

SENIOR MANAGEMENT TEAM (SMT)

**WEDNESDAY, 28 JUNE 2023 at 9.30 AM
ROOM 23, PARLIAMENT BUILDINGS**

APPROVED

Present:

**Lesley Hogg, Clerk/Chief Executive
Steven Baxter, Director of Corporate Services
Tara Caul, Director of Legal, Governance and Research Services
Gareth McGrath, Director of Parliamentary Services**

In Attendance:

**Janet Hughes, Clerical Supervisor
Robin Ramsey, Adviser to the Speaker/Head of Corporate Support
(Item 5)
Billy Mahoney, Deputy Head of Finance – Secretariat (Item 6)
Gary Browne, Senior Accountant (Item 6)
Sinéad McDonnell, Head of HR (Items 7, 8, and 9)
Donna-Marie Clark, Data Protection and Governance Officer (Items 11
and 12)
Frank Geddis, Clerk Assistant (Item 15)
Barbara Love, Assembly Clerk (Item 15)**

The meeting commenced at 9.36 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 from the meeting on 2 June 2023 had been published.

4. SMT Action Points

The outstanding action points were reviewed and progress was noted.

Robin Ramsey joined the meeting at 9.39 am for agenda item 5.

5. Political Update

Lesley Hogg noted that staff remained ready to support the Assembly when normal business resumes.

Robin Ramsey left the meeting at 9.45 am.

CORPORATE SERVICES

Billy Mahoney and Gary Browne joined the meeting at 9.45 am for agenda item 6.

6. Management Accounts

Billy Mahoney and Gary Browne presented the Management Accounts for April/May 2023.

SMT noted current forecast outturns for Resource DEL and Capital DEL.

Billy advised of reductions in the forecast for Admin costs and Staff Salaries, stating that the reduction in Staff Salaries was due to a small number of retirements. Lesley asked that Billy contact the HR Office to request earlier notification of retiring staff, in order to allow for more accurate salary forecasting, especially in light of current budget pressures.

Gary Browne advised SMT of expenditure in relation to Members' costs.

On reviewing the Capital Plan, SMT noted a number of surrenders and Billy sought approval of bids for the partial electronic access control project and the Blue Flax restaurant refurbishment. Billy also advised SMT of a number of pipeline capital projects that could potentially seek approval at future SMT meetings.

Following consideration, SMT agreed that neither of the two capital bid requests could be approved at this time, as a business case was required for the partial electronic access control project and further discussion was required in relation to the refurbishment of the Blue Flax restaurant.

SMT thanked Billy, Gary and the rest of the team for the work undertaken in preparing the year end accounts.

Billy Mahoney and Gary Browne left the meeting at 10.13 am.

Sinéad McDonnell joined the meeting at 10.13 am for agenda items 7, 8 and 9.

7. Annual Report of Learning and Development Activities and Associated Spend for 2022-23

Sinéad McDonnell provided SMT with an update on the learning and development activities undertaken by staff during the period 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023 and the associated spend.

Sinéad noted, as agreed at the SMT meeting on 3 May 2023, that future annual reports of learning and development activities would be presented under the three Priorities in the Learning and Development Strategy.

Sinéad advised that the number of training days that had been delivered well exceeded those of the previous year, and that overall, staff evaluation of training had been rated positively.

SMT noted an underspend against the annual Learning and Development budget, which Sinéad advised was mainly due to a change in the delivery of the training under the People Manager Programme.

Sinéad highlighted that the Learning and Development Plan for 2023-24 may need to be revisited once the Investors in People assessment had been completed to reflect any findings.

SMT praised the Learning and Development Team for their efforts in the delivery of training throughout the year and for a comprehensive report.

8. HR Management Information

Sinéad presented the monthly HR Management Information as at 1 June 2023.

Sinéad advised that the Staff in Post (SIP) figure on 1 June 2023 (including agency and inward seconded staff) was 332.2 Full Time Equivalents (FTE) against a staff complement (including complement plus) of 374.4 FTE.

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

Sinéad updated SMT on recent recruitment activity. In light of budget pressures, it was noted that whilst recruitment competitions were continuing, Directors would continue to assess current business need prior to any appointments being made.

Sinéad noted that the temporary AG6 and AG7 posts within HR Recruitment had been approved until 31 October 2023 and, in light of the volume of recruitment activity planned for September, sought approval of an extension of both posts until 31 March 2024. Following consideration, SMT approved in principle, an extension of both the temporary AG6 and AG7 posts until 31 March 2024.

SMT noted with concern the growing level of sickness absence which had risen to 14.1 average days lost per FTE staff member for the period June 2022 to May 2023, compared with 10.8 days per FTE for the same period in 2021/22.

SMT asked the HR Office to keep absence levels under close scrutiny and ensure that all actions under the Managing Attendance Policy are being efficiently implemented by line managers and HR Office. It was also agreed that the service provided by the occupational health adviser, Blackwell Associates, would be assessed with a view to providing assurance that milestones in relation to referrals were being achieved.

9. Salary Supplements Policy

Sinéad presented the draft Salary Supplements Policy, which she noted had been considered by the Clerk/Chief Executive and Directors on a number of occasions.

Sinéad stated that the draft policy had been shared with Trade Union Side and that she had met with the Clerk/Chief Executive and Directors on 21 June 2023 to consider comments received.

SMT noted and approved the draft Salary Supplements Policy, as presented.

Action: HR Office to arrange for the Salary Supplements Policy to be communicated to staff.

10. Provision of Recruitment Tests and Assessment Exercises

Sinéad presented a paper which provided an update on the procurement of a new contract for Recruitment Tests and Assessment Exercises.

Sinéad advised that a recent tender exercise had failed to procure a new supplier and in light of this and the fact that the current contract expires on 30 June 2023, sought approval to directly award an interim contract to the existing provider, pending the procurement of a new contract.

In relation to the budget for recruitment testing and/or assessment exercises for the 2023/24 financial year, Sinéad advised that there were sufficient funds to cover the current projected costs for recruitment, but noted that any additional recruitment competitions which require testing and/or assessment would require additional budget.

Following consideration, SMT approved the direct award of an interim contract with the existing supplier as proposed and outlined in the paper.

Sinéad McDonnell left the meeting at 11.12 am.

Meeting suspended at 11.12 am and resumed at 11.23 am.

LEGAL, GOVERNANCE AND RESEARCH SERVICES

Donna-Marie joined the meeting at 11.23 am for agenda items 11 and 12.

11. Quarterly Review of the Corporate Risk Register

SMT noted that the Clerk/Chief Executive, Directors and Data Protection and Governance Officer, had met on 6 June 2023 to discuss the Corporate Risk Register (CRR) in detail.

SMG approved the CRR for June 2023.

12. Sensitivity Review

Donna-Marie Clark noted that the Assembly Commission has a duty under the Public Records Act (NI) 1923 and the Disposal of Documents Order (S.R. & O 1925 No 167 and No 170), to ensure that information deemed of historical value generated in the activity of its work is appropriately recorded, preserved and shared with the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI). She advised that records to be preserved and shared with PRONI were those which had reached the 20-year point and it was noted that 22 files had been identified for review.

As this was a new process, Donna-Marie asked that SMT carry out the first Sensitivity Review on the six files being piloted, prior to submission to PRONI.

SMT agreed to carry out the Sensitivity Review as requested and noted that there would need to be communication with the Assembly Commission prior to the release of the files to PRONI.

Action: SMT to carry out a Sensitivity Review of six files by 7 August 2023.

Action: Clerk/Chief Executive to update the Assembly Commission on the Sensitivity Review, prior to the release of files to PRONI.

Donna-Marie left the meeting at 11.31 am.

13. Research and Information Service (RaISe) Staff Complement

Tara Caul presented a paper, which sought an increase in AG4 complement from 4 to 4.2 FTE in RaISe.

Following consideration, SMT approved the request.

PARLIAMENTARY SERVICES

14. Complement of the Office of the Official Report

Gareth McGrath presented a paper on the staffing complement in the Office of the Official Report.

Following consideration, SMT approved the staffing complement as outlined in the paper, noting an anticipated marginal reduction in net salary costs.

Frank Geddis and Barbara Love joined the meeting at 11.58 am for agenda item 15.

15. Legislative Drafting Software: Procurement Update and Ongoing Support for the Legislative Work Bench Software

Frank Geddis and Barbara Love presented a paper, which provided an update on the ongoing work in relation to the procurement of new Bill Drafting Software, and sought approval of a Direct Award contract for maintenance and support of the existing Legislative Work Bench software, in the interim.

Steven Baxter stated that it was important to ensure that the new solution was in line with the Assembly Commission's ICT Strategy moving forward in order to minimise costs and maximise benefits.

SMT noted the update and following discussion, agreed, in the interim, a Direct Award contract for maintenance and support of the existing Legislative Work Bench software.

Frank Geddis and Barbara Love left the meeting at 12.26 pm.

OTHER ITEMS

16. Directors' Updates

Corporate Services

Systems Review

Steven Baxter provided SMT with an update on the Systems Review project.

Usher Services

SMT noted the operational impact of sickness absence and restricted duties within Usher Services.

Support Services/Building Services

Steven noted that further discussions on the re-design of the Assembly's Blue Flax Restaurant would soon be taking place.

Legal, Governance and Research Services

Litigation

Tara Caul updated SMT on ongoing litigation.

Information Standards

Tara updated SMT on two ongoing complaints to the Information Commissioner's Office.

RaISe

Tara noted that RaISe had published 'The Assembly@25' research paper, which details the key political and legislative developments that have shaped the institution since 1998.

Procurement Office

Tara advised that a temporary AG5 Procurement Manager had taken up post.

SMT noted the ongoing procurement projects.

Parliamentary Services

Gareth provided a detailed account of the work undertaken by Clerking, Hansard, Public Engagement, the Communications Office and the Information Systems Office, since last reported at the SMT meeting on 2 June 2023.

Gareth noted that work to refurbish broadcasting systems in the Assembly Chamber would be commencing at the beginning of July with a planned completion date of the first week in September 2023. He confirmed that the Senate Chamber would be used for any required plenary cover during this period.

Gareth also highlighted that staff were continuing to meet UK Government officials to discuss the planned shadow operation of the Windsor Framework Democratic Scrutiny Committee.

17. Papers Cleared via Correspondence/Meeting

Annual Equality Progress Report to the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland 2022-2023;

Advice to Give Effect to the Assembly Commission's Decision to Accept the Donation of, and Erect a "Centenary Stone"; and

Grading and Pay Benchmarking Review.

18. AOB

There was no other business.

19. Date of Next Meeting

It was agreed that the next meeting would take place on 11 August 2023.

20. Proposals for Agenda Items for Next Meeting

- Review of the Hybrid Working Policy
- Corporate Strategy 2023-28
- Grading and Pay Benchmarking Review Post Project Evaluation
- Office Resources Update
- Annual Environmental Management Review
- Review of the Risk Management Strategy
- Business Case for Mobile Phones

The meeting ended at 1.01 pm.