

SENIOR MANAGEMENT TEAM (SMT)

**WEDNESDAY, 27 MARCH 2024 at 9.30 AM
ROOM 106, PARLIAMENT BUILDINGS**

APPROVED

Present:

**Lesley Hogg, Clerk/Chief Executive
Ken Eccles, Head of Usher Services/Security (deputising for Steven Baxter, Director of Corporate Services)
Tara Caul, Director of Legal, Governance and Research Services
Gareth McGrath, Director of Parliamentary Services**

In Attendance:

**Janet Hughes, Clerical Supervisor
Robin Ramsey, Adviser to the Speaker/Head of Corporate Support (Items 5 and 6)
Sinéad McDonnell, Head of HR (Items 7, 8 and 9)
Cathy McGowan, Learning and Development Manager (Item 7)
Billy Mahoney, Interim Deputy Head of Finance (Item 10)
Paula McClintock, Head of Finance (Item 11)
Terri Quigley, Head of Facilities Management (Items 13, 14 and 15)
Jonathan McMillen, Head of Legal Services (Item 16)
Donna-Marie Clark, Data Protection and Governance Officer (Items 17 and 18)
Michael Cairns, Acting Head of Communications (Item 19)
Dan Hull, Chairperson of Internal Communications Group (Item 20)**

The meeting commenced at 9.31 am.

1. Apologies

Apologies were received from Steven Baxter, Ken Eccles deputised.

2. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

3. Minutes of previous meeting

It was noted that the minutes from the meeting on 1 March 2024 had been published.

4. SMT Action Points

The outstanding action points were reviewed and progress was noted.

Lesley Hogg queried the update provided to the action from the January 2024 SMT meeting, in relation to the issuing of regular communications on fire safety by the Health and Safety Team. Ken Eccles agreed to follow up on this.

Robin Ramsey joined the meeting at 9.36 am for agenda items 5 and 6.

5. Political Update

Lesley acknowledged that it had been a very busy period for the Assembly Commission as a whole and that staff had been stretched due to the number of vacancies being carried. She noted that recruitment competitions were being progressed at pace in order to fill vacancies as quickly as possible.

6. Draft Assembly Commission Agenda

Robin Ramsey advised that the next Assembly Commission meetings were scheduled for 16 May 2024 and 20 June 2024.

Proposed items for the May meeting included:

- Clerk/Chief Executive's Report
- Defects in the Roof of Parliament Buildings
- Review of the Financial Assistance for Political Parties Scheme ('FAPP Scheme') 2016
- Assembly Members (Remuneration Board) Bill
- Review of Security Arrangements for Members
- Corporate Plan 2023 -2028
- Portrait of His Majesty the King

Robin Ramsey left the meeting at 9.54 am.

CORPORATE SERVICES

Sinéad McDonnell joined the meeting at 9.54 am for agenda items 7, 8 and 9.

Cathy McGowan joined the meeting at 9.54 am for agenda item 7.

7. Corporate Learning and Development Activities and Budget for 2024-25

Cathy McGowan presented a paper seeking approval of the proposed corporate learning and development activities for 2024-25 and the associated budget.

Cathy outlined the proposed activities under each of the three priorities of the Learning and Development Strategy, noting that they would require an increase in the requested budget to that forecasted in December 2023.

Cathy highlighted the continuing issue of resource levels within the HR Learning and Development Team to facilitate the proposed activities for 2024-25. Sinéad stated that she would be reviewing the Corporate Plan 2023-2028, with a view to preparing a paper for consideration by SMT at a future meeting, setting out anticipated additional work for the HR Learning and Development Team, and highlighting the subsequent risk in delivery, given the current level of staffing dedicated to learning and development.

Gareth McGrath drew attention to the fact that a lot of training was undertaken at Directorate level and suggested that the monitoring of outcomes and evaluation of that training could also be considered as part of Sinéad's review.

Action: Sinéad to give consideration to the monitoring of outcomes and evaluation of training undertaken at Directorate level, as part of her review.

Lesley enquired about attendance figures at courses and stated that in order to live within budget, consideration may need to be given to reassessing priorities, the planned frequency of a number of courses now that the Assembly was conducting normal business, and the proposed number of course participants to ensure that they were delivering value for money.

Following discussion, SMT approved the corporate learning and development activities and original budget for 2024-25, subject to confirmation of the Assembly Commission's overall budget position. However, SMT did not, at this stage, agree a bid for an additional £20k to support new Learning and Development aspects of the draft Corporate Plan, and that this bid would be considered, together with other similar bids, in year.

It was agreed that the application process for staff to seek financial (and other) assistance to study could be commenced on the understanding that agreement to any requests could not be made until the overall budget position for the Assembly Commission was established.

SMT acknowledged the work involved in preparing the paper and the breadth of work delivered or facilitated by the HR Learning and Development Team.

Cathy McGowan left the meeting at 10.16 am.

8. Holiday Pay

Sinéad presented a paper outlining a proposed approach to the management of issues arising from Holiday Pay litigation, in relation to the retrospective calculation of holiday pay and noted that she had held a

separate meeting with the Clerk/Chief Executive and Directors on 13 March 2024.

Sinéad advised SMT of a recent development in the Holiday Pay claim, namely that, the legal representatives of Trade Union Side (TUS) had submitted a request to the Tribunal for a stay in proceedings until the beginning of January 2025.

Following discussion, SMT agreed that its preference would be to proceed in line with the proposed approach as outlined in the paper presented, but acknowledged that this may be impacted by TUS' request for a stay in proceedings.

9. HR Management Information

Sinéad presented the monthly HR Management Information as at 1 March 2024.

SMT noted the Staff in Post (SIP) figure, temporary promotions/deputising arrangements and agency worker assignments currently in place on 1 March 2024.

Sinéad updated SMT on recruitment activity. Tara Caul recorded her thanks to the HR Recruitment Team, for the considerable amount of work that had been undertaken in relation to the recent Research Officer competition.

Sinéad asked SMT to consider a staff Complement Change Application Form, for a temporary AG6 post within the Committee for Communities, to support the passage of the Sign Language Bill. SMT noted the application, and agreed to re-visit the request when there was a clearer position on the Assembly Commission's budget and the timing of the Sign Language Bill.

Sinéad referred to the recent unsuccessful competition for an AG6 Lead Software Developer, and following discussions with the Head of IT, as a temporary measure, sought SMT approval to run an internal competition for a Lead Software Developer for a 12-month period. SMT approved the request for a temporary internal competition.

In relation to sickness absence, Sinéad stated that short-term absences had greatly reduced in the last month.

SMT acknowledged the work involved with vacancy management, particularly since resumption of normal Assembly business and recorded its thanks to Sinéad and the HR Recruitment Team.

Sinéad McDonnell left the meeting at 10.29 am.

Billy Mahoney joined the meeting at 10.29 am for agenda item 10.

10. Management Accounts

Billy Mahoney presented the Management Accounts for February 2024.

Billy advised SMT of the current forecasts for Resource DEL and Capital DEL, and stated that the focus now was on ensuring that all expenditure incurred is receipted on the purchase ordering system by 31 March 2024.

Billy informed SMT of under and overspends that had been identified, and sought approval on the reallocation of budget brought forward by budget managers in Administration costs and Capital costs, as outlined in the paper. SMT approved the reallocation of budget.

Billy provided SMT with an update on the remaining capital projects due for completion prior to the end of the financial year.

Billy stated that consideration is being given to the governance arrangements that need to be put in place to manage and monitor the 2024-25 budget, in terms of assessing and prioritising increased or new expenditure proposals that were not included in the original budget.

SMT noted that the Finance Office will document a formal process for recording and prioritising unbudgeted expenditure proposals, should they start to arise early in the new year when underspends have yet to be identified in other business areas. SMT agreed that this should mirror the process used for capital expenditure.

Action: Billy to arrange for a record to be kept of expenditure that has been agreed in principle by SMT, which will be considered further should funding become available.

Lesley referred to the Life Cycle Plans that were produced for Building Services, the IS Office and Broadcasting, as a means of identifying potential future expenditure, and highlighted the importance of ensuring that these Plans were reviewed and updated annually in order to inform future budget requirements.

In relation to the capital budget for 2024-25, SMT agreed that for items that required approval, business cases should be with SMT for consideration, no later than the SMT meeting scheduled for 4 July 2024.

Action: Billy to arrange for a communication to issue to staff advising of the deadline for business cases to be considered by SMT in relation to potential capital expenditure for 2025-26.

Billy Mahoney left the meeting at 10.51 am.

Paula McClintock joined the meeting at 10.51 am for agenda item 11.

11. Annual Insurance Policy Renewal and Update

Paula McClintock updated SMT on the existing insurance policies currently held by the Assembly Commission, the cover provided and the proposed renewal premiums.

Tara Caul queried the position regarding the definition of bodily injury and the extent of insurance cover in relation to personal data breaches and libel or slander by staff in the course of their duties. It was noted by SMT that the first two of these issues had been addressed satisfactorily during last year's renewal process and that Paula should include reference to these matters in the paper. It was agreed that Paula should seek clarification regarding potential insurance cover for libel or slander by staff in the course of their duties.

Action: Paula to update the paper as requested and arrange for it to be re-circulated to SMT for information.

Action: Paula to obtain clarification in relation to potential insurance cover for libel or slander by staff in the course of their duties.

Following consideration, SMT agreed to proceed with the renewals as recommended, taking account of the longer-term agreement for the Employers' and Public Liability policy.

Paula McClintock left the meeting at 11.08 am.

Meeting suspended at 11.08 am and resumed at 11.19 am.

Frank Geddis joined the meeting at 11.08 am for agenda item 12.

12. Draft Corporate Plan 2023-2028 and Draft Annual Plan 2023-2024

Frank Geddis presented the draft Corporate Plan 2023-2028 and draft Annual Plan 2023-2024.

Following consideration, SMT approved the proposed layout of both draft Plans and agreed that it would be useful to set up a meeting with Heads of Business (HoBs) to go through the detail of the Plans, with any tweaks required done by HoBs prior to final sign off and presentation to the Assembly Commission at its next meeting.

Action: Clerk/Chief Executive's Office to arrange a meeting with HoBs to go through the detail of the draft Corporate and Annual Plans during week commencing 15 April 2024.

SMT acknowledged and was appreciative of all the effort and hard work that had gone into drafting both Plans and recorded its thanks to Frank, Paul Gill and HoBs.

Frank Geddis left the meeting at 11.33 am.

Terri Quigley joined the meeting at 11.41 am for agenda items 13, 14 and 15.

13. Provision of Building Maintenance and Minor Capital Work Projects

Terri Quigley presented a paper, seeking SMT approval to continue to avail of the services of the Property Maintenance Pan Government Framework Agreement 2024 for the financial years 2024-28.

Lesley noted that the paper sought approval of a budget for building maintenance and minor capital work projects for the period 2024-28 and raised a number of issues regarding the budget sought for the period 2025-26 to 2027-28, and fact that it did not correlate with the 10 Year Life Cycle Plan.

Following consideration, SMT approved the continued use of the services of the Property Maintenance Pan Government Framework Agreement 2024 for the financial years 2024-28 and the proposed budget for 2024-25 in relation to building maintenance and minor capital work projects, subject to confirmation of the Assembly Commission's overall budget position.

SMT noted that the budget for future years (2025-26 onwards) will be informed by the final 10 Year Life Cycle Plan, and that spending on building maintenance going forward was likely to be considerably higher than in recent previous years, due to underinvestment in those years.

SMT noted that Terri would have to seek budget approval for the period 2025-26 to 2027-28 at a later stage.

14. Building Services – Interim 10 Year Life Cycle Property, Plant and Equipment Upgrade / Replacement Plan - Update

Terri presented the 10 Year Life Cycle Property, Plant and Equipment Upgrade / Replacement Plan for Building Services.

Following review of the Plan, SMT agreed that it required further updating and also requested that a spreadsheet be produced detailing the assets identified for replacement and refurbishment each year, along with their estimated cost, split between capital and revenue.

It was agreed that by September 2024 a meeting would be held with the Clerk/Chief Executive, Directors and the Head of Facilities Management, to review the Life Cycle Plan and accompanying spreadsheets in detail, in order to determine the projects that should be undertaken and the timing of these.

Action: Terri to arrange a meeting with the Clerk/Chief Executive and Directors, to review the Life Cycle Plan and accompanying spreadsheets before the end of September 2024.

15. Office Resources Update

Terri presented a report on the Review of Office Resources Decentralisation Pilot Scheme and based on its findings sought SMT approval to end the pilot scheme and to commission an alternative, modern and paperless service provision for both Members and staff.

SMT noted the report, and following discussion, requested that Terri give further consideration to the proposed way forward.

Terri Quigley left the meeting at 12.49 pm.

LEGAL, GOVERNANCE AND RESEARCH SERVICES

Jonathan McMillen joined the meeting at 12.50 pm for agenda item 16.

16. Litigation Update

Jonathan McMillen updated SMT on the litigation to which the Assembly Commission is currently a named party.

Jonathan McMillen left the meeting at 1.07 pm.

Donna-Marie Clark joined the meeting at 1.07 pm for agenda items 17 and 18.

17. Quarterly Review of the Corporate Risk Register

Donna-Marie Clark advised that she had met with the Clerk/Chief Executive and Directors, on 6 March 2024, to discuss the Corporate Risk Register (CRR) in detail.

SMT noted and approved the CRR for March 2024, subject to some further minor amendments.

Donna-Marie advised that the CRR would be presented to the Assembly Commission Audit and Risk Committee at its meeting in May 2024.

18. Review of Records Management Policy and Guidance

Donna-Marie noted that a separate meeting had taken place with the Clerk/Chief Executive and Directors, to discuss revisions to the Records Management Policy and Guidance in detail.

SMT noted and approved the revised Records Management Policy and Guidance and requested that both the Policy and Guidance be issued to staff, with key changes highlighted.

Action: Donna-Marie to arrange for the revised Records Management Policy and Guidance to be issued to staff, with key changes highlighted.

Donna-Marie left the meeting at 1.12 pm.

Meeting suspended at 1.12 pm and resumed at 1.46 pm.

Change to agenda running order.

OTHER ITEMS

Dan Hull joined the meeting at 1.46 pm for agenda item 20.

20. Update on the Work of the Internal Communications Group (ICG) October 2023 – March 2024

Dan Hull provided SMT with an update on the activities of ICG for the period October 2023 to March 2024.

Dan reported on three main areas of work undertaken by ICG since the last update was provided to SMT, which included:

- concluding the AG8 Focus Group and presentation of a report on this exercise to SMT;
- commencing the work required to launch a joint staff survey in September 2024; and
- considering how best to respond to the recommendations made in the Supporting Personal Resilience Working Group report.

Dan advised that the AG8 Focus Group Report was published in January 2024 and that both he and Liz Beaton from the ICG sub-group, had consulted on the Report at a HoBs Forum in February 2024. Dan stated that this had been a very positive meeting and that HoBs had agreed to consider the findings of the Report in detail within their business areas and have a further discussion about actions at the next HoB Forum in March 2024.

In relation to the intention to participate in a joint survey with the Scottish and Welsh Parliaments, Dan advised that he had made arrangements to discuss the next steps with representatives from both Parliaments.

Dan also referred to two recommendations made in the Supporting Personal Resilience Working Group report that had been considered by ICG. Whilst a formal response to one of the recommendations had been agreed by ICG (the appointment of a resilience champion at SMT), Dan advised that the group had felt that there was a less obvious role for ICG with regards the other recommendations. It was agreed that Dan would meet with the Head of HR to discuss progress on implementation of the remaining recommendations.

Dan Hull left the meeting at 1.57 pm.

PARLIAMENTARY SERVICES

Michael Cairns joined the meeting at 2.02 pm for agenda item 19.

19. Strategic Communications Update

Michael Cairns provided a general update on strategic communications.

Michael also advised that the findings of the web analysis surveys would be available after Easter.

Michael noted that he was working with the Head of IT on a paper for presentation to a future SMT, on the redevelopment of the Assembly's Information Management System (AIMS).

Michael Cairns left the meeting at 2.26 pm.

21. Items Cleared by Correspondence

SMT Register of Interest – updated March 2024

SMT considered and approved a staff complement change form issued by correspondence on 20 March 2024, in relation to the extension of a temporary AG5 and two temporary AG6 posts in the Office of the Official Report (Hansard).

22. Papers Cleared by Correspondence

Revised Holiday Pay.

23. Directors' Updates

Corporate Services

Facilities Management

Ken Eccles advised that a few concerns had been raised in relation to the usability of the new EV charging system and associated cards and that these were being addressed.

Ken also advised that work on increasing the capacity of the EV charging spaces by recovering charging points from Dundonald House was ongoing.

Finance Office

Ken informed SMT of an issue in relation to the administration of party pensions, which is currently being address by the Finance Office.

Systems Review Project

Ken noted that discussions were ongoing with the supplier, in relation to signing off the Design phase of the Project.

Usher Services

Ken advised that there had been a good response to the recent Usher recruitment competition with interviews due to get underway in mid-April 2024.

Carparking

Ken noted that since the return of Assembly business there have been some issues with a lack of car parking spaces, particularly in the lower East car park, and some criticism received at the manner in which some vehicles have been parked. Ken stated that Usher Services management are currently exploring the option of using Agency staff to assist with monitoring parking in the lower East car park in the short term, and are also planning on making use of the overspill car park opposite the lower East car park from 8 May 2024.

Members' Security

Ken advised that discussions are continuing with the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI), with a view to setting up a briefing on personal security at Parliament Buildings in late April for Members and their staff, and that the Clerking and Member Support office is contacting Members to ascertain the level of interest.

It was noted that the Speaker had also just received a letter from PSNI Assistant Chief Constable, regarding a briefing on Members' Security. Ken also noted that a further paper on Members' Security was being prepared for the next Assembly Commission meeting.

Conservation Survey

Ken advised that the Building Services Team had engaged with the Department of Finance in relation to a conservation survey. SMT noted that as part of the protocol for the care of the historic estate, Parliament Buildings should be subject to periodic inspections and condition surveys, in order to identify and prioritise necessary repairs and major maintenance requirements, to enable Building Services to plan and execute work in a cost-effective way in keeping with the Grade A listed status of the building.

Legal, Governance and Research Services

Legal Services

Tara advised that a Satisfactory audit rating had been obtained following a recent audit of Legal Services.

Governance

Tara noted that the next Assembly Commission Audit and Risk Committee meeting is scheduled for 17 May 2024.

Information Standards

Tara informed SMT that the third Sensitivity Review (2002 and 2003 release) had commenced.

Research and Information Services

Tara noted that Library enquiries had increased significantly following the return to normal Assembly business.

Tara also noted the ongoing recruitment competition for Research Officers.

Tara advised that the Library is currently trialling the Legal Information Online Network (LION), which includes access to Lexis Legal Library and Westlaw. Tara noted that the separate subscription to Lexis Nexis would be ended if the trial is successful as significant savings will be achieved by utilising LION to access these resources. It was agreed that it was not necessary to bring a further business case to SMT as no additional expenditure would be incurred.

Procurement Office

Tara updated SMT on the ongoing procurement projects.

Parliamentary Services

Gareth McGrath provided a detailed account of the work undertaken by all business areas within the Parliamentary Services Directorate, since last reported at the SMT meeting on 1 March 2024.

24. AOB

There was no other business.

25. Date of Next Meeting

It was agreed that the next meeting would take place on 26 April 2024.

26. Proposals for Agenda Items for Next Meeting

- Defects in the Roof of Parliament Buildings
- Review of the Financial Assistance for Political Parties Scheme 2016
- Review of Security Arrangement for Members
- Corporate Values
- Safeguarding Policy
- Revised Appeal Mechanism Policy
- Parliament Buildings Security System Post Project Evaluation

- Assembly Members (Remuneration Board) Bill
- Biannual Review of Directorate Risk Registers
- Contract Management Guidance
- Northern Ireland Assembly Commission Complaints Policy and Procedures Report for 2023-24
- Quarterly Update on Internal Communications
- Legislative Drafting Contract
- Strategic Communications Update

The meeting ended at 3.06 pm.