

SECRETARIAT MANAGEMENT GROUP (SMG)

THURSDAY, 26 OCTOBER 2017 at 11.00AM
ROOM 30, PARLIAMENT BUILDINGS

APPROVED

Present: Lesley Hogg
Tara Caul
Gareth McGrath
Richard Stewart

In Attendance: Frances Leneghan
Janet Hughes
Rose Morwood
Maria Bannon
Paula McClintock
Sinéad McDonnell
Alice McKelvey
Barbara Love
Alyn Hicks
Angela Kelly
John Gibson
Brian Devlin
Richard Scott
Robin Ramsey
Maeve Donnelly
Shauna Mageean

Opening/Review

The meeting commenced at 11.07am.

1. Apologies

No apologies were received.

2. Declarations of Interest

Gareth McGrath declared an interest in agenda item 19.

3. Minutes of Previous Meeting

Minutes of the previous meeting together with unrestricted papers were published on 24 October 2017.

4. SMG Action Points

The outstanding action points were reviewed and progress was noted subject to the following comments.

Effective use of Corporate Support Systems

Richard Stewart highlighted that some external resource might be required at the pre-planning stage of the project, but that if this was required it would be included as part of the business case.

HR Management – Consideration of a possible Apprenticeship Programme

Action: Richard Stewart to provide CCSU with a revised date for presentation of a paper to SMG on an apprenticeship programme.

Review of Corporate Risk Register – Corporate Risk 4 ‘Failure to maintain a suitably skilled, experienced and motivated staff complement’

Action: Richard Stewart and Tara Caul to confirm that there are suitable staff contingency arrangements in place within their Directorates. Gareth McGrath confirmed that suitable staff contingency arrangements were in place with Parliamentary Services.

5. Political Update

Lesley Hogg confirmed that although the Secretary of State and political parties were still engaged in talks the lack of progress could lead to contingency arrangements being put in place in relation to the budget for Northern Ireland.

Maria Bannon joined the meeting at 11.30am for agenda item 6.

CORPORATE SERVICES

6. Good Relations Action Plan 2016 – 21: October 2017 six-monthly update

Maria Bannon presented the six monthly update on the Good Relations Action Plan 2016-21.

Maria confirmed that of the forty-one actions recorded during the reporting period March 2017 to October 2017, twenty-eight had been met, seven were in progress and six had been suspended due to the political situation and would be revisited on resumption of the Assembly.

On reviewing the actions Gareth McGrath requested a meeting with Maria to discuss action 2.6, 'Reconsideration of Civic Occasions Protocol'.

SMG approved the Action Plan for consideration by the Commission at the November Commission meeting, subject to a small number of minor amendments.

Action: Maria Bannon to update the Action Plan as agreed by SMG and arrange for the six-monthly update report to be published on the Assembly website once approved by the Commission.

Lesley Hogg raised an issue in relation to the quality and timeliness of the action updates provided by Heads of Business (HoBs) and asked Directors at the next six-monthly update to review responses from their respective business areas in detail before they are forwarded to the Equality Unit.

Action: Equality Unit to copy Directors in on correspondence issued to HoBs regarding the six-monthly update returns.

Action: A process to be established for Directors to review and approve six-monthly updates by HoBs before they are forwarded to the Equality Unit for inclusion in the Action Plan.

Lesley Hogg advised SMG that a letter had been received from the Equality Commission acknowledging receipt of the Assembly Commission's Section 75 Annual Progress Report. The response received provided a positive assessment of the work done so far.

SMG thanked Maria and her team for all their hard work in relation to the Action Plan and congratulated them on the high quality of the Annual Progress Report.

Maria Bannon left the meeting at 11.44am.

Paula McClintock joined the meeting at 11.44am for agenda item 7.

7. Management Accounts

Paula McClintock presented the Management Accounts for the reporting period to 30 September 2017.

SMG noted the latest forecasted position in relation to income and expenditure for 2017/18 and Paula confirmed that the reports presented incorporated the new directorate structures.

In relation to capital, Paula confirmed that the Finance Team was working closely with HoBs to monitor expenditure in this area.

SMG reviewed and discussed the new DAS report provided this month by the Finance Office detailing general administrative expenditure and capital expenditure against approved limits provided by Procurement Office with effect from 1 September 2017.

SMG thanked Paula for the report and agreed that further work and significant data cleansing was required to make this new report more meaningful.

Action: Paula McClintock to consider including only DAS records generated from 1 April 2017 since there is no mechanism to record expenditure from previous periods against DAS reference numbers.

It was also acknowledged that the majority of the data cleansing would have to be done by contract managers.

Action: Finance Office to devise a more appropriate reporting mechanism for business requirements.

SMG thanked Paula and her team for their significant efforts in restructuring the accounts to align with the new organisational structure.

Paula McClintock left the meeting at 12.32pm.

Sinéad McDonnell joined the meeting at 12.33pm for agenda item 8.

8. HR Management Information

SMG noted that the Staff in Post (SiP) figure on 1 October 2017 was 327.8, which is a slight decrease on the 1 September 2017 figure.

Sinéad advised SMG that there were still two agency workers assigned to the Assembly and she also provided an update on the temporary and short-term redeployment of staff.

With regards to recruitment activity, Sinéad advised SMG that the permanent Clerical Officer (AG8) interviews had finished in early October and that the temporary Clerical Supervisor (AG7) competition had closed on 16 October.

Statistics on sickness absence for the period September 2016 to August 2017 were also provided and reflected an increase on the same period for 2015/16. For the period September 2016 – August 2017, the average days lost to sickness absence per FTE member of staff was 9.4. This represents an increase of 2.0 days when compared with the period from September 2015 – August 2016 which had an average days lost figure of 7.4 days. This increase is primarily attributable to long term absence, which has increased by 2.4 days.

Finally, Sinéad informed SMG that a lot of work had been undertaken by her team in developing and running the Mental Health Awareness Week Programme and she confirmed that a draft Mental Health Policy was out for consultation with Trade Union Side and Secretariat staff.

SMG thanked Sinéad and her team for their hard work during the recent Mental Health Week and agreed that it was an excellent initiative which had been a great success.

Sinéad McDonnell left the meeting at 12.54pm.

Alice McKelvey and Barbara Love joined the meeting at 12.54pm for agenda item 9.

9. Staff Survey 2017

Alice McKelvey presented the Internal Communications Group (ICG) report on the findings of the Staff Survey undertaken over the summer. Alice advised that Barbara Love would be analysing the report further by gender.

SMG noted the contents of the survey and the recommendations proposed by ICG.

Agreed: SMG agreed with ICG's request to publish the Staff Survey Report on AsslSt on 27 October 2017.

Action: Lesley Hogg to arrange a separate meeting with Directors to discuss ICG's recommendations and consider the actions to be taken going forward.

SMG thanked Alice and Barbara for a very comprehensive report and all the work undertaken by ICG.

Alice McKelvey and Barbara Love left the meeting at 1.58pm.

The meeting suspended at 2.pm and resumed at 2.34pm.

Alyn Hicks joined the meeting at 2.34pm for agenda item 10.

LEGAL, GOVERNANCE & RESEARCH SERVICES

10. The European Union (Withdrawal) Bill (as introduced in the House of Commons)

Alyn Hicks presented this paper, providing SMG with an overview of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill (as introduced).

SMG thanked Alyn for this very comprehensive paper.

Alyn also asked SMG to give consideration to whether it would be helpful if this information was cascaded to relevant Secretariat staff.

Agreed: SMG agreed that a paper should be produced for relevant staff and briefing sessions held.

Action: Legal Services to produce a paper for relevant staff and arrange briefing sessions.

Alyn Hicks left the meeting at 2.59pm.

Angela Kelly joined the meeting at 2.59pm for agenda item 11.

11. Resourcing of the Function of the Examiner of Statutory Rules (Resources for Brexit)

Angela Kelly presented this paper, seeking approval from SMG on a further staff complement for the office of the Examiner of Statutory Rules for a period of up to three years (to account for exit day plus any transition period).

Angela provided SMG with four options for consideration, with option 4, to increase the complement of the ESR by two full time equivalent (FTE) lawyers at AG4 and one FTE staff member at AG5 (legal researcher) for a period of up to three years (to account for exit day plus any transitions period) with administrative support (0.5 AG8), recommended as the preferred option.

SMG thanked Angela for her paper and following consideration agreed that a separate meeting be arranged to give further consideration to this request.

Action: Lesley Hogg to arrange a meeting with Directors to give further consideration to this request for additional staff.

Angela Kelly left the meeting at 3.23pm.

John Gibson joined the meeting at 3.23pm for agenda item 12.

12. Review of delegated Procurements

John Gibson provided SMG with an update on the review of delegated procurement activity and sought SMG's views on the results of the review.

Lesley Hogg left the meeting at 3.25pm

John advised SMG that twenty-one competitions were reviewed and provided them with a breakdown of how each competition complied against a series of questions, which addressed internal governance and

process requirements and more critical governance and best practice requirements.

Agreed: SMG agreed that this matter required further consideration and would be discussed in more detail at a separate meeting due to take place on 9 November 2017.

John Gibson left the meeting at 3.48pm.

Brian Devlin and Richard Scott joined the meeting at 3.48pm for agenda items 13 and 14.

PARLIAMENTARY SERVICES

13. Business Case – Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) Telephony Project

Brian Devlin presented a paper on the VoIP Telephony project which was accompanied by a video presentation. Brian stated that further work needed to be undertaken around costs and procurement.

Richard Scott provided more details on the risk and corporate governance issues, identifying 3 options for delivery which were to do the minimum, implementation of the VoIP telephone handset only or full telephony and selected UC elements implemented to replace the current analogue telephone system in Parliament Buildings.

SMG were content with the business case but agreed to give further consideration to the priority of the Business Case and when to refer it to the Commission.

14. Revised Business Case: Review of Cathode Ray Tube (CRT) televisions 2017 (incl Annunciator screens)

Brian Devlin presented a revised business case for the replacement of TVs in public areas only (60 in total) following a request from Commission Members at the last Commission meeting on 25 September 2017 when a business case to replace all 250 Cathode Ray Tube televisions was presented for consideration.

Agreed: SMG were content with the paper for presentation at the next Commission meeting.

Brian Devlin and Richard Scott left the meeting at 4.19pm.

The meeting was suspended at 4.19pm.

The meeting re-convened at 1.05pm on Monday, 13 November 2017 in Room 106, Parliament Buildings.

Robin Ramsey joined the meeting at the start.

15. Apologies

Apologies were received from Richard Stewart, who joined the meeting at 1.24pm.

16. Draft Commission Agenda

SMG discussed and agreed the agenda items for the Commission meeting on 22 November 2017.

Agenda to include the following items:

- Clerk/CE Key Report;
- Paper on a Memorandum of Understanding between the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission (NIAC) and Politics Plus;
- Paper on the Review of Cathode Ray Tube (CRT) Televisions 2017;
- Business Case - Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) Telephony Project;
- Paper on the 2017 Pay Claim;
- Good Relations Action Plan 2016-21: October 2017 six-monthly update; and
- Paper on the Decade of Centenary Events to be marked during the Mandate.

SMG proposed that following the meeting on 22 November the next Commission meeting would be held on 24 January 2018 subject to Members' availability, but that an earlier meeting would be arranged should the need arise.

17. Draft Clerk/Chief Executive's Report to the Commission

SMG discussed and agreed the items for inclusion in the Clerk/Chief Executive's Report for the November Commission meeting.

18. Decade of Centenary Events to be Marked During the Mandate

Robin Ramsey presented a draft paper on the historic anniversaries policy.

Richard Stewart joined the meeting at 1.24pm.

Following discussion SMG agreed that the paper should be considered at the Commission meeting on 22 November 2017.

Please note change in agenda running order, item 24 taken before item 19.

24. Approval for Consultation of Draft Corporate Strategy and Next Steps

Robin Ramsey presented this paper seeking approval from SMG to share the work done so far with a wider group of staff and agree the next steps going forward.

SMG referred to a separate Directors meeting which had been convened to discuss next steps in detail and noted that it was content with the next steps referenced in the paper, namely:

- that a copy of the draft Corporate Strategy and High Level Objectives be issued to senior staff in advance of a planned consultation session;
- that further work be undertaken to develop a Corporate Business Plan; and
- that consultation be undertaken with all staff prior to the strategy going to the Assembly Commission.

Robin confirmed that following consideration of feedback from staff a further draft of the Corporate Strategy and high level objectives would be brought back to SMG for final approval.

Robin Ramsey left the meeting at 1.45pm.

19. Proposed Memorandum of Understanding between the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission and Politics Plus

Gareth McGrath presented this paper seeking approval from SMG to recommend to the Assembly Commission that it enter into a new Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with 'Politics Plus' to replace the one previously agreed by the Commission in January 2015.

Gareth provided an overview of the role and work of Politics Plus since it was established in 2010 and proposed a further MoU between the Commission and Politics Plus, which would include:

- the award of grant-in-aid to Politics Plus of up to £75k in each of 2017/18, 2018/19 and 2019/20 financial years;
- the allocation of 1.3 Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) staff from the Commission to Politics Plus; and
- two offices in Parliament Buildings with associated facilities for the sole use of Politics Plus.

Following discussion, SMG approved the paper for submission to the November Commission meeting subject to the inclusion of reference in the paper to the consistency of the Commission's ambit in relation to its budget and the awarding of a grant in aid, and a number of other minor amendments.

Action: Gareth McGrath to update paper in line with amendments from SMG and present it to the Commission meeting on 22 November 2017.

Maeve Donnelly joined the meeting at 2.07pm for agenda items 20,21 and 22.

Please note change in agenda running order, item 21 taken before item 20.

21. Review of the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission Complaints Policy and Procedure

Maeve Donnelly presented this paper, seeking SMG's approval on the recommendation to implement new internal procedures to support the Complaints Policy.

Maeve advised SMG that the Complaints Policy and Procedure was last revised on 16 September 2016 after taking advice from the Northern Ireland Public Service Ombudsman (NIPSO), the Assembly's Information Standards Officer and its Equality Manager.

Maeve informed SMG that five complaints had been dealt with under this revised policy, however the process of dealing with said complaints had identified a number of shortcomings within the internal procedures.

SMG noted that one of the complaints came from an MLA and that MLAs generally wrote directly to the Assembly Commission with any issues.

Maeve highlighted the shortcomings in internal procedures that had been noted since implementation of the revised policy and recommended a number of changes.

Whilst noting that many of the issues highlighted were internal implementation issues and not a matter for SMG, nevertheless SMG considered the recommendations as set out in the paper and agreed the following:

Agreed: SMG agreed that there should be a designated Complaints Officer with contingency arrangements in place to provide cover when required.

Agreed: SMG agreed that the handling of complaints should remain with a dedicated member of staff within the Communications Office.

Action: Maeve Donnelly to identify a member of staff within the Communications Office to handle complaints. Training to be provided if necessary.

Agreed: SMG agreed that a new contact email and mail address be established specifically for complaints.

Action: Maeve Donnelly to arrange for a new contact email and mail address to be established and communicated.

Lesley Hogg advised SMG that Maria Bannon had highlighted that Section 75 complaints were quite specific and should follow a set procedure, and she had concerns that this may not have been addressed fully in the current Complaints Policy and would be better dealt with under the established Section 75 Complaints Procedure. Maria had suggested that it was acceptable for external complainants to go to the Communications Office as a first point of contact and that the Communications Office would then refer the matter to the Equality Unit if it came under Section 75.

Agreed: SMG agreed that the Complaints Policy should be amended to ensure that Section 75 Equality Scheme Complaints are investigated and reported by the Equality Manager rather than the Complaints Officer.

Action: Maria Bannon to meet with Maeve Donnelly to discuss the handling of Section 75 complaints and update the Complaints Policy accordingly.

Agreed: SMG agreed that email notification similar to that used by the FoI Unit when FoI requests are received be adopted for complaints. SMG also agreed that an update on live complaints be included in the Director of Parliamentary Services monthly directorate update submitted to SMG.

Action: Maeve Donnelly to speak to the Information Standards Unit to discuss SMG notification of FoI requests and implement a similar notification and update system for complaints. Maeve Donnelly to provide a monthly complaints update for any live complaints to the Director of Parliamentary Services for inclusion in his directorate update report to SMG.

Agreed: SMG agreed that the Complaints policy be amended to provide the Assembly Commission with an annual summary report detailing the numbers and categories of complaints received in the previous year. The report will include any improvements made to the policy or procedures.

SMG also agreed that the references in the Policy to “the Assembly” should be amended to the “Assembly Commission” which is named in Schedule 3 of the Public Services Ombudsman Act (NI) 2016.

Action: Maeve Donnelly to update the Complaints Policy to reflect the changes agreed by SMG.

20. Northern Ireland Assembly Complaints Policy Activity Report September 2016 – September 2017

SMG noted the complaints received during the period September 2016 to September 2017.

SMG reviewed the Complaints Policy Report 2017 and agreed that the summary document should be published following presentation to the Assembly Commission subject to any lessons learned and actions taken being included in the report.

Action: Maeve Donnelly to liaise with colleagues and add a paragraph before Section 3 in the Activity Report on lessons learned in relation to complaints received.

Action: Updated Complaints Policy Activity Report to be presented to the Commission at its January meeting and then published on the Assembly's website.

22. Internal Communications Strategy – Update on Heads of Business (HoBs) Consultation

Maeve provided SMG with an update on feedback received from HoBs in relation to the draft Internal Communications Strategy.

Based on the feedback received from HoBs, the recent staff survey and the current political situation, SMG agreed to pause work on the current draft Internal Communications Strategy and develop an Interim Communications Plan to reflect current circumstances and address findings from the 2017 Staff Survey.

Action: SMG agreed to consider how that should be taken forward at its meeting regarding the Staff Survey.

Maeve Donnelly left the meeting at 3.40pm.

Shauna Mageean joined the meeting at 3.40pm for agenda item 23.

23. Update on the Secretariat EU Exit Working Group

Shauna Mageean provided SMG with an update on the work of the Secretariat EU Working Group and the content of the Brexit Response Plan.

SMG noted the work carried out by the group to date and thanked them for their efforts. SMG also congratulated Shauna on her new monthly blog on AsslSt, which they agreed was excellent and

suggested that it be included in the weekly AsslSt update that is issued.

Action: Shauna Mageean to liaise with Maeve Donnelly to ensure that a short article highlighting the blog is posted on AsslSt.

Shauna Mageean left the meeting at 3.56pm.

DIRECTORATE UPDATES

25. Directors' Updates

SMG noted the Directorate updates.

Tara Caul re-iterated the importance of committing resources to the implementation of GDPR.

Richard Stewart advised SMG that the Assembly Commission had been awarded Gold Standard in the Business in the Community's Environmental Benchmarking Survey. SMG congratulated the Environmental Services Manager on the achievement of such a prestigious award.

OTHER ITEMS

26. Items Cleared by correspondence

Corporate Risk Register

27. AOB

There was no other business.

28. Date of Next Meeting

The date of the next meeting is to be confirmed.

The meeting ended at 3.58pm.