

SECRETARIAT MANAGEMENT GROUP (SMG)

THURSDAY, 24 JUNE 2021 at 1.30 PM
(VIRTUAL MEETING VIA MICROSOFT TEAMS)

APPROVED

Present: Lesley Hogg
Tara Caul
Gareth McGrath
Richard Stewart

In Attendance: Janet Hughes
Robin Ramsey
Julie Devlin
Brian Devlin
Kevin Pelan
Stella McArdle
Shauna Mageean
Sinéad McDonnell
Paula McClintock
Billy Mahoney
Maria Bannon
Liz Milligan
Susie Brown
Tracey Wilson
John Power

Opening/Review

The meeting commenced at 1.32 pm.

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 27 May 2021 were published on 23 June 2021.

4. SMG Action Points

The outstanding action points were reviewed and progress was noted.

Lesley Hogg, Clerk/Chief Executive, referred to an outstanding action from the SMG meeting on 26 February 2021, in relation to obtaining costings for 'Train the Trainer' training, and requested that the information be obtained as soon as possible.

Also, it was agreed that the status update for an action from the May 2021 meeting, in relation to the recruitment of a Senior Software Developer could be updated to record the action as 'complete'. Gareth McGrath, Director of Parliamentary Services, confirmed that he had reviewed and was content with the job specification. It was noted that the post would also be considered in the Grading and Pay Benchmarking Review which was currently being undertaken.

Robin Ramsey, Adviser to the Speaker/Head of Corporate Support, joined the meeting at 1.38 pm for agenda items 5, 6, 7 and 8.

5. Political Update

Lesley noted the considerable volume of legislation currently being introduced in the Assembly by Executive Ministers.

CORPORATE SUPPORT

6. Draft Assembly Commission Agenda

Robin Ramsey noted that the next Assembly Commission meeting had been scheduled for 30 June 2021 but that an alternative date of either 7 or 8 July was being considered.

Proposed items for the meeting included:

- Clerk/Chief Executive's Report
- Assembly Commission Annual Plan 2020-21 End of Year Performance Report
- Assembly Commission Annual Plan 2021-22
- Maternity, Paternity and Adoption Provisions for MLAs' Constituency Offices
- Potential Rescheduling of the Assembly Members (Remuneration Board) Bill
- Update and Next Steps on Project to Review the Display of Artefacts in Parliament Buildings
- Outline Business Case – Systems Review Project
- Roof Project Issues
- Support Services Contract
- Cost Analysis for Freedom of Information Requests
- Action Plan to address findings from the Members Survey 2021

- Draft Induction and Development Framework for Members
- Annual Equality Progress Report to the Equality Commission 2020-21
- Five-year Review on the Application of the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission's Equality Scheme 2016-21
- Draft Disability Action Plan 2021-25: Public Consultation
- Secretariat Audit and Risk Committee Annual Report 2020-21

Corporate Support Unit Update

North/South Inter-Parliamentary Association (NSIPA)

Robin advised that a virtual preliminary plenary of the NSIPA Joint-Executive was scheduled for Friday 25 June 2021.

Liaison with Committees

Robin noted that the Clerk Assistants had been asked to remind committee clerks that requests for information from committees should come through the Adviser to the Speaker/Head of Corporate Support and the Assembly Commission Office.

Summer Staff Event

Robin confirmed that the summer staff briefing and charity event were scheduled for Friday 9 July 2021. It was noted that both events would be held virtually.

7. Draft Assembly Commission Annual Plan 2021-22

Robin presented and sought approval from SMG on a draft Assembly Commission paper, outlining the Assembly Commission Annual Plan for 2021-22.

Robin noted that he had met with the Clerk/Chief Executive, Directors and Governance Officer earlier in the day to consider the draft paper in detail.

SMG agreed the paper for presentation to the Assembly Commission at its next meeting, subject to some minor amendments.

Action: Robin to update the draft Assembly Commission paper as requested by SMG, for presentation to the Assembly Commission at its next meeting.

It was also noted that, going forward, in-year performance reports against the Annual Plan would be presented to SMG quarterly, with a performance report to the Assembly Commission in late 2021.

Lesley recorded her thanks to the Strategic Steering Groups for all their input to the Plan and also Robin and Julie Devlin for their work in co-ordinating responses and producing the draft Plan.

8. Update and Next Steps on Project to Review the Display of Artefacts in Parliament Buildings

Robin presented and sought approval from SMG on a draft Assembly Commission paper, outlining the progress and next steps in relation to the project to review the display of artefacts in Parliament Buildings.

Robin noted that at its meeting on 19 February 2021, the Assembly Commission had agreed a process and a set of principles to conduct a review of the display of artefacts in Parliament Buildings. He also confirmed that officials had engaged with Dr Eamon Phoenix to secure his involvement with the project on a consultancy basis.

SMG agreed the following as outlined in the paper:

- the Terms of Reference for the Working Group on the Review of the Display of Artefacts in Parliament Buildings;
- the basis on which Dr Phoenix would be available to participate in the project;
- the intention to approach the work in two phases with an initial proposal coming forward by the end of September 2021; and
- the need to consider the approach to the loan of artefacts while the initial proposal was being developed.

SMG approved the paper for presentation to the Assembly Commission at its next meeting.

Robin Ramsey left the meeting at 2.17 pm.

Change to agenda running order.

LEGAL, GOVERNANCE AND RESEARCH SERVICES

Julie Devlin, Governance Officer, joined the meeting at 2.17 pm for agenda item 26.

26. Quarterly Review of the Corporate Risk Register

Julie Devlin presented the June 2021 Corporate Risk Register and it was noted that she had met with the Clerk/Chief Executive and Directors on 9 June 2021 to discuss it in detail.

SMG agreed the contents of the Corporate Risk Register.

Julie Devlin left the meeting at 2.19 pm.

Brian Devlin, Head of IS, joined the meeting at 2.20 pm for agenda items 9 and 10.

9. Staffing in IS Office – June 2021 Update

Brian Devlin provided SMG with an update on recent recruitment competitions within the IS Office and also sought approval for the establishment and recruitment of a Senior ICT Infrastructure Analyst (AG7) and a Senior Business Relationship Manager (AG6), as recommended in the 2018 'Review of ICT Staffing' Review Report.

Brian noted that SMG had previously agreed that the recommendations from the Review Report would be addressed in three phases and he stated that the recruitment of these posts related to the implementation of recommendations from phase two.

Following consideration, SMG approved the establishment and recruitment of a Senior ICT Infrastructure Analyst and Senior Business Relationship Manager.

Brian also highlighted and SMG noted a number of continuing difficulties with the retention and recruitment of staff within the IS Office. SMG was supportive of efforts to resolve these systemic issues.

10. Post Project Evaluations (PPE) for Tablet PC Replacement (2020) and Renewal of Microsoft Premier Support (2020) Projects

Brian presented PPEs for the Tablet PC Replacement Project (2020) and the Microsoft Premier Support Agreement (2020) and these were noted by SMG.

Brian confirmed that overall the Tablet PCs had been well received by both Members and staff.

Action: Brian to arrange for the PPEs to be uploaded to the PPE Registry.

Brian Devlin left the meeting at 3.14 pm.

Kevin Pelan, Clerk Assistant, and Stella McArdle, Committee Clerk, joined the meeting at 3.15 pm for agenda item 11.

11. Draft Induction and Development Framework for Members

Kevin Pelan presented a draft Induction and Development Framework for Members, to be implemented from the start of the next Assembly mandate in May 2022.

Kevin advised that a number of Member development sessions had been delivered following implementation of the Interim Member Development Plan in December 2020 and that re-engagement was planned with Party Whips to advise of the continuing roll out of Member development programmes until the end of the mandate.

It was noted that in order to facilitate the work necessary to plan, develop and implement the Framework before the start of the next mandate, a cross-Directorate project group would be established, led by the Clerking and Member Support (CAMS) office, with input from relevant business areas and Members. Kevin outlined the work that would be undertaken by the group which included exploring options for the development of a dedicated Intranet site for Members.

SMG was keen for the cross-Directorate project group to be established as soon as possible, in order to progress the work outlined.

Following consideration, SMG proposed some amendments to the Framework, and agreed that it should be presented to the Assembly Commission at its next meeting.

Action: Kevin to arrange for the draft Induction and Development Framework for Members to be updated as proposed by SMG and presented to the Assembly Commission at its next meeting.

Kevin Pelan and Stella McArdle left the meeting at 3.49 pm.

Shauna Mageean, EU Affairs Manager, joined the meeting at 3.50 pm for agenda item 24.

12. Quarterly Update on EU Exit

Shauna Mageean provided SMG with an update on the latest developments regarding EU Exit and related inter-parliamentary and inter-governmental relations.

SMG thanked Shauna for a very comprehensive update.

Shauna Mageean left the meeting at 4.04 pm.

Meeting suspended at 4.04 pm until 4.12 pm.

Sinéad McDonnell, Head of HR, joined the meeting at 4.12 pm for agenda items 14 and 15.

14. HR Management Information

Sinéad McDonnell presented the monthly HR Management Information as at 1 June 2021, which she noted also included a staff complement change application in relation to the HR Office.

Sinéad subsequently sought approval from SMG to increase the staff complement within the HR Office by 0.1 Full-time Equivalent (FTE) at AG5 grade. SMG approved the request.

SMG noted the temporary promotions/deputising arrangements and agency worker assignments currently in place. Sinéad highlighted that a number of temporary promotions and agency assignments had anticipated end dates recorded of 'End of Mandate' and she sought clarification from SMG as to the actual date. She also noted that some committees had indicated that they would like to retain agency workers for a period of time beyond the end of the mandate. SMG agreed that the 'End of Mandate' date should be recorded as 31 March 2022 and that line managers should be advised of this and the fact that any extensions beyond this date would need to be discussed with their Director and a clear business need established.

Tara Caul advised Sinéad of amendments to anticipated end dates for two members of staff within the Legal, Governance and Research Services Directorate.

Sinéad updated SMG on recent recruitment activity.

Sinéad noted that the temporary dedicated Recruitment Team would end on 31 August 2021 as planned, with this work being subsumed into the HR Service Team and that outstanding recruitment competitions would happen at a slower pace going forward. She also noted that a meeting had been scheduled with the Clerk/Chief Executive and Directors for 7 July 2021 to review the priority of outstanding competitions listed on the Recruitment Schedule.

Sinéad confirmed that a review of the Recruitment and Selection and Induction project would be presented to SMG in October 2021 and that this would formally close the project.

Sinéad noted that for the period June 2020 to May 2021, the average days lost to sickness absence per FTE member of staff was 5.4 compared with an average of 10.3 days during the period June 2019 to May 2020.

15. Learning and Development Strategy (and associated Action Plan)

Sinéad presented the Assembly Commission's Learning and Development Strategy and outlined proposals in relation to the implementation of priority actions during 2021-22.

It was noted that the Clerk/Chief Executive and Directors had considered the Strategy in detail at a separate meeting and that it had also been consulted on with staff and Trade Union Side (TUS).

SMG approved the Strategy and associated Action Plan, however, Lesley requested that consideration be given to mapping out the key activities for each year of the four-year Strategy and it was agreed that this would be presented along with the Biannual Review Report to SMG in October 2021.

Action: Sinéad to map out the activities for each year of the four-year Strategy and present to SMG in October 2021.

Lesley thanked Sinéad, her team and Directors for their input in getting the Learning and Development Strategy developed.

Sinéad McDonnell left the meeting at 4.42 pm.

Paula McClintock, Head of Finance and Billy Mahoney, Senior Accountant, joined the meeting at 4.42 pm for agenda item 13.

13. Management Accounts

Billy Mahoney presented the Management Accounts for May 2021.

He outlined the forecast for income and expenditure for 2021/22 and provided an early indication of the anticipated underspends against the opening budget as approved by the Audit Committee.

The current forecast outturn position and proposed surrenders/bids were also noted.

On reviewing the Capital Plan, Billy noted that the current forecast was £125k less than the approved opening figure, due to the removal of the requirement of funds originally bid for in relation to the remote access project, to facilitate remote working.

Billy confirmed that following a request at the April 2021 SMG meeting, for a more accessible process for Budget Managers to update the Capital Plan, a new Microsoft Teams process had been introduced. SMG considered and approved three proposed items of expenditure recorded in the Capital Plan in relation to the data back-up tape library, Ironport Email Security Appliances and the development of an in-house videography service.

SMG reviewed the latest Decision Authorisation System (DAS) report.

Paula McClintock and Billy Mahoney left the meeting at 5.06 pm.

16. Update on Roof Project Issues

Richard provided a verbal update on the Roof Project issues.

Action: Detailed Assembly Commission paper to be prepared for approval by SMG, prior to presentation at the next Assembly Commission meeting.

17. Support Services Contract

Richard provided a verbal update on a year five contract proposal from the Support Services contractor, following initial consideration by SMG at its March 2021 meeting.

Action: Detailed Assembly Commission paper to be prepared for approval by SMG, prior to presentation at the next Assembly Commission meeting.

18. Maternity, Paternity and Adoption Provisions for MLAs' Constituency Offices

Richard presented a draft Assembly Commission paper on the provision of support for Members, by means of the publication of a further Determination to increase the level of staffing costs available to Members during periods of maternity, paternity or adoption.

SMG considered the paper and approved it for presentation to the Assembly Commission at its next meeting, subject to some minor amendments.

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

The meeting suspended at 5.41 pm until 11.02 am on Friday 25 June 2021.

CORPORATE SERVICES

Maria Bannon, Equality and Good Relations Manager, and Liz Milligan, Assistant Clerk, joined the meeting at 11:02 am for agenda items 19, 20 and 21.

19. Annual Equality Progress Report to the Equality Commission 2020-21

Maria Bannon presented the 2020-21 Annual Equality Progress Report on statutory Equality and Good Relations duties.

Following consideration, SMG approved the report for presentation to the Assembly Commission at its next meeting, subject to some minor amendments.

Action: Maria to update the Annual Equality Progress Report 2020-21 to the Equality Commission as requested by SMG and prepare a paper for presentation to the Assembly Commission at its next meeting.

Lesley also requested that draft Assembly Commission papers be attached to future reports to SMG.

20. Draft Disability Action Plan 2021-25: Public Consultation

Maria noted that she had met with the Clerk/Chief Executive and Directors on 9 June 2021 to consider the draft Disability Action Plan 2021-25 in detail.

SMG approved the draft Plan for presentation to the Assembly Commission at its next meeting, subject to some minor amendments.

Action: Maria to update the draft Plan as requested by SMG and prepare a paper for presentation to the Assembly Commission at its next meeting.

Following presentation of the draft Plan to the Assembly Commission, arrangements to be made to launch a full public consultation.

Action: Maria to arrange the launch of a full public consultation on the draft Disability Action Plan 2021-25.

21. Equality and Good Relations Survey: Identified Themes and Issues

Maria noted that her colleague Roisin Mooney, had met with the Clerk/Chief Executive and Directors on 23 April 2021 to consider in detail, the issues identified from the 2018 Equality and Good Relations Survey and the 'Survey analysis and responses by theme' document.

SMG approved the 'Survey analysis and responses by theme' document for publication on AsslSt and circulation to staff, subject to some minor amendments.

Action: Maria to update the 'Survey analysis and responses by theme' document as requested by SMG and arrange for it to be published on AsslSt and circulated to staff.

Maria Bannon and Liz Milligan left the meeting at 11.38 am.

PARLIAMENTARY SERVICES

Susie Brown, Head of Communications, and Tracey Wilson, Communications Officer, joined the meeting at 11.38 am for agenda items 22 and 23.

22. Post Project Evaluation for the Broadcasting Replacement Router Matrix Project

Susie Brown presented the Post Project Evaluation (PPE) for the Broadcasting Replacement Router Matrix Project.

Susie highlighted a number of lessons learned following completion of the project.

Lesley proposed that an additional lesson learned in relation to early communications with stakeholders be included in the PPE.

Action: Susie to update the PPE as proposed and arrange for it to be uploaded onto the PPE Registry.

SMG thanked Susie for a comprehensive PPE which provided an honest and fair assessment of the problems encountered and subsequent lessons learned throughout the project.

23. Approval of Outline Business Case (OBC) for the Design, Build and Installation of a New Committee Room and Additional Capacity for Concurrent Broadcasting

Susie presented and sought SMG approval for an OBC in relation to the initial requirements and estimated costs for the new committee room project and additional broadcasting capacity.

Susie noted the objectives of the project and outlined four options that had been proposed and considered by the Project Board to meet them. She advised that Option 3 – to develop a new committee room in Room 21, together with two new Production Control Rooms (PCR) in Parliament Buildings to increase overall broadcasting capacity to five simultaneous live outputs, was the preferred option of the Project Board.

Following discussion, SMG approved the OBC subject to the inclusion of additional information in the next version of the Business Case, which will be brought to SMG, namely:

- a breakdown of the proposed total cost of Option 3;
- consideration of a fifth option in relation to two virtual PCRs;
- a reference to the issue in relation to broadcasting from the Chamber and Senate at the same time;
- details on captioning; and
- an expansion to the reference on electronic voting.

Action: Susie to include the additional information, as requested by SMG, in the updated Business Case.

Susie confirmed that in-depth market sounding would now be undertaken to inform the development of a fully costed specification, following which an updated OBC would be resubmitted to SMG for further approval.

Richard highlighted the need to estimate, as accurately as possible, the expenditure for this project throughout the current financial year.

Susie Brown and Tracey Wilson left the meeting at 12.34 pm.

Change to agenda running order.

LEGAL, GOVERNANCE AND RESEARCH SERVICES

John Power, Head of Research and Information Service (RaISe), joined the meeting at 12.34 pm for agenda item 27.

27. Library Staffing Capacity

SMG noted that the Clerk/Chief Executive and Directors had met with the Head of Research and Information Service on 16 June 2021, to consider in detail the proposal to increase the staff complement within the library by one AG6 librarian post.

SMG approved the proposal.

It was also noted that one AG7 Assistant Librarian post was being suppressed.

John Power left the meeting at 12.37 pm.

PARLIAMENTARY SERVICES

24. Action Plan to Address Findings from the Members Survey 2021

Gareth presented a draft Assembly Commission paper, noting the findings from the 2021 Members Survey and incorporating a draft Action Plan addressing the key issues raised by Members.

Following consideration, Lesley proposed that additional actions be incorporated in the draft Action Plan in relation to services provided by the Finance Office, as well as in relation to the orientation and induction of new Members.

Action: Gareth to update the paper as proposed and present at the next Assembly Commission meeting.

Lesley also requested that, as an interim measure, a list of useful contact telephone numbers be produced and circulated to Members and uploaded to the Members page on AssISt.

Action: Gareth to arrange for a list of useful contact telephone numbers to be produced and circulated to Members and uploaded to the Members page on AsslSt.

25. Policies Developed by the Parliamentary Services Directorate – Cyclical Update Plan

As requested at the SMG meeting in April 2021, Gareth presented a list of corporate policies for which the Parliamentary Services Directorate was responsible, together with details of their next review date.

It was agreed that lists of corporate policies developed by the Legal, Governance and Research Services Directorate and Corporate Services Directorate would also be produced.

Action: Tara and Richard to produce lists of the corporate policies developed by their respective Directorates.

Meeting suspended at 12.58 pm until 3.01 pm.

LEGAL, GOVERNANCE AND RESEARCH SERVICES

28. Staffing Resource Pressures within the Procurement Office

SMG noted that the Clerk/Chief Executive, Directors and Head of Procurement had met on 11 June 2021, to consider the staffing resource pressures within the Procurement Office in detail.

SMG agreed that the staff complement in the Procurement Office should be temporarily increased by an additional AG5 for 18 months and that options A and B, as outlined in the paper, should be investigated, with the most appropriate option being implemented.

Lesley stated that she found the detail in the paper presented very helpful but asked that the Head of Procurement review the timescales recorded in the draft Project Plan in relation to project procurement resource requirements so that they are specific to the project rather than generic.

Action: Head of Procurement to review the timescales in relation to project procurement resource requirements, as presented in the draft Project Plan, so that they are specific to the project rather than generic.

Given the discussion about staffing resources, Richard asked that all procurement options were considered for each project to ensure the best use of the scarce resources.

29. Cost Analysis for Freedom of Information (Fol) Requests

Tara presented and sought SMG approval of a draft Assembly Commission paper, providing a cost analysis of Fol requests from 1 July 2020 to 31 May 2021.

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

Tara reiterated the need for Directors to closely monitor Fol requests received relating to their Directorates and ensure that clear direction on responses is provided at the outset.

Action: Tara to update the paper as proposed by SMG for presentation at the next Assembly Commission meeting.

30. Directors' Updates

Corporate Services

Usher Services

Richard confirmed that rotas for all Usher Services staff were being amended to reflect the reopening of Parliament Buildings on Wednesday 14 July 2021.

Support Services

Richard advised that the ATM was being removed from the Blue Flax restaurant in September 2021 and confirmed that signage would be put in place shortly to inform building users.

Richard also confirmed that the Blue Flax restaurant would be reconfigured for one metre distancing, with effect from 14 July 2021.

Richard noted that a paper on the Support Services Contract would be prepared for the next SMG meeting.

Grading and Pay Benchmarking Review

Richard advised that the work on reviewing job specifications for the Grading and Pay Benchmarking Review had completed.

Legal, Governance and Research Services

Internal Audit

Tara provided an update on the Internal Audit Reviews for:

- Procurement Office;
- Members Expenses (Final Testing) 2020/21;

- Commission and Clerk/Chief Executive's Office;
- IS Infrastructure;
- Secretariat Pensions;
- Bill Office;
- Standing Committees; and
- Examiner of Statutory Rules.

RaISe

Tara noted that a number of research papers had been published by RaISe since the last update on 20 May 2021.

Tara also confirmed that recruitment within RaISe was progressing well.

Parliamentary Services

Clerking

Gareth highlighted the increase in Bill activity between now and the end of the Mandate and the need for adequate staffing resources to manage this.

31. Assembly Commission papers cleared by SMG via correspondence

- Proposed Reopening of Parliament Buildings for Events, Tours, Public Dining and Visitors; and
- Forthcoming Plenary Debate on a Motion, Tabled by the Committee on Procedures, Directing the Assembly Commission to provide Simultaneous Interpretation of Assembly Business in Irish and Ulster Scots.

32. AOB

Lesley noted that whilst it had been agreed that Parliament Buildings would re-open to visitors and public dining with effect from 14 July 2021, the commencement of events and tours was subject to the potential further easing of restrictions anticipated in August 2021.

33. Date of Next Meeting

Lesley to propose a date for the next meeting following a review of annual leave scheduled by Directors over the summer recess.

34. Proposals for Agenda Items for Next Meeting

- Review of Building Maintenance
- Assembly Members Pension Scheme
- Support Services Contract

- Review of Information Management Policy
- Review of Retention and Disposal Schedule
- Public Engagement Activity: Bi-Annual Report

Lesley acknowledged the amount of work that had been undertaken to prepare the papers for the meeting and she commended Directors and their teams on the quality of the papers produced.

The meeting ended at 3.56 pm.