

SENIOR MANAGEMENT TEAM (SMT)

**TUESDAY, 31 OCTOBER 2023 at 1.00 PM
ROOM 106, 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
(Items 5 and 6)
Stephanie Mallon, Clerk Assistant (Items 15 and 16)
Billy Mahoney, Deputy Head of Finance – Secretariat (Item 7)
Diane Lamont, Senior HR Manager (Items 8 and 9)
Donna-Marie Clark, Data Protection and Governance Officer (Items 12,
13 and 14)
John Perry, Infrastructure Analyst (Item 17)
Tracey Wilson, Information Officer (Item 18)
Michael Cairns, Acting Head of Communications (Item 19)**

The meeting commenced at 1.01 pm.

1. Apologies

There were no apologies 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 22 September 2023 had been published.

4. SMT Action Points

The outstanding action points were reviewed and progress was noted.

Tara Caul provided a further update in relation to the action on the

Retention and Disposal Schedule (the Schedule). Tara advised that despite a revised Schedule being submitted to the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI) on 21 September 2023, addressing comments received from PRONI, it was not considered at its panel meeting on 27 October 2023 as planned and instead PRONI had sent back some further comments for consideration.

SMT noted its disappointment at the Schedule not being considered by PRONI, despite its early submission, and about the protracted nature of the process. Tara advised that the Schedule would now go to a November PRONI panel meeting.

In relation to the action to update the Building Services 10 Year Life Cycle Property Plant and Equipment Upgrade/Replacement Plan (the Plan), Steven Baxter advised that due to resourcing issues within Building Services it was unlikely that the Plan would be fully updated by the end of November as previously proposed.

Robin Ramsey joined the meeting at 1.07 pm for agenda items 5 and 6.

5. Political Update

SMT noted the ongoing political situation.

Action: Directors to seek confirmation from all Heads of Business (HoBs) that their business areas are ready to support the resumption of normal Assembly business, if confirmation has not already been provided.

Gareth McGrath advised that discussions on the establishment of the Windsor Framework Democratic Scrutiny Committee and operation of the Stormont Brake were continuing with the UK Government officials, and that the necessary funding requirement had been resent to the Department of Finance.

6. Draft Assembly Commission Agenda

Robin Ramsey advised that the next Assembly Commission meeting was scheduled for 21 November 2023.

Proposed items for the next meeting included:

- Clerk/Chief Executive's Report
- Corporate Strategy 2023-2028
- Defects in the Roof of Parliament Buildings
- Holiday Pay Litigation Update
- Comprehensive Review of the Pioneer Phase of the Northern Ireland Youth Assembly
- Review of Security Arrangements for Members
- Centenary Stone
- Pay Claim 2023

SMT recorded its thanks to all the staff involved with hosting the recent visit to Parliament Buildings of a US Senior Business Delegation, led by the US Special Envoy Joe Kennedy III, which was a huge success and had received a lot of positive feedback.

Robin Ramsey left the meeting at 1.20 pm.

Change to agenda running order.

PARLIAMENTARY SERVICES

Stephanie Mallon joined the meeting at 1.21 pm for agenda items 15 and 16.

15. Establishment of a Visitor Experience Team

Stephanie Mallon presented a paper outlining proposals to further develop the visitor experience at Parliament Buildings, through the establishment of a dedicated Visitor Experience Team.

Stephanie proposed that the Visitor Experience Team would have a staff complement of one AG6 Visitor Operations and Experience Manager; one AG7 Visitor Experience Supervisor; and six AG8 Visitor Welcome Assistants and that this Team would combine and consolidate the service currently offered in part by the Events Office and in part by Usher Services, in respect of the reception service in the Great Hall.

Steven highlighted the excellent reception service that had been provided by Usher Services over the years and the positive feedback that was regularly provided by visitors on the welcome received from Ushers. SMT strongly endorsed this and recorded its thanks to Usher Services for the high quality reception service it has provided in the Great Hall. SMT also noted the importance that Usher Services would continue to play as the first point of contact for everyone who attends Parliament Buildings.

Following consideration, SMT supported and approved the proposal outlined in the paper to establish a Visitor Experience Team.

16. Outline Business Case (OBC) for the Replacement of the Audio-Visual Equipment in the Long Gallery, whilst Simultaneously Updating the Décor and Furnishings

Stephanie presented an OBC, with a recommendation to replace and modernise the audio-visual equipment in the Long Gallery to meet contemporary standards and expectations, and to update the space to improve accessibility, comfort, aesthetics and functionality.

Stephanie noted that the Long Gallery is the primary event space in Parliament Buildings, used on a regular basis for many different types of activities and although some minor updates had been made to elements of

the Long Gallery over the last number of years, there had been no major updates since 1998.

Stephanie highlighted a number of common issues reported by external and internal users of the Long Gallery and outlined four options to address these going forward; with a recommendation to proceed with Option 4, i.e. to replace the audio-visual equipment, whilst simultaneously updating the space.

Stephanie proposed that the project would be delivered during summer recess 2025, or summer recess 2024 should budget become available earlier.

Steven outlined the importance of adequate technical scoping of the equipment specification to ensure that it would be sufficiently flexible for event organisers to use.

Following consideration, SMT approved Option 4 as outlined, with the usual proviso that if projected costs are significantly different to (or in excess of) the business case then further SMT approval would be required.

Stephanie Mallon left the meeting at 1.55 pm.

CORPORATE SERVICES

Diane Lamont joined the meeting at 1.55 pm for agenda items 8 and 9.

8. HR Management Information

Diane Lamont provided the usual monthly HR Management Information in relation to staff complement/staff in post, temporary promotion/deputising arrangements and agency worker assignments, as at 1 October 2023.

SMT reviewed the Recruitment Schedule which had been revised following discussion at the SMT meeting on 22 September 2023. Diane informed SMT of a request received from the Head of Finance to swap the priority of the AG7 Clerical Officer (Pay Team) with the AG8 Payroll Officer competition. SMT approved the request.

Diane advised SMT that the HR Senior Management team was currently reviewing the recruitment procedures and would present a paper to SMT in due course. In the interim however, Diane sought approval to use a health declaration for the forthcoming Assembly Usher competition to reflect the physical duties associated with the post and ensure that those appointed to the role were able to carry out the full range of duties. Following consideration, SMT approved the use of a health declaration for the forthcoming Assembly Usher competition and any other posts that had an associated physical requirement.

Diane advised that the HR Office had sought clarification on the current practice of redacting certain potentially identifying information from

application forms before they are provided to the selection panel, from the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, who advised that there was no requirement to redact such information. In light of this advice, Diane sought approval from SMT to cease the practice of redacting certain information from application forms. SMT approved the request.

Diane provided SMT with sickness absence information and it was noted that for the period October 2022 to September 2023, the average days lost to sickness absence per full-time equivalent (FTE) member of staff was 15.8 days, which was an increase of 3.6 days for the same period in 2021/2022. SMT noted this remained an area of concern but was content that absence cases were being actively managed.

Tara highlighted a further issue in relation to the Recruitment Schedule. She stated that Research and Information Service (RaISe) was currently carrying five AG5 Research Officer (RO) vacancies and that the proposal to defer these competitions on the Recruitment Schedule to January to March 2024 was a cause of major concern for both herself and the Head of RaISe.

Tara said she had hoped that these posts could be advertised before Christmas in order to ensure operational readiness. Steven stated that the support offered by the HR Office in relation to recruitment was limited by the resources available, but that he would review the possibility of bringing forward the timing of the RO competition with Diane and the Head of HR and report back to SMT.

Action: Steven to review the possibility of reinstating advertising of the RO competition before Christmas with Diane and the Head of HR and report back to SMT by correspondence.

9. Biannual Review of Learning and Development Activities

Diane provided SMT with an update on the progress made from April 2023 to September 2023, in relation to the implementation of corporate learning and development activities for staff.

Diane noted that a lot of work had gone into the launch of the new Assembly Commission Management and Leadership Programme and provision of four modules of the Programme.

SMT noted that 318.6 training days had been delivered in the period, which equated to just under one day per FTE staff member.

Diane informed SMT of the spend against budget as at 30 September 2023 and stated that it was anticipated that the remaining budget would be required in order to deliver planned corporate learning and development activities for the remainder of the financial year. A proposal to re-allocate funds to cover some additional costs was also noted.

SMT noted the learning and development activities that had been

undertaken; the level of spend to date; and the anticipated budget for the remaining six months of the financial year.

Diane highlighted the level of remaining budget for Directorate training and it was agreed that Directors would review requirements for the remainder of the financial year with their HoBs.

Action: Directors to review Directorate training budget requirements for the remainder of the financial year with HoBs.

Diane proposed a change to the approval requirement for external learning and development events. SMT agreed that going forward, the HoB, rather than the Director, can approve attendance at external learning and development events in cases where more than one staff member from their business area is attending.

Action: Directors to inform HoBs that they can approve attendance at external learning and development events, in cases where more than one staff member from their business area is attending.

Diane Lamont left the meeting at 2.30 pm.

SMT had a further discussion in relation to the recruitment competition for the five Research Officer posts and the concerns raised by Tara on the ability of RaISe to maintain readiness for a return to normal business, if this recruitment was delayed. Tara stated that if a delay was likely, that consideration would have to be given to some temporary measures to fill posts deemed critical.

Following discussion, it was agreed that the preference was to try and progress the Recruitment Schedule as originally intended.

Tara stated that if that was not possible then the current Agency worker in the health and education portfolio would be retained in post temporarily and she would consider further options to ensure operational readiness with regard to the remaining vacancies.

Billy Mahoney joined the meeting at 2.41 pm for agenda item 7.

7. Management Accounts

Billy Mahoney presented the Management Accounts for September 2023.

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

Billy advised that Budget Holders had undertaken a budget exercise in September and re-forecasted expenditure for the remainder of the financial year.

SMT noted that the Department of Finance (DoF) was planning to conduct

a final year-end technical forecast exercise and that a return would be due by 1 December 2023. SMT therefore agreed to revise the planning assumption for a return to normal Assembly business from 1 November 2023 to 1 December 2023.

The forecast in relation to constituency costs was reviewed and Lesley Hogg requested that the Finance Office write to Members to seek an indication of their expected year-end outturn in order to inform the DoF return.

Action: Finance Office to write to Members to seek an indication of their expected year-end outturn.

On reviewing the Capital Plan, Billy noted that as requested at September's SMT meeting, a critical review had taken place of all items on the Capital forecast, to ensure that it accurately reflected projects that could be delivered by the end of the financial year.

Billy advised of surrenders from Building Services, the IS Office and the Communications Office. Billy also outlined three bids that had been received that required SMT's consideration and noted some other projects that were not yet included in the Capital Plan but that had been identified by Budget Managers as ones that could progress this year, should budget become available.

Following discussion, SMT approved the bids for the partial electronic access control project and the industrial kitchen equipment, subject to the completion of the necessary business cases. SMT also agreed that the refurbishment of the Blue Flax restaurant should be scheduled for 2024 summer recess in order to minimise disruption for building users.

In relation to the other potential projects that had not yet been approved, it was agreed that business cases should be prepared with the necessary approvals obtained, and that a final decision to proceed would be made if funds become available.

Billy Mahoney left the meeting at 3.11 pm.

11. Review of Photovoltaic Solar Panels

This paper was deferred to the next meeting.

LEGAL, GOVERNANCE AND RESEARCH SERVICES

Donna-Marie Clark joined the meeting at 3.12 pm for agenda items 12, 13 and 14.

12. Biannual Review of Directorate Risk Register (DRR)

SMT noted the September 2023 DRRs for Corporate Services, Legal, Governance and Research Services and Parliamentary Services.

Donna-Marie Clarke advised that as the DRRs will now be updated quarterly, the next DRR analysis presented to SMT will be as at 31 March 2024.

It was noted that SMT had agreed the insertion of a risk into the CRR in relation to the delivery of the Assembly Commission's Corporate Strategy 2023-28.

SMT considered emerging Risk Clusters and agreed that there were no further risks that required escalation to the CRR.

13. Review of Information Assurance Policy

Donna-Marie presented the Information Assurance Policy and noted that proposed amendments had been considered in detail by the Clerk/Chief Executive and Directors at a separate meeting.

SMT considered and approved proposed minor revisions to the Policy along with a further revision in relation to the communication of passwords.

Action: Donna-Marie to update the Information Assurance Policy in relation to the communication of passwords.

14. Report and Self-Assessment of the Information Security Group (ISG)

Donna-Marie presented the Annual Report and Self-Assessment of ISG for the year to September 2023.

SMT noted the work undertaken by ISG during the reporting period and its planned future actions.

Tara noted that two new members had joined the group.

SMT recorded its thanks to the members of ISG for their efforts over the last year and for the preparation of a very informative report.

Donna-Marie Clark left the meeting at 3.30 pm.

Meeting suspended at 3.30 pm and resumed at 3.50 pm.

PARLIAMENTARY SERVICES CONTINUED

John Perry joined the meeting at 3.50 pm for agenda item 17.

17. Post Project Evaluation (PPE) Report: Parliament Buildings Television System Replacement Project

John Perry presented a PPE for the Parliament Buildings Television System Replacement Project.

John advised that the project met its objectives whilst overcoming some challenges. John stated that the new system far exceeds the capabilities of the old system and is much more energy efficient.

SMT congratulated John and the team on a successful project.

SMT approved the PPE for uploading onto the PPE Registry, subject to the inclusion of a section referencing any lessons learned.

Action: John to arrange for the PPE to be updated to include a section referencing any lessons learned from the project, prior to uploading onto the PPE Registry.

John Perry left the meeting at 4.02 pm.

Tracey Wilson joined the meeting at 4.02 pm for agenda item 18.

18. Final Business Case (FBC) for the Upgrade of the Audio and Video Systems in the Assembly Chamber

Tracey Wilson presented the FBC for the upgrade of the audio and video systems in the Assembly Chamber.

Tracey noted that the OBC for the project had been approved by the Assembly Commission on 24 November 2021, and that the key drivers for the upgrade were the aging infrastructure and increased risk of system failures.

SMT noted that scope changes had impacted the original estimated budget, and that additional capital bids for 2022-23 were approved by SMT in January 2023 and for 2023-24 in May 2023.

SMT congratulated Tracey on her leadership skills throughout this major project, which had led to its successful delivery.

Tracey Wilson left the meeting at 4.23 pm.

Michael Cairns joined the meeting at 4.23 pm for agenda items 19.

19. Strategic Communications Update

Michael Cairns provided an update on communications associated with recent events.

Michael Cairns left the meeting at 4.37 pm.

CORPORATE SERVICES CONTINUED

10. Blue Flax Restaurant Refurbishment Update

Steven updated SMT on the current position in relation to the Blue Flax

refurbishment project and stated that a further meeting with the contractor would be held in November.

SMT approved payment of invoices in relation to the scoping of the project, the provision of an initial design and mood-boards.

OTHER ITEMS

20. Directors' Updates

Corporate Services

Support Services

Steven advised of positive catering sales and that year to date sales were ahead of target.

Office Resources

Steven noted that the pilot scheme for a new ordering system for stationery and IT consumables, would be implemented in the Corporate Services and Legal, Governance and Research Services directorates from 1 November 2023.

HR Office

Steven advised that the HR Office had engaged the services of the Investors in People (IIP) assessor to provide direction on the work that needs undertaken as a result of the IIP assessment.

Systems Review

Steven advised that progress continued to be made on the Systems Review project, with design workshops due to be completed by mid-November.

Legal, Governance and Research Services

Litigation

Tara Caul updated SMT on ongoing litigation.

Information Standards

Tara updated SMT on recent Information Commissioner's Office complaints.

RaSe

Tara noted that in line with the Recruitment Schedule, the post of Senior Research Officer was being advertised on 2 November 2023.

Procurement Office

SMT noted the ongoing procurement projects.

Tara advised that the Procurement Office was updating Contract Management Guidance for uploading onto AsslSt, pending a more detailed revision.

Tara noted that the social value element of procurement still required consideration and that a paper would be prepared on this for consideration by SMT in the next few months.

Tara also noted that the Procurement Act 2023 had now received Royal Assent and that significant operational changes would be required by October 2024.

Parliamentary Services

Clerking - Committees

Gareth noted that all clerking staff continued to maintain readiness for resumption of normal Assembly business.

Youth Assembly

Gareth advised that the Youth Assembly team had completed the recruitment process for new Youth Assembly Members.

Procedural Work

Gareth noted that progress continued to be made in relation to the replacement legislative drafting solution.

21. AOB

There was no other business.

22. Date of Next Meeting

It was agreed that the next meeting would take place on 30 November 2023.

23. Proposals for Agenda Items for Next Meeting

- Review of the Fraud and Bribery Policy
- Review of Fraud and Bribery Self-Assessment Checklists, Bribery Risk Assessment and Action Plan
- Review of Photovoltaic Solar Panels
- Retention and Disposal Schedule
- Risk Management Self-Assessment

- Update on the Provision of IT and Related Kit to Support Hybrid Working
- Public Engagement Activity: Biannual Report

The meeting ended at 5.23 pm.