

SECRETARIAT MANAGEMENT GROUP POLICY FORMAT

**WEDNESDAY, 8 OCTOBER AT 12.55PM
ROOM 25, PARLIAMENT BUILDINGS**

APPROVED

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

**In Attendance: Jim Beatty
John Gibson
Tony Logue
Sinead McDonnell
Robin Ramsey**

1. Opening/Review

(a) Apologies

There were no apologies.

(b) Declarations of Interest

Gareth McGrath declared an interest in respect of Item 9 as a Director with the NIA Legislative Strengthening Trust.

(c) Minutes of Previous Meeting

The Minutes of the meeting of 3 September 2014 had been approved and published on 16 September 2014.

(d) Matters Arising

Trevor Reaney said that he had revised the Gender Action Plan following discussion at the previous SMG meeting. This would now go to the Assembly Commission.

2. Action Points

- 2.1 The Action Points list was reviewed. Members were asked to advise Jim Beatty of any further updates/amendments.

3. Service and Resources Prioritisation – update

- 3.1 Trevor Reaney said that a Director's meeting has been arranged for 10 October 2014 to discuss staffing levels and budgets. Richard Stewart told SMG that a paper on the topic would be distributed later today.
- 3.2 SMG provided some initial views on the matter and agreed the basis for further discussions at Friday's meeting.

4. Business Justifications and Cases Policy

- 4.1 John Gibson joined the meeting at 1.20pm and assisted Richard Stewart in presenting this paper.
- 4.2 A number of internal and external audit reports commented on the need for clearer guidance (and greater compliance with existing guidance) on the preparation and monitoring of business cases. A draft Policy document was presented to SMG in June 2014. SMG considered the draft Business Justifications and Cases Policy and asked for a number of amendments to be made. This revised paper includes those amendments, the Terms of Reference for the Resource Planning Group (RPG) and a new appendix on project management profiles.
- 4.3 SMG welcomed this policy and sought its introduction as soon as possible. It was accepted that pending digitisation of the forms that paper trails would be used in the interim. There would be some costs associated with the introduction, eg, training, but the level of investment would be assessed and progress made within the available resources.
- 4.4 It was agreed that the policy along with a paper on Programme and Project Management should be forwarded to the RPG. John Stewart said that Resource Planning Group would prepare an implementation plan – including development of online business case approval and monitoring and a policy on programme and project management.

5. Secondment and Job Shadowing Policy

- 5.1 Sinead McDonnell joined the meeting at 1.43pm and spoke to this paper.

- 5.2 On 18 January 2013, SMG had approved the development of a Secondment Policy. During development, HR identified the need for separate policies addressing outward/inward secondments and short internal development opportunities (job shadowing). SMG was asked to agree to separate policies for the management of Secondment and Job Shadowing opportunities and to approve these for formal consultation.
- 5.3 SMG discussed and agreed the separate draft policies. They will now go out for consultation for four weeks before equality screening and return to SMG. It was agreed that these could be cleared by correspondence.

6. Probation Policy

- 6.1 Sinead McDonnell spoke to this paper.
- 6.2 The probation policy was considered by SMG previously and approval was given for amendments to be made and for the revised policy to be placed in the Staff Handbook. Several issues have arisen since which were before SMG for consideration. The revisions to the policy had been consulted on and agreed with TUS.
- 6.3 SMG was asked to reconsider the benefit from applying paragraph 5 of the policy as currently worded. At present a period of probation restricts a new and existing staff member from applying for any other Assembly recruitment opportunity during the six month period and also restricts them from applying for secondment opportunities within the six month period.
- 6.4 After discussion, SMG agreed to the proposed changes.
- 6.5 At present, new and existing staff members are restricted from applying for secondment opportunities during the six month period of their probation. It was proposed that this restriction should be removed for existing members of staff who have already been confirmed as Assembly Commission employees.
- 6.6 After discussion, SMG agreed to the proposed changes.

7. Staff Hours Policy

- 7.1 Sinead McDonnell spoke to this paper.
- 7.2 A draft policy had been discussed at the SMG meeting in June 2014 and following some amendments the policy had gone out for consultation. The response rate had been the highest for any consultation to date.

- 7.3 HR Office put forward 4 options for consideration by SMG and recommended adopting Option 4 which reflects the bandwidth used in the current flexitime system - the benefit to the organisation would be a single, consistent approach to recording and managing hours worked across the business. Maintaining a bandwidth end time of 1800 would address the majority of concerns raised during formal consultation.
- 7.4 SMG had questions around a number of areas, eg, the working of conditioned hours, Saturday working and the payment of overtime. After discussion SMG accepted Option 4 as the way forward. It was agreed that, subject to further discussions with TUS, the policy may be implemented in January 2015 and reviewed thereafter. HR Office will complete equality screening and clear this by correspondence with SMG.

8. Members Survey

- 8.1 Gareth McGrath spoke to this paper.
- 8.2 The survey was conducted between May and July 2014. The purpose of this research was:
- To assess levels of satisfaction with the services provided by the Assembly Secretariat amongst Members and their support staff;
 - To identify any changes or improvements to current services that may be necessary; and
 - To gather views on recent and proposed service developments to assist the Commission's vision of being progressive and outstanding.
- 8.3 In total, 82 responses were received to the online survey, 70 from MLAs and 12 from Members' staff. Analysis of the results has shown that Members and their support staff view the services provided by the Secretariat very positively.
- 8.4 SMG discussed the findings and agreed to recommend to the Commission that a threshold of 75% be set for Member satisfaction, which if not met will require an action for improvement. On that basis the following areas will require an action(s) for improvement:
- Access to the Internet (incl. speed) (60.7%)
 - Wi-Fi Network Access in Parliament Buildings (72.1%)
 - Mobile phone network service in Parliament Building (59.7%)

- 8.5 SMG acknowledged the contribution of Secretariat staff in the achievement of such outstanding results.
- 8.6 It was agreed that John Stewart and Stephen Welch would develop a joint action plan in relation to Information Technology matters and concerns raised within the survey.

9. Memorandum of Understanding – NIAC and Politics Plus

- 9.1 Gareth McGrath spoke to this paper.
- 9.2 The paper proposed a Memorandum of Understanding between the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission (NIAC) and Politics Plus (“Northern Ireland Assembly Legislative Strengthening Trust”) and outlined the arrangements that have been/will be put in place in order to further formalise the governance arrangements between the NIAC and Politics Plus.
- 9.3 The work of Politics Plus was initially supported through the award of a grant by Atlantic Philanthropies (AP) with the NIAC providing a smaller amount of direct financial and “in kind” support. Following the success of the programme, consideration has been given by Politics Plus as to how to build on the momentum that has been generated through its work. In addition a number of formal research evaluation reports were commissioned, and the recommendations made in these and other relevant reports have been used to inform the development of a 2014 – 2017 Strategic Plan.
- 9.4 Under this MoU a small number of staff will be formally seconded to Politics Plus, though the NIAC will continue to be their employer. A grant of £50k per annum from the NIAC to Politics Plus will contribute towards the cost of administering the delivery of Member Development Programmes in addition to the £300k per annum which has been contributed by AP. Any NIAC contribution would be subject to the overall consideration of future resource and service prioritisation.
- 9.5 SMG discussed the proposed MoU and agreed that although a decision was not to be taken today, it would benefit from the inclusion of an overview. If possible, this will be cleared by correspondence before proceeding to the Commission.

10. Refresh of the Corporate Risk Register

- 10.1 Hugh Widdis spoke to this paper. SMG had discussed this issue in June 2014 and since then Hugh Widdis had consulted with the other

Directors. Some changes had been made to the original draft and it was proposed that the revised Risk Register should be agreed.

- 10.2 SMG discussed the proposed Risk Register in detail and agreed a number of key changes. Hugh Widdis will amend the document and bring back to a future SMG meeting.

AP: HUGH WIDDIS

11. Good Relations Monitoring

- 11.1 Tony Logue joined the meeting at 3.15pm and spoke to this paper.
- 11.2 The 2012-2016 Good Relations Strategy and associated Action Plan was approved by the Commission at their meeting held on 25 September 2012.
- 11.3 The paper before SMG was the 6 monthly monitoring report (March – September 2014) to provide SMG with an update on the progression of actions undertaken across each of the Directorates. The Good Relations Action Plan Monitoring Report recorded 22 completed actions, 30 on-going actions and 2 marked as not yet complete.
- 11.4 SMG discussed the Action Plan update and agreed some changes. The significant progress was noted.

12. Commission/SMG Business

- 12.1 Robin Ramsey joined the meeting at 3.25pm. Tony Logue presented the agenda for the next Commission meeting for 22 October 2014. The proposed items are:-
- Clerk/CE's Update
 - Members Development Plan
 - Parliament Buildings External Lighting
 - Review of Events Policy
 - Draft Engagement Strategy
 - Usher Service – Internal Audit
 - Appointment of the NI Public Services Ombudsman
 - Gender Action Plan
 - Budget Planning 2015/16
- 12.2 The Commission will also want to consider marking the retirement of the Speaker.
- 12.3 SMG noted the Forward Work Plan to March 2015.

13. Directors' Updates

- 13.1 John Stewart paid tribute to everyone involved in the induction of the new Bursary Programme students. He said that the Education Service had submitted an Erasmus+ application for funding to support the Youth Assembly proposal. John said that Assembly Community Connect had hosted a successful 'Get Involved' workshop in South Down on 3 October. John provided an up-date on the Laptop Replacement Project and questions posed by one Commission Member. He also mentioned successful visits to the Assembly by a parliamentarian from the Falkland Islands and colleagues from the Houses of the Oireachtas Service. John told SMG about the untimely passing of the Secretary-General of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, Dr William Shija.

14 Items cleared by Correspondence

- 14.1 SMG noted that the following item had been issued for clearance by correspondence since the last meeting:-

(a) HR Management Information

15. AOB

- 15.1 SMG discussed a proposal for the re-evaluation of a post to proceed. It was agreed that this did not fall within the requirements of the relevant policy and should be reconsidered.
- 15.2 Trevor Reaney said that a DVD containing the Annual Report for 2013/14 had been produced. It was agreed that this would be circulated to Directors.

AP: JOHN STEWART

16. Next Meeting

- 16.1 The next meeting will be held on Friday 14 November 2014 at 9.30am in Room 106.

The meeting adjourned at 4.04pm.