

**SECRETARIAT MANAGEMENT GROUP (SMG)
THURSDAY, 30 APRIL 2020 at 9.30AM
(VIRTUAL MEETING VIA MICROSOFT TEAMS)**

APPROVED

Present: Lesley Hogg
Tara Caul
Gareth McGrath
Richard Stewart

In Attendance: Janet Hughes
Robin Ramsey
Paula McClintock
Karen Martin
Susie Brown
Tracey Wilson
Jonathan McMillen
Eddie Kelly

Opening/Review

The meeting commenced at 9.35am.

1. Apologies

No apologies were received.

2. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

3. Minutes of previous meeting

It was noted that the minutes and unrestricted papers from the meeting on 3 April 2020 had been published earlier that day.

4. SMG Action Points

The outstanding action points were reviewed and progress was noted.

In relation to an action from the February 2018 meeting on the 'Corporate Support Systems Review Project', Richard Stewart, Director of Corporate Services, advised that the Project Manager had reported difficulties in obtaining volunteers to participate in focus groups and mapping exercises, which was further delaying this work, as input from end users

was crucial to moving the project forward. Richard, therefore, asked Directors to encourage their staff to engage in the project and offer assistance when requests were sought by the Project Manager.

Action: Directors to encourage their staff to engage in the project and offer assistance when requests were sought by the Project Manager.

Regarding an action from the November 2018 meeting on the 'Review of Information Management Systems', Tara Caul, Director of Legal, Governance and Research Services, sought approval to move completion of this SMG paper to June 2020, to allow the newly appointed temporary Data Protection Officer sufficient time to complete a thorough review.

Tara also proposed that a separate meeting be arranged with the Clerk/Chief Executive, Directors and the Data Protection Officer, prior to presenting a paper at the June SMG meeting, to discuss the review in detail. SMG was content to proceed with the proposals as outlined by Tara.

Action: Data Protection Officer to arrange a meeting with the Clerk/Chief Executive and Directors to discuss the review of the Information Management Systems, prior to presenting a paper at the June 2020 SMG meeting.

Robin Ramsey, Adviser to the Speaker/Head of Corporate Support, joined the meeting at 9.55am for agenda items 5 and 6.

5. Political Update

SMG noted the ongoing work of the COVID-19 Response Group and the further measures taken to protect staff from risk to their health and safety, in order to support the continued operation of the Assembly and the Assembly Commission. SMG also noted that further guidance was likely to issue from the Executive the following week and that the measures taken to date would be reviewed in light of this.

SMG also acknowledged the excellent work that had been done to facilitate the amendment of parliamentary processes and procedures, to meet the needs of the Assembly.

CORPORATE SUPPORT

6. Draft Assembly Commission Agenda

Robin Ramsey informed SMG that 11 May 2020 was the proposed date for the next Assembly Commission meeting and that it would take place virtually using Microsoft Teams.

SMG reviewed the draft agenda for the next meeting.

Proposed items for the meeting included:

- Clerk/Chief Executive's Report
- Transfer of Certain Functions of the Independent Financial Review Panel
- Proposal for an Assembly Commission – supported Youth Assembly
- Salary of the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman
- Good Relations Action Plan 2016-21: March 2020 Monitoring Update
- Gender Action Plan Update: March 2020
- Assembly Commission Corporate Plan 2019-20 End-year Performance Report
- Assembly Commission Complaints Policy and Procedure 2020 Report

Robin Ramsey left the meeting at 10.46am.

CORPORATE SERVICES

Paula McClintock, Head of Finance, joined the meeting at 10.46am for agenda items 7 and 8.

7. Management Accounts

Paula McClintock presented the year-end Management Accounts for March 2020.

Paula reported on the provisional outturn figures for income and expenditure for 2019-20. She confirmed that the figures reported would be subject to change as work continued on the preparation of the Annual Report and Resources Accounts.

Paula referred SMG to areas of under/over spend and highlighted the main areas of underspend, namely, Secretariat salaries, Admin costs and Members' costs, which had all been impacted by the Coronavirus pandemic.

It was noted that there was a significant underspend recorded against Admin costs in relation to Buildings Services. Paula stated that some of the underspend could be due to accruals that were still to be processed and that this would be investigated further.

Paula also advised that the period for Members to submit claims for the 2019-20 financial year would stay open until 8 May 2020 so the figures for Members' costs would change.

Action: Richard to liaise with the Head of Building Services to put in place a more effective system of identifying accrued expenditure on a monthly basis.

Paula provided SMG with an estimated capital expenditure figure and advised on a provisional underspend. Lesley and Tara queried the budget figure recorded against the Learning and Development Training Room, stating that the figure exceeded that agreed and requested that this be investigated. Paula noted that the figure in the paper was used in the preparation of the Capital figure for inclusion in the Spring Supplementary Estimate but agreed to review the budget figure for the Learning and Development Training Room and make the necessary amendments to the Capital Plan.

Paula also asked SMG to consider a new emerging pressure of £7,500 for the 2020/21 Capital Plan in respect of additional devices to facilitate home working during the Coronavirus pandemic. SMG approved this expenditure and agreed that it would be managed from within the existing budget.

SMG highlighted the need for business areas to carefully consider expenditure and accruals, in order to avoid pressures next year. It was also agreed that a meeting would be arranged to give further detailed consideration to the 2020/21 Capital Plan.

Action: Paula to arrange a meeting with the Clerk/Chief Executive and Directors to discuss Capital expenditure for the 2020/21 financial year.

SMG reviewed the latest Decision Authorisation System (DAS) report. Paula confirmed that she was still working with some Heads of Business (HoBs) to obtain explanations for variances between approved and actual expenditure and that she would bring a final DAS year-end report along with the final outturn figures to a future SMG meeting.

Action: Directors to remind HoBs that explanations for variances in expenditure must be provided in the DAS report, as a matter of urgency.

Paula also sought Directors' support with obtaining responses from business areas to other Finance Office requests for information and it was agreed that Directors would be copied in to all future Finance Office requests and informed of any returns that are outstanding.

SMG thanked Paula and her team for their work to date in compiling the provisional outturn figures.

8. Insurance Policy Update

Paula provided SMG with an update on the annual renewal of the Assembly Commission's insurance policies for 2020/21.

She stated that the renewal process had started in early January and that a number of factors that could potentially have had an impact on the

renewal premium had been identified and fed into the renewal for 2020/21.

Paula also advised that during the renewal process consideration had been given to the level of employer's liability on the Combined Liability Policy. She said that following further discussions with the broker, it was agreed that the existing liability limit was sufficient, but that this would be kept under review as staff numbers increased. SMG was content with the current limit of liability cover and the proposed approach going forward.

Action: Paula to review the level of employer's liability cover on the Combined Liability Policy in six months' time and update SMG accordingly.

On further review of the current policy, Lesley and Tara queried coverage in relation to Directors and Office Holders, coverage for defamation and coverage for Members in their roles as employers.

Richard noted that cover for defamation had been specifically removed from the policy and that Directors and Office Holder coverage was generally undertaken on a self-insured basis for most public service entities.

In relation to the queries raised on coverage, it was agreed that Paula would liaise with the insurance broker and provide a further update at the May SMG meeting.

Action: Paula to liaise with the insurance broker in relation to the queries raised on the cover provided by the policy and present a further update at the May SMG meeting.

Paula also highlighted the need for Directors and HoBs to ensure that consideration was given to insurance issues when making operational decisions and that early engagement with the Finance Office was advised to ensure that any insurance implications were identified.

Action: Paula to engage with HoBs and advise them of the type of insurance cover held by the Assembly Commission and ask that they give consideration to insurance issues when making operational decisions.

SMG requested that future Insurance Policy Updates are presented to SMG for consideration in February in advance of the policy renewal.

Action: Paula to prepare the annual update to SMG in February each year.

Paula finished by providing SMG with an update on the insurance case history for 2019-20.

Paula McClintock left the meeting at 12.09pm.

Comfort break until 12.22pm

Karen Martin, Deputy Head of HR, joined the meeting at 12.22pm for agenda items 10 and 11.

10. HR Management Information

Karen Martin presented the HR Management Information as at 1 April 2020.

She informed SMG that the Staff in Post (SiP) figure (including agency and seconded staff) was 325.4 Full Time Equivalents (FTE) against an agreed staff complement (including complement plus) of 375.8 FTE. It was noted that the SiP figure represented a decrease of 3.5 FTE (from 328.9) when compared with 16 March 2020, the date of the last formal update provided to SMG.

In relation to temporary promotions/deputising arrangements currently in place, it was noted that there had been little change since last reported to SMG.

Karen also advised that there had been no change to agency workers assignments since last reported but confirmed that more specific individual contract end dates had been added to the report for SMG information.

SMG reviewed the Recruitment Schedule, which had been updated to include the three additional posts approved at the last SMG meeting on 3 April 2020. Karen confirmed that the HR Office was continuing to work with selection panels on recruitment competitions.

It was noted that due to the Coronavirus pandemic, the Clerk Assistant and Research Officer competitions had been paused but that consideration was being given to progress these. Karen also confirmed that the IS Scholarship interviews would be taking place by video conference the following week and that the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman (NIPSO) recruitment was progressing.

On reviewing the Complement Plus table, SMG noted that agreed end dates had been added for all posts. A few amendments were requested to the table and it was agreed that any future additions to the table be highlighted for future SMG reports.

Karen confirmed that recruitment activity would continue to be kept under review with SMG in light of the impact of the COVID-19 situation.

Sickness absence information was provided for the first three months of the year. The rolling figures for January, February and March 2020 were reported as follows:

- for the period February 2019 – January 2020, the average days lost to sickness absence per FTE member of staff was 11.0 days, which represented a significant increase over 8.9 days for the period February 2018 – January 2019;
- for the period March 2019 – February 2020, the average days lost to sickness absence per FTE member of staff was 10.6. Again, it was noted that this did not compare favourably with 8.9 days for the period March 2018 – February 2019; and
- for the period April 2019 – March 2020, the average days lost to sickness absence per FTE member of staff was 10.7, compared with an average of 8.8 days for the period April 2018 – March 2019.

SMG noted its concern with the level of sickness absence over the last three months. Karen confirmed that cases of long term sickness absence had increased and highlighted that Occupational Health Service (OHS) was not accepting any new referrals due to the redeployment of staff during the Coronavirus pandemic.

SMG agreed that it was far from satisfactory that staff could not currently avail of OHS services and asked Karen to look into the possibility of using an alternative service provider in the interim period.

Action: Karen to investigate the possibility of using an alternative service provider to OHS on a short-term basis.

SMG requested, that as had been done in the past, that an anonymised list of long term sickness absences be provided at SMG meetings as part of the HR Management Information, broken down by directorate.

Action: Karen to provide SMG with an anonymised list of long term sickness absences as part of the monthly HR Management Information to SMG, broken down by Directorate.

Karen also confirmed that the HR Office was maintaining information on all absences (including self-isolation and special leave) related to COVID-19 and that it would continue to provide regular updates to SMG. SMG requested that the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases be included in future monthly HR Management Reports going forward.

11. Equal Pay Review 2019

Karen presented the Equal Pay Review 2019 Report stating that the position had not changed from the last report and that there were no particular areas of concern.

SMG noted the content of the Report and agreed that there was nothing highlighted that required any further action. SMG agreed to conduct a further review in two years' time.

Action: Karen to arrange for a copy of Equal Pay Review 2019 Report to be forwarded to Trade Union Side.

Karen Martin left the meeting at 1.03pm.

Meeting suspended at 1.03pm and resumed at 1.34pm.

Change to agenda running order.

PARLIAMENTARY SERVICES

Susie Brown, Head of Communications and Tracey Wilson, Information Officer, joined the meeting at 1.34pm for agenda item 15.

15. Virtual Committee Meetings via Video Conferencing

Susie Brown and Tracey Wilson presented this paper, outlining options for addressing the urgent need to support MLAs participating in committee business from outside Parliament Buildings during the ongoing Coronavirus pandemic.

Susie stated that the Communications Office, in conjunction with the Clerking and Member Support Office, IS Office and Assembly Broadcasting had explored a number of technical solutions. She confirmed that consideration had been given to using tools such as, Microsoft Teams, Pexip, Zoom and Starleaf and outlined the advantages and disadvantage of each. Following review of the four options, Susie stated that the 'Starleaf' system had been identified as the best fit to meet the needs of the Assembly for virtual/hybrid committee meetings and potentially plenary sittings.

On discussing the paper, SMG asked that it be updated to include some additional costings for completeness and that the wording in one of the paragraphs be amended to ensure clarity.

Action: Susie to update the paper as requested and re-circulate to SMG

Following consideration, SMG noted the recommendation to use the 'Starleaf' system to facilitate virtual committee meetings and approved the associated expenditure under the terms of the current 'Broadcasting, Associated Equipment Maintenance and Related Services Contract', specifically section 4.2.4 'Service Development & Minor Projects'.

Susie Brown and Tracey Wilson left the meeting at 2.10pm.

LEGAL, GOVERNANCE AND RESEARCH SERVICES

Jonathan McMillen, Head of Legal Services, joined the meeting at 2.10pm for agenda item 14.

14. Litigation Update

Jonathan McMillen provided SMG with an update on the actual and potential litigation to which the Assembly Commission is currently a named party.

Jonathan McMillen left the meeting at 2.27pm.

CORPORATE SERVICES CONTINUED

12. Salary of the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman

Richard presented a draft Assembly Commission paper outlining options for consideration in relation to the setting of the Ombudsman's salary.

Following consideration, SMG approved the paper for presentation at the next Assembly Commission meeting, subject to a minor amendment.

Action: Richard to update the paper as agreed by SMG and present at the next Assembly Commission meeting.

LEGAL, GOVERNANCE AND RESEARCH SERVICES CONTINUED

Eddie Kelly, Acting Head of Internal Audit, joined the meeting at 2.42pm for agenda item 13.

13. Draft Internal Audit Strategy 2020/21 – 2022/23 including the Draft Internal Audit Plan 2020/21

It was noted that the draft Internal Audit Strategy 2020/21 – 2022/23 had previously been considered by SMG at the January 2020 meeting and subsequently updated, following further detailed discussion with the Clerk/Chief Executive and Directors, to include the priority areas of work.

Eddie Kelly presented the revised draft Internal Audit Strategy 2020/21 – 2022/23 which also now included a draft Strategic Plan and 2020/21 Annual Plan.

Following consideration, SMG approved the Strategy (subject to a minor amendment), and associated Strategic and Annual Plans for 2020/21, which will be presented to the Secretariat Audit and Risk Committee at its

next meeting. Final version of Internal Audit Plan 2020/21 to be shared with HoBs.

Action: Eddie to issue a copy of the Internal Audit Plan for 2020/21 to HoBs.

Eddie Kelly left the meeting at 2.58pm.

PARLIAMENTARY SERVICES CONTINUED

16. Northern Ireland Assembly Commission Complaints Policy and Procedure Report for 2019-20

SMG reviewed the Complaints Policy Report for the period 1 April 2019 to 31 March 2020, and noted that one complaint had been received.

SMG approved the Report for presentation at the next Assembly Commission meeting and, thereafter, for publication on the Assembly's website.

Action: Gareth to present the paper at the next Assembly Commission meeting.

Action: Communications Officer to arrange for the Complaints Policy Report for 2019-20 to be published on the Assembly's website following consideration by the Assembly Commission.

SMG also discussed the current Complaints Policy and agreed that a revision was required in relation to who investigates complaints made. Under the current policy, it was noted that complaints are forwarded to the HoB from the area within which the complaint relates, for investigation. However, following consideration of this process, SMG agreed that any future complaints should be forwarded instead, to the relevant Director who would in turn appoint an investigating officer, independent of the business area to which the complaint related.

Action: Gareth to arrange for the Assembly Commission's Complaints Policy to be revised as agreed by SMG.

OTHER ITEMS

17. Directorate Updates

SMG noted the Directorate updates.

Corporate Services

Richard again highlighted staffing issues within the Equality Unit and the

need for additional specialist support given the heavy workload for the remainder of this year and into next year.

Richard also highlighted the potential for an increased risk of cyber-fraud arising from remote working and that it was particularly relevant for the Finance Office. It was noted, however, that weekly communications were being issued to Finance Office staff reminding them of the need to remain vigilant and that specialist training was carried out earlier in the year.

Legal, Governance and Research Services

Tara provided an update on the Internal Audit Reviews for:

- Members' Expenses;
- Administration of Members' Expenses;
- Mobile Phones;
- Cyber-security;
- Public Engagement;
- Equality and Good Relations Unit; and
- Payroll

Parliamentary Services

Gareth confirmed that a number of staff from Hansard were now able to work from home using personal computers.

It was also noted that all events and activities overseen by Events Office, Education Service and Public Engagement and Outreach had been cancelled/postponed up to 10 May with no future bookings being taken at the current time. Gareth confirmed that future events would be kept under review.

18. AOB

There was no other business.

19. Date of next meeting

Next meeting to take place on 29 May 2020.

20. Proposals for Agenda Items for Next Meeting

- Review of Financial Management Process
- Post Project Evaluation: Support Services Contract
- Travel and Subsistence Policy
- Risk Management Strategy
- Further Insurance Policy Update

The meeting ended at 3.41pm.