

SECRETARIAT MANAGEMENT GROUP (SMG)

FRIDAY, 28 JANUARY 2022 at 9.30 AM
ROOM 21, PARLIAMENT BUILDINGS

APPROVED

Present: Lesley Hogg
Tara Caul
Gareth McGrath
Richard Stewart

In Attendance: Janet Hughes
Robin Ramsey
Sinéad McDonnell
Karen Martin
Richard Anderson
Angela Kelly
Paul Gill
Susie Brown
Tracey Wilson
Liz Beaton
Brian Devlin

Opening/Review

The meeting commenced at 9.32 am.

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 16 December 2021 were in the process of being published.

Change to agenda running order.

Robin Ramsey, Adviser to the Speaker/Head of Corporate Support, joined the meeting at 9.32 am for items 5 and 6.

5. Political Update

SMG discussed the legislative pressures and dealing with the business to be done before the end of the mandate. It was noted that the Speaker and Business Committee were considering how to manage business to ensure the best use of plenary time.

Tara Caul, Director of Legal, Governance and Research Services, noted that progress on the Northern Ireland (Ministers, Elections and Petitions of Concern) Bill continued to be monitored.

CORPORATE SUPPORT

6. Draft Assembly Commission Agenda

Robin Ramsey noted that the next Assembly Commission meeting was scheduled for 9 February 2022.

Proposed items for the meeting included:

- Clerk/Chief Executive's Report
- Recommendations of the Working Group Report on the Review of the Display of Artefacts in Parliament Buildings – Confirmation of Approval to Proceed with Revised Display of Items and Images
- Defects in the Roof of Parliament Buildings and Investigation of Potential Liability
- Simultaneous Interpretation of Assembly business in Irish and Ulster Scots
- Business Case for the Retendering of the Support Services Contract 2022
- Retender of the Broadcasting and Related Services Contract
- Disability Action Plan 2022-25 and Consultee Comments and Response Table
- Assembly Members' Pension Scheme Accounts and Actuarial Valuation
- Designated Days for the Flying of the Union Flag at Parliament Buildings
- Pay Claim 2021
- Maternity and Adoption Financial Support for MLAs' Constituency Offices
- Review of the Financial Assistance to Political Parties Scheme ('FAPP Scheme) 2016

Corporate Support Unit Update

Robin advised of the potential for a plenary of the North/South Inter-Parliamentary Association and a quadrilateral meeting of Speakers and Presiding Officers, before the end of the mandate.

It was also noted that the Speaker had agreed to preside over the public apology to the victims of historical institutional abuse, scheduled to take place in the Assembly Chamber on 11 March 2022.

Robin Ramsey left the meeting at 9.53 am.

4. SMG Action Points

The outstanding action points were reviewed and progress was noted.

Lesley Hogg, Clerk/Chief Executive, requested that a comprehensive paper be prepared and presented to SMG, as soon as possible, in relation to an outstanding action on the Maintenance and Minor Capital Works Review.

In relation to another outstanding action, regarding the Retention and Disposal Schedule, Tara noted the work that had been undertaken to date, but advised that there was still significant work to be done on revising the Schedule. It was noted that the Data Protection and Governance Officer would be arranging meetings with Directors, to ensure that the revised Schedule was fit for purpose.

CORPORATE SERVICES

7. Management Accounts

Richard Stewart, Director of Corporate Services, presented the Management Accounts for December 2021, highlighting the anticipated underspends against the January Monitoring position.

Richard advised that the current forecast underspend was £129k.

As requested at the SMG meeting on 26 November 2021, to assist with forecasting, Richard noted that the Finance Office had written to Members seeking an indication of their expected year-end outturn. Richard advised that only a very small number of Members had replied thus far and Lesley stated that going forward the Finance Office would need to work with Members in relation to budgeting and forecasting.

On reviewing the Capital Plan, Richard initially sought approval from SMG for surrenders in relation to the Room 21 Upgrade; the Keyboard, Video and Mouse Project; and Cloud Migration; along with a bid for the Simultaneous Translation Project, which had been included in the Management Accounts paper for November 2021, circulated to SMG via correspondence in December 2021.

Following consideration, SMG approved the surrenders as outlined in the November Managements Accounts paper. SMG was not however content to approve the full amount of the bid for the Simultaneous Translation Project, as it exceeded the amount previously notified to the Committee on Procedures and the Assembly Commission. SMG

therefore agreed an amount of £45k, which was broadly in line with the previously notified cost of the project. SMG noted that any additional bid for this project, would need to be accompanied by a clear rationale for the additional cost and would also be subject to the availability of capital funds.

A new bid to replace a fridge in the main kitchen was considered and approved in principle, subject to confirmation of available capital. A request to approve expenditure on office furniture, was also agreed subject to confirmation of available capital. SMG agreed, that the Finance Office would liaise with budget holders to review the remaining anticipated capital expenditure until the end of the financial year.

Action: Finance Office to liaise with budget holders to review the remaining anticipated capital expenditure until the end of the financial year in order to enable any reallocation to be made.

Lesley advised of a surrender from the Speaker's Office in relation to portrait costs.

Lesley highlighted the need for business areas to closely monitor capital expenditure until the end of the financial year.

Richard noted that in light of the scale of the increases in utility costs that the budget for such costs may need to be reviewed for next year.

Sinéad McDonnell, Head of HR and Karen Martin, Deputy Head of HR, joined the meeting at 10.32 am for agenda items 8 and 9.

8. HR Management Information

Karen Martin presented the monthly HR Management Information as at 1 January 2022.

SMG noted that the Staff in Post (SiP) figure on 1 January 2022 (including agency and inward seconded staff) was 349.2 Full Time Equivalent (FTE) against an agreed staff complement (including complement plus) of 390.9 FTE.

SMG noted the temporary promotions/deputising arrangements and agency worker assignments currently in place.

Karen informed SMG of the updated position in relation to the Recruitment Schedule and recent recruitment activity. Karen highlighted five additional competition requests that had been added to the Recruitment Schedule since it was discussed by SMG at its meeting on 16 December 2021. She also advised of a further number of requests that had been received since the paper had been prepared.

Sinéad McDonnell noted her concern, at the work the additional recruitment competitions would create for the two HR Service teams, who also carried out the other day-to-day HR work. She advised that the available resource would limit the speed with which the recruitment competitions could be progressed. Richard added that the current recruitment requirement was above the level that would be expected in a “normal” year.

Lesley stated that greater clarity was required, on when all of the posts on the Recruitment Schedule needed to be filled and when the recruitment documentation would be ready.

Following discussion, it was agreed that Directors would liaise with their Heads of Business (HoBs), to identify this and that the Clerk/Chief Executive and Directors would then meet with representatives from the HR Office to agree the priority of recruitment competitions.

Action: Directors to liaise with their HoBs, to establish when the vacant posts on the Recruitment Schedule needed to be filled and when the recruitment documentation would be ready.

Action: HR Office to arrange a meeting with the Clerk/Chief Executive and Directors to agree the priority of recruitment competitions.

SMG noted the approach, of using both temporary promotions and fixed term contracts to fill temporary vacancies, and confirmed that it remained content with it.

Sickness absence information was provided and it was noted that for the period January 2021 to December 2021, the average days lost to sickness absence per FTE member of staff was 8.2 days, compared with an average of 7.3 days during the period January 2020 to December 2020.

9. Recruitment Advertising Contract

SMG considered and approved, the procurement of a new Recruitment Advertising contract for the Assembly Commission, as outlined in the paper presented.

Sinéad McDonnell and Karen Martin left the meeting at 11.07 am.

Richard Anderson, Health and Safety Officer, joined the meeting at 11.07 am for agenda item 10.

10. Health and Safety Management Report 2021

Richard Anderson presented the Health and Safety Management Report, providing SMG with a detailed account on accidents, other health and

safety issues and training undertaken during the year ending 31 December 2021.

Richard Anderson noted that the Learning and Development team had rolled out Display Screen Equipment (DSE) online training to staff throughout the pandemic and that the Health and Safety team had provided staff with the necessary DSE for home working, as requested. Richard Anderson also updated SMG on the development of an online DSE self-assessment questionnaire, which he confirmed would be rolled out, once COVID-19 restrictions had been fully lifted and staff were back working in Parliament Buildings.

Richard Anderson advised that refresher training had been provided throughout 2021 to first aiders, evacuation chair operators and radiation supervisors. He noted that attendance at the first aid and evacuation chair training courses had been low, and that a number of staff had withdrawn from these roles. Richard Anderson did state however, that the recent email to staff had resulted in 10 new volunteers for the role of first aider and 10 for evacuation chair operator.

Lesley asked that Richard Anderson inform HoBs of non-attendance by any of their staff in Health and Safety roles at any future training courses, if an apology had not been provided.

Richard Anderson noted that the Parliament Buildings Fire Safety Risk Assessment would be undertaken within the next few months, and confirmed that any recommendations made would be brought to the attention of SMG. He also advised that following revisions to the Parliament Buildings Fire Evacuation Procedures, Christine Watts had taken on the role of Fire Precautions Officer.

Richard Anderson confirmed that work on updating the Health and Safety manual was nearing completion.

SMG thanked Richard Anderson and the rest of the Health and Safety team for their efforts throughout the year, and were particularly appreciative of the ongoing support and advice provided in response to the pandemic.

Richard Anderson left the meeting at 11.20 am.

LEGAL, GOVERNANCE AND RESEARCH SERVICES

Angela Kelly, Examiner of Statutory Rules, joined the meeting at 11.20 am for agenda item 11.

11. Resourcing of the Functions of the Examiner of Statutory Rules

Angela Kelly presented a paper seeking a permanent increase in the staff complement of the office of the Examiner of Statutory Rules (ESR),

by two full time equivalent additional (FTE) AG4 posts (legal advisers) and one permanent FTE AG8 post (clerical officer).

SMG noted that it had met with Angela on 8 December 2021, to discuss her draft proposals in detail.

After further consideration, SMG agreed to an additional 0.5 AG4 legal adviser post on a permanent basis and that administrative support would be provided by the AG8 in the Legal Services Office. SMG also agreed that, subject to work demands in the Legal Services Office and the agreement of the Head of Legal Services, that at the beginning of the next mandate, a legal adviser would move from the Legal Services Office to the office of the ESR on a temporary full-time basis. SMG agreed that staffing within the ESR Office would be kept under review.

SMG thanked Angela for the excellent work carried out by the ESR Office, particularly during the ongoing pandemic.

Angela Kelly left the meeting at 11.56 am.

Meeting suspended at 11.56 am until 12.10 pm.

PARLIAMENTARY SERVICES

Paul Gill, Clerk Assistant, joined the meeting at 12.10 pm for agenda item 12.

12. Parliamentary Culture

Paul Gill noted that a paper on a proposed definition of parliamentary culture had been considered by SMG at its meeting on 16 December 2021, and that SMG had agreed to provide feedback on it.

Paul presented a revised proposed definition taking account of SMG's feedback and this was approved.

Paul Gill left the meeting at 12.14 pm.

13. Business Case for the Retendering of the Support Services Contract 2022

The business case for the retendering of the Support Services Contract was not considered at the meeting.

SMG agreed to arrange a separate meeting to discuss this matter.

Susie Brown, Head of Communications, joined the meeting at 12.15 pm for agenda items 14 and 15.

Tracey Wilson, Information Officer, joined the meeting at 12.15 pm for agenda item 14.

14. Retender of the Broadcasting and Related Services Contract

It was noted that SMG had met with Susie Brown and Tracey Wilson on 24 January 2021, to discuss in detail, the outline business case for the retender of the Broadcasting and Related Services contract.

Susie confirmed that feedback from the recent meeting had been incorporated in the draft Assembly Commission paper presented.

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

Tracey Wilson left the meeting at 12.20 pm.

Liz Beaton, Internal Communications Officer, joined the meeting at 12.20 pm for agenda item 15.

15. Approval of the Revised Internal Communications Strategy, draft Action Plan and draft Values Plan

It was noted that at its meeting on 26 November 2021, SMG had considered and approved in principle, a draft Internal Communications Strategy, Action Plan and Values Plan, subject to some further refinement and consultation with HoBs on actions.

Susie confirmed that the draft Strategy and Action and Values Plans presented had been revised in line with previous comments from SMG and consultation with HoBs.

Liz Beaton presented a new “YOU Said, WE Did” infographic, which captured all the latest activity post-consultation.

Following consideration, SMG approved the Revised Internal Communications Strategy, draft Action Plan, draft Values Plan and “YOU said, WE did” infographic.

It was agreed that the Internal Communications Strategy would launch during week commencing 31 January 2022.

Susie Brown and Liz Beaton left the meeting at 12.36 pm.

Brian Devlin, Head of IS, joined the meeting at 12.36 pm for agenda item 16.

16. Remote Access to Assembly Network Resources

Brian Devlin presented a paper outlining the two systems currently in place for remote access to the Assembly network resources.

Brian stated that whilst both systems were less than optimal, the use of both in the short to medium term was sustainable and provided certain advantages. He confirmed that a full project to replace both systems was desirable in the medium to long term.

It was noted that such a project would require considerable research and that the Infrastructure team was currently not resourced to undertake another major project during the coming year. Brian however stated, that this would be considered as a priority for the 2023-24 IS Office work plan.

Following consideration, SMG agreed to retain both systems until a substantial project could be resourced to replace both systems with a new, resilient remote access service which would meet the needs of all users.

Brian advised that the IS Office Business Relationship Manager, had engaged with RaISe to address connectivity issues incurred by staff when working from home, as noted by SMG at its meeting on 26 November 2021. He confirmed that significant progress had been made in addressing the issues raised. Brian also noted that the IS Office had produced guidance in the form of helpful hints and tips for RaISe staff, and Lesley suggested that this be published on AssISt and made available to all users.

It was noted, that as requested by SMG, Assembly Commission staff currently using personal devices would be provided with Assembly devices for remote access.

SMG also agreed that no further reconditioned laptops would be purchased and that new current generation ones would be purchased going forward.

SMG approved the purchase of a further 65 devices.

SMG thanked Brian and his team for their continued excellent work.

Brian Devlin left the meeting at 1.25 pm.

Meeting suspended at 1.26 pm and resumed at 2.26 pm.

17. SMG papers cleared by SMG via correspondence

Management Accounts November 2021.

18. Directors' Updates

Corporate Services

Equality and Good Relations Unit: Staffing

Richard advised of staffing issues within the Equality and Good Relations Unit and in light of the large volume of work to be undertaken, sought approval from SMG to extend the agency worker placement by six months until 30 September 2022 on a part-time basis. This was agreed.

Business Continuity

Richard advised of the difficulty in filling a temporary position to work on Business Continuity. Lesley stated that if this continued to prove difficult, an alternative approach, such as consultancy, should be considered.

Richard agreed to review the situation with the Senior HR Manager.

Legal, Governance and Research Services

Internal Audit

Tara provided an update on the Internal Audit Reviews for:

- Delegated Procurement
- Youth Assembly
- Recruitment and Selection
- Accounts Payable
- Members Expenses
- Business Office
- Information Assurance
- Freedom of Information

Tara confirmed that work had commenced on the development of the 2022/23 Internal Audit Plan and that the draft plan would be presented to SMG in March 2022.

Governance

Tara noted that the new Secretariat Audit and Risk Committee Chairperson had been appointed.

Information Standards

Tara advised that training for Data Protection, FoI Exemptions and the Records Management Sensitivity Review, would be rolled out in February/March 2022.

RaISe

Tara noted that RaISe continued to publish numerous papers and blog articles.

Lesley asked that Tara query a reference in the RaISe update, in relation to RaISe taking over the research element of the Assembly Commission's Audit of Inequalities. SMG noted that although RaISe had undertaken this research in the past, SMG had agreed in January 2021 that going forward this would be undertaken by the Equality and Good Relations Unit.

Procurement

SMG noted the updates on ongoing procurements. Tara asked Directors to ensure that the details recorded were in line with their own understanding of the ongoing procurements in their business areas.

Lesley highlighted the need for the relevant business areas to progress the procurement of a supplier for the Bill Drafting Software and the Stationery and IT Consumables contract.

Parliamentary Services

SMG noted the work undertaken by the Parliamentary Services Directorate, since last reported at the SMG meeting on 16 December 2021.

19. AOB

Staff Survey

It was noted that the draft biennial Staff Survey had been approved by SMG via correspondence and a launch date of 7 February 2022 was confirmed.

COVID-19

It was noted that SMG was keeping up to date with changes in COVID-19 Regulations and the implications for Parliament Buildings and the Assembly Commission, all of which were being worked through with the COVID-19 Response Group.

Action: Richard to arrange for an email to issue to staff, reminding them of the importance of carrying out lateral flow tests on a regular basis.

Section 75 Staff Survey

In response to an action from SMG at its meeting on 16 December 2021, in relation to the frequency of future Section 75 Staff Surveys, Richard

advised of the data that is captured when staff are recruited.

Based on the data captured, SMG agreed that future Section 75 Staff Surveys were not required, and that if any additional information was needed, it would be requested on an ad-hoc basis.

20. Date of Next Meeting

The next meeting was scheduled for 25 February 2022.

21. Proposals for Agenda Items for Next Meeting

- Post Project Evaluation for the Procurement of the Provision of Tests and Assessment Exercises for Recruitment
- Good Relations Action Plan (for public consultation)
- Transgender Policy
- Review of Building Maintenance
- Retention and Disposal Schedule
- Records Management Policy
- Procurement Planning
- Provision of Library Electronic Resources and Journals
- Office of the Official Report (Hansard): Temporary Increase in Complement

The meeting ended at 3.06 pm.