

# SECRETARIAT MANAGEMENT GROUP (SMG)

WEDNESDAY, 25 MAY 2022 at 9.30 AM  
ROOM 106

**APPROVED**

**Present:** Lesley Hogg  
Tara Caul  
Gareth McGrath  
Richard Stewart

**In Attendance:** Rose Morwood  
Robin Ramsey  
Billy Mahoney  
Karen Martin  
Sinéad McDonnell  
Maria Bannon  
Debra Savage  
Brian Devlin  
Susie Brown  
Liz Beaton  
Tracey Wilson  
Simon Burrowes

The meeting commenced at 9.30am.

## **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 draft minutes from the meeting on 1 April 2022 had been agreed and would be published in due course with the unrestricted papers.

## **4. SMG Action Points**

The outstanding action points were reviewed and progress was noted.

Richard Stewart, Director of Corporate Services, acknowledged that while he had issued a note to SMG members the previous day in response to action number 10 regarding how the findings from the Section 75 Survey Report would, if at all, be utilised in Equality Screening, SMG members had not yet had time to consider it and further discussion might be required.

*Robin Ramsey, Adviser to the Speaker/Head of Corporate Support, joined the meeting at 9:35 am for items 5 and 6.*

## **5. Political Update**

Lesley Hogg, Clerk/Chief Executive, noted the current political situation and the possibility of an Assembly recall. She also noted that there was still considerable work to be done in preparation for the new Mandate and closing out work from the previous Mandate and therefore the need to make best use of the time available whilst the Assembly is not conducting normal business.

## **CORPORATE SUPPORT**

## **6. Draft Assembly Commission Agenda**

Robin Ramsey noted that the date of next Assembly Commission meeting had yet to be set and it was agreed that a date in June 2022 should be sought.

Proposed items for the next meeting included:

- Clerk/Chief Executive's Report
- The Good Relations Action Plan 2016-21 Closure Report
- Draft Good Relations Action Plan 2022-25: Public Consultation
- Audit of Inequalities Closure Report 2016-21
- Annual Equality Progress Report 2021-22
- Consultation on the draft Equality Scheme and Audit of Inequalities Report and Action Plan 2022-26
- Gender Action Plan: March 2022 Update
- Wi-Fi Network Replacement
- Constituency Office Broadband Services
- Defects in the Roof Update
- 2022 Pay Claim and Industrial Action
- 2021-22 Annual Plan Outturn
- Report on the Development of an Unacceptable Behaviours Policy
- Financial Assistance for Political Parties
- COVID-19 Update
- Secretariat Audit and Risk Committee Annual Report
- Complaints Policy and Procedures Report 2021-22
- Protocol to Allow Attendance at Assembly Commission Meetings While Vacancies Cannot be Filled

## Corporate Support Unit Update

Robin advised SMG that the Speaker was still doing courtesy calls and visits.

*Robin Ramsey left the meeting at 09:55 am.*

## CORPORATE SERVICES

*Billy Mahoney, Senior Accountant – Secretariat, joined the meeting at 10.00 am for agenda item 7.*

### 7. Management Accounts

Lesley thanked Billy Mahoney and his team for preparing the year end accounts in such a tight timeframe.

Billy presented the Management Accounts for March 2022.

SMG noted the current forecast outturn for Resource DEL and Capital.

Billy reported an increase in Staff Salaries, due to an increase in the flexi and annual leave accrued at 31 March 2022.

SMG was asked to note that an accrual had been made to cover the retrospective impact of the 2021 pay award on agency costs. Lesley asked for further clarification on this.

**Action:** Richard Stewart to provide clarification on the retrospective payment of pay awards to agency staff.

In relation to General Administration Expenditure (GAE), Billy reported a number of underspends in various Business Areas.

Billy also reported a significant underspend in Constituency Office Operating and Staff Costs. He explained that while Members had been given an opportunity to reduce their forecasted costs as part of the January Monitoring exercise, only a small number had done so. He stated that Members remained cautious about the recruitment of permanent staff towards the end of the Mandate, but that there was likely to be greater utilisation of these allowances during 2022-23.

*Billy Mahoney left the meeting at 10.18 am.*

*Karen Martin, Deputy Head of Human Resources, and Sinéad McDonnell, Head of Human Resources joined the meeting at 10.19 am for agenda items 8, 9 and 10.*

## 8. HR Management Information

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

Karen advised that the Staff in Post (SIP) figure on 1 May 2022 (including agency and inward seconded staff) was 330 Full Time Equivalents (FTE) against a staff complement (including complement plus) of 384.2 FTE. Lesley asked for a list of all vacant posts so that these could be reviewed.

**Action:** Karen to provide SMG with a list of all vacant posts and a meeting set up to review these.

Karen highlighted that the appropriateness of the current arrangements in relation to references and notice periods had been discussed by the Clerk/Chief Executive, Directors and the Human Resources (HR) Office at a meeting on 29 April 2022. SMG confirmed that it was content to proceed with the revised arrangements proposed in the paper.

Karen reminded SMG that it had agreed to consider the circulation of Interchange opportunities at the start of the new Mandate. SMG confirmed that it was willing to consider Interchange opportunities, subject to business need, and proposed that they be made available to staff via a link on AssiSt rather than circulating individually.

Sickness absence information was provided and it was noted that for the period May 2021 to April 2022, the average days lost to sickness absence per FTE was 10.3 days, compared with an average of 5.6 days during the period May 2020 to April 2021.

Karen outlined the number of Performance Management Conversations that had taken place by directorate during the period 1 November 2021 to 20 April 2022. SMG expressed concern at the low number of conversations that had taken place, but acknowledged that there was still likely to be some underreporting due to conversations not being closed off on the Portal.

It was agreed that SMG and Heads of Business (HOB) would remind staff of the importance of Performance Management Conversations taking place on a monthly basis and of properly completing them on the Portal.

**Action:** SMG and Heads of Business (HOB) to remind staff of the importance of Performance Management Conversations taking place on a monthly basis and of properly completing them on the Portal.

SMG reviewed the annual equality information as at 1 May 2022 and noted the case management activity since 1 October 2021.

The recruitment schedule was discussed in detail and a number of amendments made. Karen and Sinéad advised that they were

progressing well with competitions and that there would be quite a lot of recruitment over the summer months.

Gareth McGrath, Director of Parliamentary Services, requested that the merit list for Senior Assistant Assembly Clerk be extended to 30 September 2022 for temporary appointments only, in order to ensure that there was not a gap while the new competition is progressed. SMG agreed to extend the merit list to 30 September 2022 for temporary appointments only on the basis that appointments would only be made from the list if the Assembly resumed normal business, and the fact that the competition would be progressed over the summer.

Lesley raised a concern regarding the title of the Information Systems Manager post and the fact that it did not make any reference to Finance or HR and therefore whether it would attract appropriate applicants.

## **9. Review of Health and Wellbeing Framework and Associated Actions**

Sinéad reported that the review of the Health and Wellbeing Framework had been an action in the Annual Plan 2021-22, and that the paper outlined the activities that had taken place during the period June 2020 to March 2022. She said that she would work with the Internal Communications Officer to develop an update for staff.

Sinéad added that she was also keen to see the results of the health and wellbeing related questions in the Staff Survey 2022, and that HR would work with SMG to develop strategic health and wellbeing themes in order to inform future health and wellbeing initiatives.

Lesley suggested trying to develop a brighter, more eye-catching logo. She also suggested engaging with the Personal Resilience Working Group in order to feed in its thinking.

SMG noted the activities undertaken under the Health and Wellbeing Framework for the period June 2020 to March 2022, and confirmed its continued support for the Health and Wellbeing Framework.

## **10. Proposed Extension of the MidlandHR Contract**

Sinéad noted that she had discussed the business case for the proposed extension of the MidlandHR contract with the Clerk/Chief Executive and Directors in detail at a separate meeting. Karen also provided a brief update on her recent meeting with MidlandHR.

SMG stated that while it was broadly content with the business case and approved it, it was not content with the situation that the Assembly Commission had found itself in.

Lesley thanked Karen and Sinéad for their efforts to resolve the issue.

*Karen Martin and Sinéad McDonnell left the meeting at 11:19 am.*

*Meeting suspended at 11.20 am until 11.28 am.*

*Maria Bannon, Equality and Good Relations Manager, joined the meeting at 11.28 am for agenda items 11, 12, and 13.*

## **11. Gender Action Plan: March 2022 Update**

Maria Bannon presented the March 2022 update on the Gender Action Plan along with a draft Assembly Commission paper.

SMG considered and approved the update and draft Assembly Commission paper, subject to some minor amendments. It also proposed that responsibility for development of the draft Menopause Policy be transferred to HR and that going forward the development of staff related policies reside with HR.

**Action:** Maria to amend the Gender Action Plan: March 2022 update as agreed by SMG, for presentation to the Assembly Commission at its next meeting.

Maria advised that the draft Transgender Policy is with Richard for consideration and that a meeting would be arranged with SMG to discuss it in due course.

## **12. Draft Good Relations Action Plan 2022-25: Public Consultation**

Maria presented a draft Assembly Commission paper seeking agreement to the draft Good Relations Action Plan 2022-25 and to publishing it for public consultation.

Maria noted that the Action Plan was now shorter and more focused following the meeting she had held with the Clerk/Chief Executive and Directors to discuss it in detail.

SMG considered and approved, subject to some minor amendments, the draft Assembly Commission paper.

**Action:** Maria to amend the draft Good Relations Action Plan 2022-25 as agreed by SMG, for presentation to the Assembly Commission at its next meeting.

## **13. Publication of the Audit of Inequalities Action Plan 2016-21 Closure Report**

Maria presented the Audit of Inequalities Action Plan 2016-21 Closure Report and advised that of the 27 actions in the Plan, 23 had been completed, two had not been completed and two were suspended.

SMG considered and approved, subject to some minor amendments, the Audit of Inequalities Action Plan 2016-21 Closure Report. SMG also agreed that a copy should be provided to the Assembly Commission.

**Action:** Maria to amend the Audit of Inequalities Action Plan 2016-21 Closure Report as agreed by SMG, for presentation to the Assembly Commission at its next meeting.

Lesley thanked Maria for all of the work that she and the team had put in to produce the various action plans and reports.

*Maria Bannon left the meeting at 11:50 am.*

#### **14. Provision of Building Maintenance and Minor Capital Works Projects**

Richard noted that the paper on the provision of building maintenance and minor capital works projects had been considered by SMG by correspondence, and that SMG had approved the recommendation to continue to avail of the services of the Property Maintenance Pan Government Framework Agreement 2019 for the financial year 2022-23 and the associated financial expenditure.

#### **15. Annual Plan 2021-22 End of Year Performance Report**

Richard presented a draft Assembly Commission paper outlining the final status of the actions in the Annual Plan 2021-22.

A discussion took place regarding some of the outcomes in the Plan, and Richard asked SMG to note the summary that would appear in the Annual Report and Accounts.

SMG considered and approved, subject to some minor amendments, the draft Assembly Commission paper on the Annual Plan 2021-22 End of Year Performance Report.

**Action:** Richard to amend the Annual Plan 2021-22 End of Year Performance Report as agreed by SMG, for presentation to the Assembly Commission at its next meeting.

SMG highlighted that the Annual Plan 2022-23 should be reviewed to ensure that any actions that were not fully completed in the Annual Plan 2021-22 were carried forward to the Annual Plan 2022-23. SMG also agreed that going forward it would be more practical to monitor actions with Directors and Heads of Business, rather than the Strategy Steering Groups.

**Action:** Richard to updated the Annual Plan 2022-23 following the finalisation of the outturn for the 2021-22 and circulate to the Clerk/Chief Executive and Directors for final agreement.

## **16. Temporary Staffing Resources – Corporate Services Directorate**

Richard noted that a separate meeting had taken place with the Clerk/Chief Executive and Directors to discuss temporary staffing resources in the Corporate Services Directorate in detail.

SMG approved the proposal presented in the paper.

Lesley thanked Richard for bringing the matter to a satisfactory conclusion.

## **17. Review of Data Protection Policy**

Tara Caul, Director of Legal, Governance and Research Services, presented the revised Data Protection Policy and noted that it had been discussed in detail at a separate meeting with the Clerk/Chief Executive, Directors and Data Protection and Governance Officer.

SMG approved the revisions to the Data Protection Policy.

## **18. Review of Internal Audit Charter**

Tara presented a paper on the review of the Internal Audit Charter. She stated that the review had been undertaken by the outgoing Acting Head of Internal Audit, who had concluded that the Charter remained current and required no amendment.

SMG considered and agreed the results of the review of the Internal Audit Charter.

## **PARLIAMENTARY SERVICES**

*Change to agenda running order.*

*Debra Savage, Communications Officer, joined the meeting at 12:20 pm for agenda item 20.*

## **20. Northern Ireland Assembly Commission Complaints Policy and Procedures Report for 2021-22**

Debra Savage reported that one admissible complaint had been received for the period 1 April 2021 to 31 March 2022 and presented a draft Assembly Commission paper

SMG reviewed the Complaints Policy Report for 2021-22 and agreed the paper for presentation to the Assembly Commission at its next meeting.

*Debra Savage left the meeting at 12:30 pm.*



*Meeting suspended at 12:30 pm until 1:30pm.*

*Brian Devlin, Head of Information Systems Office, joined the meeting at 1:31 pm for agenda item 21.*

## **21. Parliament Buildings Wi-Fi Network Replacement Project 2022**

Lesley welcomed Brian Devlin to his last SMG meeting.

Brian presented a business case seeking approval to replace the Assembly Wi-Fi network system, including a dedicated internet connection, and explained that the project was a priority given the number of complaints that had been received.

Brian outlined the options and costs in detail, along with the research that had been carried out with other similar organisations regarding their Wi-Fi solutions. Brian estimated that the project would be completed within six months of the Assembly Commission's approval.

Richard sought and received confirmation that two dedicated internet lines would be installed to ensure that the connection was fully resilient.

Lesley noted that the value of the business case was in excess of the budget available and therefore, if approved, additional funding would have to be identified. She also noted that the value of the business case exceeded her delegated authority and that approval would have to be sought from the Assembly Commission.

SMG considered the Business Case for the replacement of the Wi-Fi Network in Parliament Buildings and agreed that approval for the resultant expenditure should be sought from the Assembly Commission.

Lesley thanked Brian for his many years of dedicated service, and wished him well in his retirement.

*Brian Devlin left the meeting at 2:19 pm.*

*Susie Brown, Head of Communications, and Liz Beaton, Internal Communications Officer, joined the meeting at 2:21 pm for agenda item 22.*

## **22. Internal Communications Quarterly Update**

Susie Brown presented a paper on the internal communications activity that had taken place since the last update provided to SMG in October 2021.

Susie highlighted the achievements and milestones reached under the four themes of the new Internal Communications Strategy, namely, 'Listening to your views', 'Understanding how we communicate',

Improving our communications channels and platforms’ and ‘Developing meaningful and authentic content’.

Liz Beaton then presented the draft Internal Communications Action Plan 2022-23. She advised that it was a working draft and that it would be further developed once the findings the Staff Survey were published and resulting actions agreed.

Tara highlighted the importance of providing opportunities for new staff to make connections and encouraging them to do so.

Liz suggested that the Let’s Meet New Colleagues be held twice a year and advised that the best way to communicate with staff was through interaction with Working Groups, the Newsletter or podcasts.

Liz and Susie mentioned the possibility of doing an Interparliamentary Staff Survey in November 2022. Lesley advised that SMG would consider this at a later time given that the 2022 Staff Survey had just taken place and the findings had not yet been published.

SMG noted the internal communications update and provided a number of comments on the draft Internal Communications Action Plan 2022-23.

**Action:** Liz to amend the draft Internal Communications Action Plan 2022-23 to take account of comments provided by SMG and recirculate.

Lesley congratulated Susie and Liz for the very positive continued developments in internal communications.

*Liz Beaton left the meeting at 2:54 pm*

*Tracey Wilson, Information Officer, joined the meeting at 2:55 pm for agenda item 23*

## **23. Update to the Business Case for the Procurement of a Broadcasting Technical Adviser**

Susie and Tracey Wilson presented a paper seeking approval for an increase in the funding that had been approved for a Broadcasting Technical Adviser in December 2020.

Susie and Tracey outlined the need for the additional funding and the benefits that the Broadcasting Technical Adviser had brought to the broadcasting upgrade projects. They also advised that a further business case would be brought to the next SMG meeting to seek approval for the procurement of a technical adviser to provide support for the rest of the broadcasting upgrade programme.

Richard sought clarification on whether the value of the original business case had been underestimated or whether the Broadcasting Technical

Adviser had been used more than anticipated. Susie advised that while it was a combination of both, the use of the Adviser had been a very beneficial in the overall project.

Tara noted that the framework approach being used for the broadcasting upgrade programme was very innovative.

SMG considered the request to approve an increase in the value of the approved business case for a Broadcasting Technical Advisor and agreed that approval for the resultant expenditure be sought from the Speaker in line with the original business case.

*Susie Brown and Tracey Wilson left the meeting at 3.24 pm.*

*Simon Burrowes, Editor of Debates and Head of Public Engagement and Chair of the Internal Communications Group, joined the meeting at 3.25 pm for agenda items 19, 24, 25 and 26.*

## **19. Public Engagement Activity: Biannual Report (September 2021 to April 2022).**

Simon Burrowes presented the biannual report of public engagement activity undertaken by the Engagement Unit during the period October 2021 to March 2022.

Simon informed SMG of a number of Parliamentary engagement events and Assembly projects that the Engagement Unit had supported in the last six months and stated that the Engagement Team had done an exceptional job. In particular he highlighted the delivery of the very successful Commonwealth Parliamentary Association 50<sup>th</sup> British Island and Mediterranean Region Annual Conference, and the positive feedback received from delegates.

Simon also advised that the Northern Ireland Assembly Business Trust would be dissolved on 19 June 2022.

Simon noted the continued development of Citizen Space and advised that while it would now be the primary way that Committees would collect written evidence, it would be part of a wider package of engagement tools.

SMG noted the biannual report of public engagement activity undertaken by the Engagement Team during the period October 2021 to March 2022.

**24. Request for Approval of Additional Expenditure of c£17,500 under the 2017 to 2022 Partnership Agreement between the Education Service and the Council for the Curriculum, Examination and Assessment (CCEA)**

Simon presented a paper seeking approval for additional expenditure of c£17,500 under the 2017 to 2022 partnership agreement between the Assembly Commission and the Council for the CCEA and outlined why the request was retrospective.

SMG considered and approved the additional expenditure requested.

**25. Business Case for a Partnership Agreement between the Assembly Commission and the CCEA**

Simon presented a paper seeking approval of a business case for a partnership agreement between the Assembly Commission and the CCEA, covering the period April 2022 to March 2027.

Simon explained the misunderstanding regarding the process to be followed and the fact that approval of a business case had not initially been sought.

SMG considered and approved the business case for a partnership agreement between the Assembly Commission and the CCEA for the period April 2022 to March 2027.

**24. Update on work of the Internal Communications Group (ICG) October 2021 to April 2022**

Simon updated SMG on the work of ICG from October 2021 to April 2022.

Simon reported that there had been three main areas of focus during the period, namely work on the Staff Survey 2022, a refresh of the ICG's membership and discussions with the Senedd and Scottish Parliament regarding the possibility of joining with them on a combined staff survey. He also highlighted the need for a new Chairperson.

Simon advised that due to COVID-19, ICG did not meet for over a year and that the main focus of its recent meetings had been the Staff Survey. He also stated the need to resume regular meetings.

Lesley advised that a discussion had taken place with Susie Brown and Liz Beaton regarding the Interparliamentary Survey and that SMG was unsure of the cost and benefits of conducting a further survey at this time, given that a staff survey had only recently been conducted. SMG said that it would reconsider the merits at a later stage.

Tara noted the importance of the feedback from ICG and SMG encouraged ICG to resume regular meetings.

SMG noted the update on the activities of ICG and that a new Chairperson needed to be identified.

*Simon Burrowes left the meeting at 4.05 pm.*

## **25. Directors' Updates**

Directors presented comprehensive updates on the work of their respective directorates and the following in particular were noted.

### **Corporate Services**

#### **Health and Safety**

Richard advised of an accident that had occurred in April 2022 and the resulting actions.

#### **Staffing Issues**

Richard highlighted staffing difficulties in the Control Room and Finance Office and the steps that were being taken to try and resolve these.

#### **Finance Office**

Richard noted the significant work and long hours that had been undertaken by the Finance Office to process the many new and outgoing Members and support staff following the May 2022 election. He outlined the very positive feedback that had been received and congratulated staff for ensuring that everything was in place for the new Mandate.

#### **Roof**

Richard provided an update on the status of the legal actions being taken to address the roof defects.

#### **Support Services Contract**

Gareth provided an update on the status of the Support Services Contract retender.

### **Legal, Governance and Research Services**

#### **Attorney General's Reference to the Supreme Court**

Tara noted that the Attorney General for Northern Ireland had referred to the United Kingdom Supreme Court the question of whether a provision of the Abortion Services (Safe Access Zones) Bill, passed by the

Assembly in March 2022, is within the legislative competence of the Assembly.

### **Internal Audit**

Tara provided an update on the Internal Audit Reviews for:

- Broadcasting Infrastructure
- Accounts Payable
- Information Assurance
- Freedom of Information
- Business Office
- Procurement
- Members' Expenses (Final) 2021/22

### **Examiner of Statutory Rules (ESR)**

Tara advised that in the absence of normal Assembly business, the Examiner continued to consider those statutory rules which are subject to Assembly procedure and laid before the Assembly and that the Examiner would issue her First Report of the present mandate once Committees were established and she had received the necessary delegations.

### **Parliamentary Services**

#### **Broadcasting Contract**

Gareth advised that a new broadcasting contract had been awarded and that it was in the standstill period.

#### **Information Systems Office**

Gareth noted that Trevor Steenson had commenced as the Interim Head of the Information Systems Office.

### **26. AOB**

Tara asked if, as per her email request on 23 May 2022, SMG was content to transfer 0.5 FTE AG4 from the Legal Services Office to Examiner of Statutory Rules. SMG agreed the transfer.

### **27. Date of Next Meeting**

It was agreed that the next meeting would take place in June 2022, date to be confirmed.

### **28. Proposals for Agenda Items for Next Meeting**

- Consultation on draft the Equality Scheme and Audit of Inequalities Report and Action Plan 2022-26

- Annual Equality Report (including Disability Discrimination Act Yearly Report)
- Roof Project Update
- 2022 Pay Claim
- Unacceptable Behaviours Policy
- Annual Environmental Management Review
- Staffing Support for the Assembly Women's Caucus
- Business Case for the Procurement of a Broadcasting Technical Adviser
- Bring Your Own Device Policy
- Quarterly Review of the Corporate Risk Register
- Voice Over Internet Protocol Post Project Evaluation

The meeting ended at 4.30 pm.