SECRETARIAT MANAGEMENT GROUP

WEDNESDAY, 10 OCTOBER 2012 AT 2.04PM
ROOM 106, PARLIAMENT BUILDINGS

APPROVED

Present:	**Trevor Reaney**
	Gareth McGrath
	John Stewart
	Richard Stewart
	Stephen Welch
	Hugh Widdis
In attendance:	**Jim Beatty**
	Eddie Kelly (Agenda item 6)
	David Johnston (Agenda item 9)
	Brian Devlin (Agenda items 13)
	Stella McArdle (Agenda item 13)
	Sinead McDonnell (Agenda items 15 – 18)
	Tony Logue (Agenda items 22 – 23)
	Robin Ramsey (Agenda item 23)

1   Apologies

1.1   None

2   Declaration of Interests

2.1   As a member of the Ulster Architectural Heritage Society, Hugh Widdis declared an interest in respect of Agenda item 12.

3   Minutes of Previous Meeting/Matters Arising

3.1   The Minutes of the meeting of 7 September 2012 had been approved and published on 3 October 2012.

3.2   All issues within Matters Arising will be dealt with through the Action Points or discussed as substantive agenda items.

4   SMG Action Points

4.1   The outstanding Action Points were reviewed. Members were asked to advise Jim Beatty of further updates and amendments.

CORPORATE STRATEGY IMPLEMENTATION FRAMEWORK

5 Business Plans 2012/13 – updates on Directorate Business Plans

5.1 A monitoring exercise will be completed over the coming weeks and the outcome discussed at the next SMG meeting.

6 Strategic Work Strands

6.1 Business Efficiency Update

Eddie Kelly, BEP Team leader, joined the meeting at 2.10pm. The Project Board had met on 5 October 2012 and finalised the reports for the Education Service and Information and Outreach. Feedback is being sought by 7 November 2012 on the HR and Hansard reports. The next Project Board meeting is scheduled for 17 November 2012. Workshops on the current areas under review are on-going. An update note was issued to all Heads of Business on 8 October 2012 and the team will speak to individual offices if required. Tranche 4 of the project will begin in November 2012 in the Information Systems Office, the Clerk/DG office, the Speaker's Office and Support Services. Mr Reaney said that the Security/Ushering report and the RAISE report were now moving to implementation.

6.2 Institutional Review

Gareth McGrath said that the Assembly and Executive Review Committee (AERC) was considering the issue of the future number of Departments and a report is expected by the end of November. Terms of Reference are being drafted for two recommendations from the AERC's recent report on 'Numbers of the Northern Ireland Legislative Assembly', namely, a review of the Committee system and the scheduling of parliamentary business. The Secretary of State's consultation concludes on 23 October 2012.

6.3 Organisational Development

Gareth McGrath has drafted a strategy and circulated his paper to SMG members. It was recognised that significant projects are on-going and others are planned and it was vital that the OD strategy fitted the organisational need. It was agreed that the Clerk/DG would seek further views of SMG members as he considers the way forward.

6.4   Organisational Redesign

The team undertaking the Organisational Redesign Project (Ken Hughes and Dianne Bevin) have arranged a number of meetings. Staff will be informed of progress and encouraged to contribute to the process.

7.   Co-ordination

7.1   SMG noted that there were no outstanding issues regarding co-ordination on the implementation of the Corporate Strategy.

8.   Consultation, communication and engagement

8.1   SMG noted the on-going consultation, communication and engagement work in respect of the Corporate Strategy.

LEGAL AND GOVERNANCE

9.   Corporate Risk Register

9.1   David Johnston joined the meeting at 2.30pm and briefed SMG on recent changes to the register. The Secretariat Audit and Risk Committee met on 9 October 2012 and reviewed the Risk Register and recommended some minor changes.

9.2   After discussion, some further updates were identified and agreed. David Johnston will incorporate these into the register.

INFORMATION AND OUTREACH

10.   Brown Tourism Signage

10.1   John Stewart spoke to the paper on this issue about signage to Parliament Buildings and Stormont Estate. After discussion it was agreed to refer the issue to the Commission.

11.   NI Assembly Community Link and Assembly Community Link Advisory Group

11.1   John Stewart spoke to the paper on this issue about the establishment of the Community Link and associated Advisory Group.

11.2   SMG noted the paper.

FACILITIES

12.   Electronic Access Control

12.1   Stephen Welch spoke to his paper on this issue.

12.2   A number of reports have identified potential weaknesses in Parliament Building security and the potential benefits of introducing electronic access systems to doorways. The installation of such a system would also address the concern that visitors or members of the public do not face any physical restrictions when entering or moving throughout the building.

12.3   The paper before SMG proposed two options. SMG considered the options and agreed that Option B would deliver the greater benefits to the organisation.

12.4   SMG agreed to refer the issue to the Commission with a recommendation favouring Option B and the development of a supporting business case.

CLERKING AND REPORTING

13.   Electronic Committee Packs

13.1   Stella McArdle and Brian Devlin joined the meeting at 3.15pm and spoke to the paper on this issue.

13.2   A two-stage trial was carried out using 13 tablet devices of differing operating systems, screen sizes, user interfaces and input options. These were initially shared between members of three committees and the Chairpersons Liaison Group. During the second stage, one of the Committees, the Health Committee, was used exclusively and members received their packs electronically for five meetings.

13.3   An evaluation exercise was then carried out which included interviews with secretariat staff and 18 members. The project and subsequent trial have identified a wide range of issues which need to be decided and taken forward, for example, internet access, printing and back-up before a seamless transition to electronic working can be achieved.

13.4   SMG discussed the paper and its recommendations and commended the team on the work done to date. While there was general agreement on the recommendations and the need for this project to continue, it

was agreed not to decide on which tablet to purchase at this time pending a detailed evaluation of all those available at a future date.

14.   EU Project and proposed committee pilot project

14.1   Gareth McGrath spoke to the paper on this issue.

14.2   The European Project Manager was appointed on 1 February 2012 to develop an Assembly EU report and proposed action plan on the future role of the Assembly in a European context for presentation to the Commission, SMG and the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM). The Project Manager provided a briefing to SMG on 8 June 2012 which detailed the stages within the project plan and progress to date.

14.3   A key element within the project is supporting committees in scrutiny of European issues and engagement in European affairs. Committees presently receive regular updates from Research and Information Services (RaISe) on relevant EU proposals and ad hoc information from the EU Project Manager on emerging issues. A key early output from the EU Project Manager has been to work with RaISe to develop a more structured way of codifying the information that flows from Europe to the committees, allowing them to focus on what is most important to them. To this end, a pilot project to stimulate and support committee engagement is proposed.

14.4   SMG noted the proposed committee pilot project and the EU project progress to date.

CORPORATE SERVICES

15.   HR Management Information – Absence Analysis

15.1   Sinead McDonnell joined the meeting at 4.23pm and spoke to her paper on this issue. A comparison had been done with the absence levels within other organisations and while the Assembly figures were comparable with those from the NICS, they were higher than a number of others. Further analysis was provided by grade and cause of absence.

15.2   SMG discussed the figures and how best to address the issues raised. It was acknowledged that 165 staff had no absence over the past year and that a revised Managing Attendance policy was to be brought to SMG at the next meeting, subject to the timing of the consultation process for the Policy.

   ACTION: RICHARD STEWART

15.3 The paper recommended a number of new initiatives and SMG considered these. It was agreed to take these forward, including the recruitment of an Occupational Health Nurse for a pilot exercise.

16. Probation Policy

16.1 SMG considered the proposed probation policy which has been developed in consultation with TUS.

16.2 SMG approved the policy for consultation with staff for a period of 4 weeks.

17. Staff/Member Protocol

17.1 This draft protocol was developed to provide a means of resolving conflict/dispute in which an MLA or member of staff considers that they have been treated in an unfair or inappropriate manner. The protocol provides a procedure which may be used by both MLAs and staff.

17.3 A draft paper was before SMG on 8 June 2012 when it was referred for further consultation. SMG considered the revised proposals and agreed to refer them to the Commission.

18. Capability Policy

18.1 The key principles in relation to this policy had been agreed by SMG in February 2012 when it was referred for further consultation and development.

18.2 SMG considered the draft policy and agreed for consultation with staff for a period of 4 weeks.

19. Contract Management Policy

19.1 SMG had previously agreed to apply procurement best practice as developed by the Central Procurement Directorate, DFP. Revised guidance has been recently issued by CPD and this has required changes to be made to the Assembly's own guidance. Actions to implement recent recommendations from internal Audit have also been incorporated.

19.2 Richard Stewart said that adoption of this policy would provide an easily understood methodology for both the contract manager and supplier to monitor contractor performance and where failures are

identified, a process to remedy these. SMG considered the proposals and identified a need for both generic and specialist training.

19.3   In approving the guidance, SMG accepted Gareth McGrath's proposal for the draft policy to be circulated to Heads of Business for their views. Unless substantial issues are identified, the policy does not have to come back to SMG.

20.   Travel Policy

20.1   Discussion on this issue was deferred to a reconvened meeting next week.

21.   Tax Liability on Provision of staff uniforms

21.1   During a visit in February 2012 a HMRC representative highlighted that clothing provided to employees by an employer is an employment related benefit within Section 201 of the Income Tax, Earnings and Pensions Act 2003 (ITEPA 2003), unless the employee is entitled to make an off-setting deduction under Section 336 of that Act. HMRC agreed to review the items of clothing that are provided to employees to assess the compliance with current guidance and the appropriateness of applying an off-setting deduction. As a consequence, a small payment is due to HMRC.

21.2   SMG agreed to the proposed payment to HMRC and noted the on-going work to agree an appropriate tax treatment for current uniform provision.

22.   Draft Language Policy and Guidance

22.1   Tony Logue joined the meeting and spoke to this paper. At its meeting on 8 May 2012 the Assembly Commission had approved a Good Relations Strategy and Action Plan which included the development of this policy and guidance.

22.2   In drafting this policy and guidance, Tony Logue explained that a number of issues had been excluded pending discussions with SMG. These were the website, signage, tours, Irish classes for staff, Standing Orders, sign language and issues with the Dignity at Work policy.

22.3   SMG discussed the draft policy and guidance and agreed to refer the paper to the Commission.

23. Future Commission/SMG Business

23.1 SMG noted the future work plans and considered the agenda for the next Commission meeting:-

- EU Project and proposed Committee pilot project
- Clerk/DG Update report
- Evaluation of Electronic Meeting Packs project
- IT Refresh Update
- Brown Tourism Signage
- Draft Language Policy and Guidance
- Staff/Member Protocol
- Electronic Access Control
- USA Group

23.2 Robin Ramsey joined the meeting and updated SMG on the progress on taking forward the USA Group. A paper will go before the next Commission meeting.

23.3 A focus group is finalising the launch of a photographic exhibition to mark the 80th anniversary of Parliament Buildings.

John Stewart left the meeting at 4.59pm.

ADDITIONAL BUSINESS

24. Directors' Updates

24.1 Richard Stewart said the consultants undertaking the review of contract creation and contract management will meet with stakeholders on 16 and 17 October 2012. SMG had been notified of this on 28 September 2012.

25 Items dealt with by Correspondence

25.1 Stephen Welch advised that a paper on the 'Proposed Photographic Project' has been circulated to SMG for consideration.

26 AOB

26.1 There were no issues under this heading.

The meeting adjourned at 5.05pm.

The meeting reconvened in Room 23 on Thursday, 18 October 2012 at 11.40am.

Present: Trevor Reaney, Gareth McGrath, John Stewart, Richard Stewart, Stephen Welch, Hugh Widdis.

In attendance: Jim Beatty, Paula McClintock

27   Travel Policy

27.1   Paula McClintock told SMG that there were a number of documents providing guidance for Assembly business travel with separate guidance for secretariat staff and Members. There have been recent reviews by Internal Audit and the Business Efficiency Project (BEP) team and both reviews produced recommendations for changes and along with discussions with HMRC, it was considered timely to bring a range of issues to SMG.

27.2   It was pointed out that for a number of reasons the percentage of GAE spent on travel has been decreasing over the past two years and at 31 March 2012 it represents 2.06%.

27.3   In March 2012 the Independent Financial and Review Panel (IFRP) issued a Determination which included reference to costs for travel and subsistence for Members. However, the rates of subsistence and accommodation previously set by the Commission for Committee trips exceed the rates of the IFRP. SMG noted that the IFRP Determination did not expressly refer to Members when travelling as part of a Committee and agreed that as a first step, it was necessary to clarify this issue with IFRP before considering a paper for the Commission.

27.4   While the IFRP Determination set the rates of travel, it did not allude to the nature and type of air fare. The BEP had recommended that reimbursement should only be made for Members at no more than standard economy apart from exceptional circumstances. SMG agreed with this approach but identified the need for better clarification of 'exceptional circumstances'. It was noted that, in general, the staff handbook has been updated to reflect the BEP recommendations made in its Thematic Review on Reputational Risks and Quick Wins.

27.5   When part of the NI Civil Service, HMRC dispensation applied to secretariat travel and subsistence claims but this was removed on separation. Finance Office is currently in talks with HMRC about restoring the dispensation. In order to comply with HMRC guidance, SMG agreed to set revised Personal Allowance rates and to move to a 'receipted actuals' basis for subsistence claims. TUS will be consulted appropriately.

27.6   SMG emphasised a key principle that all staff and Members should be entitled to the same rates and conditions for travel and subsistence for all Assembly business travel.

27.7   Concerns were raised about the current rates set for hotel usage and the increasing difficulties in finding hotels within the rates. It was suggested that while a new basic rate may be set, individual rates may be required for individual cities such as Brussels and Washington. It was agreed that this was another issue to raise with the IFRP.

28   Next Meeting

28.1   The next meeting will be at 9.30am in Room 106 on Friday 9 November 2012.

The meeting adjourned at 12.45pm.