted by small companies in response to COVID-19 as they strive to maintain revenues. RG noted the work of SRUC in supporting farmers in South of Scotland to pivot and diversify.

ACTION Interface to provide examples to RG of support to food and drink sector   SJ/HD

6.   OVERVIEW OF DELIVERY PLAN FOR AY2020/2021 (PAPER 3)

SJ outlined the plans for Interface delivery in AY2020/2021 as per Paper 3.

The Board agreed that
- Interface's four objectives (inspire, innovate, impact, inform) were still relevant to Interface's mission and delivery in the next 12 months.
- Despite the enthusiasm and ongoing interest from academics to engage with businesses large and small to deliver social and economic impacts, this must be balanced against the desire for full cost recovery with pressure on University and College budgets.
- The backlog of company – academic projects awaiting completion due to reduced capacity in laboratories required careful management and communication.

They noted the scope for more inspiring webinars to engage with a greater number of businesses and the new 15 faces campaign that had been launched in August 2020 to celebrate the 15 years of Interface.

7.   PROPOSED KPIs FOR AY2020/2021 (PAPER 4)

LG introduced Paper 4 to the Board, highlighting the plans in place to deliver the KPIs for the forthcoming 12 months which were unaltered from the 2018 approved business plan despite the many uncertainties for businesses due to COVID-19 and Brexit.

In outlining his admiration for maintaining the ambitious KPIs, SF questioned whether *student work based learning projects* were leading to lasting impacts between academics and businesses. He noted that this may be the optimal outcome for Universities which is outwith the control of Interface and challenged the level of "stickiness"/ ongoing engagement. LG updated that at least 37% of *student work based learning projects* led to further interaction between businesses and academia and this category provides the highest return rate for new jobs created.

Johnny Mone noted that many businesses were now reluctant to contribute cash to KTPs. Current limitations on funding to offset the cost of business – academic engagement and cash shortfalls in businesses remained a significant concern. Funding enabled greater numbers of impactful collaborations in addition to reducing the risk for businesses.

ACTIONS

Interface team to update Paper 5 (from Feb 2020 Board meeting) for SFC that defined the impacts emerging from the three categories of collaborative projects.   SJ/LG

Funders to discuss potential assistance that could be offered to address cash shortfalls by businesses to support academic engagement   SF, GG, JW

8.   UPDATED RISK REGISTER AUGUST 2020 (PAPER 5)

The Board noted the updates to the risk register in line with COVID-19 and the ongoing reviews by the senior management team within Interface. DMR recommended that the risk level (post mitigating actions) in relation to ongoing funding for Interface operations be increased.

ACTION: Update Interface Risk Register and share with the Board   SJ

9. HORIZON SCANNING ROUND TABLE DISCUSSION (PAPER 6)

SJ introduced Paper 6 to enable a round table discussion on the continued strategic rationale for Interface. A short discussion followed (due to constraints on time) with the following points noted:-

- The review of coherent provision being undertaken by SFC has highlighted the importance of place making, clusters and regional economic development. Interface has a significant role to play as a trusted, skilled and key partner in enabling greater connectivity.
- What aspects of Interface service could be reduced, where should greater focus lie?
- New models for sustained funding should be explored e.g. membership models, subscription to attending events, service to academics for company outreach to support funding bids etc.

ACTION: Outline ongoing Strategic rationale for Interface   SJ, HR, LG, HD, LT, SB

10. AOB

GG reiterated the commitment by HIE to Interface but given their current four year funding commitment, internal discussions on future investment would be in line with this cycle.

11. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

26th November 2020 – 2pm - 4pm   online