

SENIOR MANAGEMENT TEAM (SMT)
FRIDAY, 1 MARCH 2024 at 9.30 AM
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)
Billy Mahoney, Interim Deputy Head of Finance (Item 7)
Sinéad McDonnell, Head of HR (Item 8)
Ken Eccles, Head of Usher Services/Security (Item 9)
Terri Quigley, Head of Building Maintenance (Items 9 and 10)
Donna-Marie Clark, Data Protection and Governance Officer (Items 11 and 12)
Michael Cairns, Acting Head of Communications (Item 13)
Dan Hull, Chairperson of Internal Communications Group (Item 14)

The meeting commenced at 9.31 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 31 January 2024 had been published.

4. SMT Action Points

The outstanding action points were reviewed and progress was noted.

Lesley Hogg referred to the outstanding action in relation to reviewing the Fraud Prevention and Anti-Bribery Policy and stated that it was important

for this review to be completed. Steven Baxter advised that the delay was due to resource pressures within the Finance Office but that the review would be completed and a paper prepared for consideration by SMT at either its March or April meeting.

Robin Ramsey joined the meeting at 9.35 am for agenda items 5 and 6.

5. Political Update

Lesley noted that normal Assembly business had resumed on 3 February 2024 with a very positive start, and that it had been an extremely busy and challenging few weeks for everyone.

SMT recorded its thanks to all staff and contractors for the exceptional effort that had gone in to ensuring the smooth resumption of Assembly business, at short notice and whilst carrying a significant number of staff vacancies.

6. Draft Assembly Commission Agenda

Robin Ramsey advised that Corporate Support staff were engaging with Assembly Commission Members, with a view to agreeing a date for the next Assembly Commission meeting.

Proposed items for the next meeting included:

- Clerk/Chief Executive's Report
- Review of Financial Assistance for Political Parties ('FAPP Scheme') 2016
- Assembly Members (Remuneration Board) Bill
- Defects in the Roof of Parliament Buildings
- Service Level Agreement between the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission and the Police Service of Northern Ireland
- Constituency Office Printer Replacement Project

Robin Ramsey left the meeting at 9.52 am.

CORPORATE SERVICES

Billy Mahoney joined the meeting at 9.53 am for agenda item 7.

7. Management Accounts

Billy Mahoney presented the Management Accounts for January 2024.

SMT noted the revised forecast position as at the end of January, in relation to Resource DEL and Capital DEL.

Billy informed SMT that the final budget position for the year had now been set in the Spring Supplementary Estimate (SSE), with figures submitted to the Department of Finance in February 2024.

Billy informed SMT of the current position in relation to the Capital forecast and he advised that the Finance Office was working closely with stakeholders, to ensure all relevant capital expenditure was incurred before the end of the financial year.

Billy highlighted under and overspends that had been identified by various business areas and sought SMT approval of the re-allocation of budget brought forward by budget managers in Admin costs and Capital costs. SMT approved the re-allocation of budget, as outlined in the paper.

Billy emphasised the importance of ensuring all expenditure is approved and receipted on the purchase order system before 31 March 2024 and it was noted that a communication would issue to staff on this shortly.

Steven acknowledged the volume of work undertaken by Billy and the Finance Team over the last number of weeks and SMT thanked Billy for his efforts.

Billy Mahoney left the meeting at 10.09 am.

Sinéad McDonnell joined the meeting at 10.13 am for agenda item 9.

8. HR Management Information

Sinéad McDonnell presented the monthly HR Management Information as at 1 February 2024.

Sinéad advised that the Staff in Post (SIP) figure on 1 February 2024 (including agency and inward seconded staff) was 320.7 Full Time Equivalent (FTE) against a staff complement (including complement plus) of 375 FTE.

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

Sinéad updated SMT on recruitment activity.

On reviewing the Recruitment Schedule, SMT approved a request from the Head of Finance, to swap the planned competition for an AG7 in the Pay Team, with a competition for an AG8 vacancy in the Finance Office. SMT also approved the inclusion of three competitions for the new Visitor Experience Team, consisting of one AG6, one AG7 and six AG8's.

Sinéad advised that the AG8 and AG7 merit lists were nearing exhaustion and that these posts therefore needed to be added again to the Recruitment Schedule. SMT was content for these to be added.

SMT considered and approved a staff complement change application form from the Director of Legal, Governance and Research Services, to increase

the AG8 post in the Library's Plenary and Research Support Team, from 0.8 to 1.0 FTE.

Sickness absence information was provided and it was noted that for the period February 2023 to January 2024, the average sickness absence per FTE member of staff was 15.4 days, compared with an average of 12.5 days during the period February 2022 to January 2023. SMT noted that this level of absence was extremely concerning.

SMT noted that the number of performance conversations that are happening across the organisation was not as high as it should be and that it would be important to understand why this is the case. SMT noted that regular communication with line managers is extremely important and that performance conversations are also an opportunity to talk to line managers about issues such as well-being, work-life balance, learning and development and other support needs.

SMT also noted that in previous feedback via the Staff Survey and other engagement methods, staff have commented that they are not taking or getting the opportunity to have quality discussions with their line manager.

SMT therefore agreed that a communication should issue to staff, highlighting the benefits and value of performance management conversations.

Action: Sinéad to draft a communication for staff, highlighting the benefits and value of performance management conversations.

Sinéad McDonnell left the meeting at 10.49 am.

Ken Eccles joined the meeting at 10.50 am for agenda item 9.

Terri Quigley joined the meeting at 10.50 am for agenda items 9 and 10.

9. Outline Business Case for Installation of a Partial Electronic Access Control System at Parliament Buildings

Ken Eccles presented and sought approval of an Outline Business Case (OBC), for the installation of a partial Electronic Access Control system at Parliament Buildings, using a card reader for door access. Following consideration, SMT approved the OBC as presented.

SMT thanked Ken and Terri Quigley for all the work that had gone into preparing the OBC.

Ken Eccles left the meeting at 11.08 am.

10. Replacement of Industrial Dishwasher, Blue Flax Restaurant, Parliament Buildings Business Case

Terri presented and sought approval of a Business Case, to purchase a new dishwasher and associated equipment, to upgrade the dishwashing area in the basement kitchen.

Following consideration, SMT approved the Business Case as presented.

Terry Quigley left the meeting at 11.19 am.

The meeting suspended at 11.19 am and resumed at 11.32 am.

Change to agenda running order.

PARLIAMENTARY SERVICES

Michael Cairns joined the meeting at 11.32 am for agenda item 13.

11. Strategic Communications Update

Michael Cairns provided a general update on strategic communications.

Michael Cairns left the meeting at 11.55 am.

OTHER ITEMS

Dan Hull joined the meeting at 11.56 am for agenda item 14.

12. A Joint Staff Survey

Dan Hull presented a paper recommending the Assembly Commission's participation in a forthcoming staff survey, being conducted with the Senedd and Scottish Parliament.

Dan noted that the Assembly Commission usually carries out a survey of staff every two years, but that at its meeting in September 2023 SMT had expressed an interest in participating in an interparliamentary staff survey. In light of this Dan advised that the Assembly Commission had been named as an interested party on the framework for a joint survey with the Senedd and Scottish Parliament.

Dan noted that an interparliamentary staff survey would provide the Assembly Commission with the opportunity to benchmark against a broader range of qualitative and quantitative data from comparable organisations, that could be used to further enhance and support Assembly Commission staff.

Dan stated that if SMT was content to proceed with this joint staff survey approach, a draft survey could be produced for consideration by SMT at its May meeting.

Following consideration, SMT approved the Assembly Commission's participation in a joint staff survey with the Senedd and the Scottish Parliament, in line with the approach outlined in the paper.

Lesley stated that it would be useful for SMT to have sight of output reports from previous surveys undertaken, and Dan agreed to contact officials in the Senedd to see if these could be obtained.

Action: Dan to contact officials in the Senedd, with a view to obtaining output reports of previous surveys undertaken.

Dan Hull left the meeting at 12.04 pm.

15. Papers Cleared by Correspondence

Biannual Update on Equality Action Plans

Abridged Management Accounts for December 2023

16. Directors' Updates

Corporate Services

Corporate Plan 2023-2028

Steven stated that he had hoped to bring a draft Corporate Plan 2023-2028 to this meeting, but due to a shortage of staff resources, the draft had not been completed. In light of this, he emphasised the need for dedicated resources to be allocated to this piece of work, as currently the lead role in this had been filled by resources from within Parliamentary Services and the return to normal Assembly business has meant that these resources are no longer available.

Steven also noted that despite the fact that the Assembly has not been conducting normal business over the past 18 months and had been able to utilise resources from Parliamentary Services, we have still not been able to finalise a Corporate Plan and are now at the end of the first year of reporting. Steven noted that without dedicated and skilled resources, delays in producing strategic documents was likely to be an ongoing problem and he advised that he had raised this as a risk in the Corporate Services Directorate Risk Register.

Lesley agreed that it was disappointing that the Corporate Plan had not yet been finalised, given that the process had commenced in September 2023 following finalisation of the Corporate Strategy 2023-2028 and that detailed feedback had been provided on the draft plan a number of months ago.

Following discussion, SMT agreed to give further consideration to a dedicated staff resource for strategic planning and other associated work, as is the case in the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Parliament.

Internal Audit

Steven advised that there were four further internal audits planned for the 2023-24 financial year, namely, Legal Services; Corporate Governance Arrangements; Safeguarding Arrangements; and Members' Expenses, Allowances and Financial Assistance for Political Parties.

Systems Review Project

Steven stated that the design stage of the Systems Review Project was still awaiting sign off and that a Project Board meeting was scheduled for 6 March 2024 to determine the next steps. He added that given the ongoing and protracted delays, the Project Board will be asked to consider a range of options with regards to the delivery and viability of the project.

Office Resources Pilot Scheme

Steven advised that a paper on the findings of the Office Resources Pilot Scheme would be presented at the next SMT meeting.

Legal, Governance and Research Services

Litigation

Tara Caul updated SMT on ongoing litigation.

Examiner of Statutory Rules

Tara noted that the First Report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules for the present mandate had been issued.

Information Standard

Tara updated SMT on a complaint currently with the Information Commissioner's Office.

Tara also advised that the revised Retention and Disposal Schedule would soon be laid in the Assembly by the Department for Communities.

Research and Information Service (RaISe)

Tara provided details on the level of research requests, and library enquiries received during January.

Procurement Office

SMT noted the ongoing procurement projects.

Tara noted that as the Procurement Act 2023 will require operational changes to Procurement Office procedures by October 2024, a paper was being prepared for consideration by SMT.

Parliamentary Services

Clerking - Committees

Gareth McGrath advised that in spite of challenges within committees due to a large number of vacancies, committee teams were working hard to ensure committee business was not impacted.

Communications Office – Broadcasting

Gareth noted that the Assembly Chamber and three Committee Rooms were fully operational and in full use following refurbishment. He advised that refurbishment of the broadcasting equipment in the Senate Chamber was scheduled to commence at Easter with completion in June.

IS Office

Gareth advised that installation of the new Wi-Fi Network was almost complete.

Public Engagement – Youth Assembly

Gareth noted that the second mandate of the Youth Assembly was progressing well.

17. AOB

There was no other business.

18. Date of Next Meeting

It was agreed that the next meeting would take place on 27 March 2024.

19. Proposals for Agenda Items for Next Meeting

- Insurance Update
- Corporate Values
- Corporate Plan 2023-2028
- Business Case for Repairs and Maintenance
- Buildings Services 10-Year Life Cycle
- Office Resources Pilot Scheme
- Litigation Update
- Quarterly Review of the Corporate Risk Register
- Records Management Policy
- Contract Management Guidance
- Strategic Communications Update
- Internal Communications Group (ICG) Update

LEGAL, GOVERNANCE AND RESEARCH SERVICES

Donna-Marie Clark joined the meeting at 12.48 pm for agenda items 11 and 12.

11. Sensitivity Review 2001 Release

Donna-Marie Clark presented a paper, which sought approval to release four 2001 files to the Public Records Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI).

Donna-Marie also advised that a review of the 2002 release (four files) and 2003 release (eight files) had commenced in preparation for transfer to PRONI in May 2024.

On reviewing Annex Two (Summary of Files Reviewed) of the paper, Lesley asked that it be updated to include details on 'Exemptions Applied'.

Action: Donna-Marie to update Annex Two of the paper, as requested, and re-circulate to SMT.

Following discussion, SMT approved the four 2001 release files for transfer to PRONI, and noted that the Assembly Commission would be notified in advance of the release.

12. Sensitivity Review Guidance

Donna-Marie presented and sought approval of proposed Sensitivity Review Guidance for staff.

Donna-Marie stated that the Guidance relates to files that are 20 years old and listed as 'PRONI Appraisal' or 'PRONI Permanent Preservation'.

Donna-Marie advised that training would be provided to Information Asset Owners (IAOs), as the IAOs would be mainly responsible for conducting sensitivity reviews going forward.

Donna-Marie recorded her thanks to Alison Belshaw, IAO for Clerking and Member Support Office, for her assistance with the review of the 2002 and 2003 file releases, due to be transferred to PRONI in May 2024.

Donna-Marie also highlighted that the current Office Resources database is no longer sufficient to meet the requirements of our current Records Management requirements and that it would therefore be necessary to consider the design and implementation of a new database with support from Information Systems. Tara noted that this is a matter for the Director of Corporate Services.

Following consideration, SMT approved the proposed Guidance for issuing to staff, subject to some minor amendments.

Donna-Marie Clark left the meeting at 12.57 pm.

The meeting ended at 12.57 pm.