

**SECRETARIAT MANAGEMENT GROUP (SMG)
FRIDAY, 3 JULY 2020 at 9.30AM
(VIRTUAL MEETING VIA MICROSOFT TEAMS)**

APPROVED

Present: Lesley Hogg
Tara Caul
Gareth McGrath
Richard Stewart

In Attendance: Janet Hughes
Robin Ramsey
Aine Kerr
Sinéad McDonnell
Maria Bannon
Sebastien Mingout
Tracey Wilson
Paul Gill
Shauna Mageean

Opening/Review

The meeting commenced at 9.35am.

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 and unrestricted papers from the meeting on 29 May 2020 had been published on 2 July 2020.

4. SMG Action Points

The outstanding action points were reviewed and progress was noted.

Robin Ramsey, Adviser to the Speaker/Head of Corporate Support, joined the meeting at 9.48am for agenda items 5 and 6.

5. Political Update

SMG noted the ongoing work of the COVID-19 Response Group and that in light of lockdown easements, consideration would now be given to more staff returning to work in the building. It was agreed that a meeting would be set up over the summer to discuss the ongoing risk assessment and the planning process which would be required to deal with more staff potentially returning to the building and more normal business being undertaken.

Action: Clerk/Chief Executive's Office to arrange a meeting with Directors to discuss the COVID-19 ongoing risk assessment and the planning process which would be required to deal with more staff potentially returning to the building and more normal business being undertaken.

SMG also noted that the Business Committee would be meeting the following week to review summer recess dates and that it had agreed that normal plenary business and questions would resume in September 2020.

SMG also noted the staffing implications of any postponement of summer recess.

CORPORATE SUPPORT

6. Draft Assembly Commission Agenda

Robin Ramsey informed SMG that the intention was to schedule the next Assembly Commission meeting for later in the month.

SMG reviewed the draft agenda for the next meeting.

Proposed items for the meeting included:

- Clerk/Chief Executive's Report (to include an update on COVID 19 measures)
- Annual Equality Progress Report to the Equality Commission 2019-2020
- Lighting of Parliament Buildings
- Proposed Litigation
- Members Expenses Issues
- Amendments to Independent Financial Review Panel (IFRP) Determination
- Secretariat Audit and Risk Committee (SARC) Annual Report 2019-2020

Corporate Support Unit Directorate Update

Robin updated SMG on the work within the Corporate Support Unit. He advised that the Speaker's Office had received a number of requests in relation to hosting events and courtesy calls from September onwards.

He also advised that the recent staff summer corporate briefing and charity fundraising event, which had been done on a virtual basis this year due to the COVID-19 pandemic, had been very successful with an impressive £1,250 being raised for the Northern Ireland Children's Hospice. Robin and SMG thanked the staff involved in organising both events and all staff for their tremendous generosity.

Robin Ramsey left the meeting at 10.11am.

CORPORATE SERVICES

7. Management Accounts

Richard Stewart, Director of Corporate Services, presented the Management Accounts for May 2020.

He outlined the forecast for income and expenditure for 2020/21 and provided an early indication of the anticipated underspends against the opening budget as approved by the Audit Committee.

The current forecast outturn position and proposed surrenders / bids for each category of expenditure were also noted.

Richard informed SMG that the forecast for Members' costs would be reviewed following conclusion of the Assembly Commission's discussions on Members' Expenses and Allowances.

On reviewing the Capital Plan, Gareth McGrath, Director of Parliamentary Services, noted that the recent expenditure in relation to the Starleaf video conferencing system did not appear to be recorded. Richard stated that it was the responsibility of Heads of Business (HoBs) to ensure that all approved capital expenditure was recorded on the Capital Plan, and asked Directors to remind their staff of the importance of reviewing and updating the Capital Plan regularly.

Action: Directors to remind their staff of the importance of reviewing and updating the Capital Plan regularly.

The Decision Authorisation System (DAS) Report was reviewed and Richard stated that expenditure should be managed in such a way that it did not exceed previously approved limits and if it was likely that the limits would be exceeded, then approval needed to be sought from SMG. It was agreed that the Head of Finance would liaise with Heads of Business on this issue.

Action: Head of Finance to liaise with HoBs and inform them that expenditure should not be incurred above the level approved by SMG and recorded on DAS.

Lesley stated that it was imperative for those business cases and contracts coming to an end, that new procurements and re-tendering exercises were considered sufficiently in advance.

Aine Kerr, Senior HR Manager, joined the meeting at 10.29am for agenda item 8.

8. HR Management Information

Aine Kerr presented the monthly HR Management Information.

SMG noted that the Staff in Post (SiP) figure on 1 June 2020 (including agency and inward seconded staff) was 326 Full Time Equivalents (FTE) against an agreed staff complement (including complement plus) of 375.3 FTE.

Temporary promotions/deputising arrangements currently in place were noted, as well as agency worker assignments.

Aine informed SMG of the updated position in relation to the Recruitment Schedule and recent recruitment activity.

SMG was asked to approve the inclusion of an Assistant Librarian post (AG7) in the Recruitment Schedule. Aine confirmed that this post was within the current complement for the business area. SMG was content to approve this request and it was agreed that the vacancy would be added to the non-priority category of the Recruitment Schedule.

Tara sought clarification regarding finder's fees charged by agencies and Aine agreed to circulate these.

Action: Aine to circulate finder's fees charged by agencies to SMG for information.

It was noted that the Human Resources Office had met with the Clerk/Chief Executive and Directors on 19 June, to review the recruitment schedule in detail and agree the priority of competitions. It was agreed that there would be two recruitment streams and that competitions would be managed in line with the priorities.

Aine highlighted the sickness absence information and it was noted that for the period June 2019 to May 2020, the average days lost to sickness absence per FTE member of staff was 10.3, which was slightly higher than for the same period last year.

SMG asked for an update in relation to Occupational Health Service (OHS) referrals, as discussed at the SMG meeting on 30 April 2020. Aine confirmed that OHS was still not carrying out any face to face

referrals and only very limited paper based ones. She advised that in order to provide some form of assistance to staff on long term sick absence, HR had been in contact with Welfare and asked that they made contact with those staff members.

SMG was very concerned that the Assembly Commission was still unable to make OHS referrals and undertook to seek an update from Sinéad McDonnell, Head of HR, when she joined the meeting for the next agenda item, on the possibility of using an alternative service provider for an interim period.

Aine Kerr left the meeting at 10:51am.

Sinéad McDonnell, Head of HR, joined the meeting at 10:51am for agenda item 9.

9. Annual Review of Learning and Development Activities and Spend in 2019-2020

Before considering the paper on Learning and Development activities, SMG asked Sinéad for an update on referrals to OHS and the possibility of using an alternative provider in the interim period, as discussed at the SMG meeting on 30 April 2020.

Sinéad advised SMG that she had made enquiries in relation to the implications, if any, of using a separate provider for an interim period. She confirmed that the use of an alternative provider was possible, provided OHS was continued to be used for ill health retirement and injury on duty cases. Sinéad also confirmed that she was awaiting a response from OHS to a letter issued to them, requesting details of costing arrangements for individual cases referred to them.

Sinéad also confirmed that she had contacted the Welsh Parliament and the Scottish Parliament and obtained details of their providers.

SMG was very keen for an alternative service provider to be identified and for new arrangements to be put in place as a matter of urgency for a 12-month period and suggested that Sinéad consider local providers. Sinéad confirmed that she would arrange for this matter to be progressed.

Action: Sinéad to source an alternative local OHS service provider as a matter of urgency for 12 months.

SMG noted the Learning and Development activities undertaken by Assembly Commission staff during the period 1 April 2019 to 31 March 2020 and the associated spend.

Sinéad informed SMG that on average there were 1.86 days training per staff member during 2019/20. It was noted that this figure was lower than the 2018/19 figure, mainly due to staff being out on temporary re-

deployments, the subsequent work pressures on staff following resumption of normal Assembly business in January and more recently the COVID-19 pandemic.

Sinéad advised SMG that 8 out of the 10 'People Manager Programmes' had been delivered and that consideration was being given to delivering the remaining modules virtually.

Tara asked whether it would be possible to offer the Practical Project Management Course to staff again as there was a staff member who required the training in the DLGRS, in order to lead a project team which was ready to commence work.

Lesley asked that staff be made aware of the fact that the new Training Room was available for booking. Sinéad confirmed that a communication was being drafted and would issue to staff shortly.

Action: Sinéad to draft a communication to staff to inform them that the new Training Room is available for booking.

Lesley also asked that staff be made aware of the availability of the Clever Touch Screens both in the new Training Room and in Room 375. She also added that training and guidance on the use of the Clever Touch Screens was to be provided to staff. Sinéad advised that development of the guidance was already in progress.

Action: Sinéad to arrange training and guidance for staff on the Clever Touch Screens.

SMG acknowledged the volume of work undertaken by the HR Learning and Development Team in the last reporting year and asked Sinéad to pass on their thanks to the team for all their efforts.

Sinéad McDonnell left the meeting at 11:17am.

Comfort break until 11:30am.

Maria Bannon, Equality and Good Relations Manager, joined the meeting at 11:30am for agenda item 10.

10. Annual Equality Progress Report to the Equality Commission 2019-2020

Maria Bannon presented the 2019- 2020 Annual Progress Report on Statutory Equality and Good Relations Duties.

SMG reviewed the report and was content, subject to a few minor amendments, for it to be presented to the Assembly Commission at its next meeting, prior to being forwarded to the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland (ECNI).

Action: Gareth McGrath to seek a revised update from the Education Service in relation to one of their actions within the Audit of Inequalities Action Plan 2016-2021 appended to the Equality Progress Report.

Lesley raised concerns about SMG only having sight of the Audit of Inequalities Action Plan and the Disability Action Plan annually, stating that if they were only seen at end of year there was no opportunity to take corrective action if things were not on track.

Action: Directors to remind HoBs that action updates are to be cleared by Directors, prior to submission to the Equality Unit.

In light of this, SMG agreed that the Audit of Inequalities Action Plan and Disability Action Plan should be reviewed by SMG on a six- monthly basis, in May and October.

Action: Richard Stewart to present the Annual Equality Progress Report 2019-2020 to the Equality Commission to the Assembly Commission at its next meeting.

Richard highlighted again the staffing issues within the Equality Unit and recorded the large volume of work being carried out by Maria and Roisin.

SMG agreed to discuss the staffing issues within the Equality Unit following the meeting.

In relation to the Audit of Inequalities, Tara sought clarification of the work to be commissioned from RaISe. She re-iterated her understanding that following the previous discussion regarding this at the SMG meeting on 24 September 2019, and the subsequent meeting of the Clerk/Chief Executive and Directors with Maria and Barbara Love, that the Audit of Inequalities was to be carried out by the Equality Unit, rather than RaISe, as this was where the expertise lay. Lesley confirmed that this was also her understanding. It was agreed that the wording of the Report would be amended to reflect this and other amendments.

Action: Maria to amend the wording of the Audit of Inequalities Report to reflect that it was being carried out by the Equality Unit.

Maria Bannon left the meeting at 12:10pm.

Sebastien Mingout, Support Services Manager, joined the meeting at 12:13pm for agenda item 11.

11. Support Services Contract Cost

Sebastien Mingout presented this paper outlining the predicted cost impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Support Services Contract.

Following detailed consideration of a number of scenarios illustrating the potential evolving impact of the pandemic on the contract, SMG agreed that the additional budget bid estimated at the end of May, which informed the June Monitoring Round, was still the most reflective of the potential contract costs at the current time, but that this should be reviewed again in September.

Lesley queried whether Sodexo had considered furloughing any of their staff. Sebastien confirmed that none of the staff had been furloughed.

Richard noted that for April and May, labour costs had totalled £60k and that it would not have been possible for all Sodexo staff to be furloughed given the need to continue to provide catering services within Parliament Buildings. Given that 80% of salaries would have been paid by the government in any case, Richard noted that the maximum additional cost to the public purse of retaining Sodexo employees for this period was £12k.

Action: Sebastien to continue to monitor the cost impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Support Services Contract and prepare a further paper for consideration by SMG at its September meeting.

Sebastien Mingout left the meeting at 1.09pm.

LEGAL GOVERNANCE AND RESEARCH SERVICES

12. Quarterly Review of Corporate Risk Register

It was noted that the Clerk/Chief Executive and Directors had met on 18 June 2020 and discussed the contents of the Corporate Risk Register in detail.

A revised version of the Register taking account of comments from the recent meeting was presented to SMG for approval. SMG approved the contents of the Corporate Risk Register, which would be reviewed by SMG again in September 2020 and by SARC at its meeting on 8 July 2020.

13. Review of Information Management Systems

It was noted that a draft version of this paper, outlining the Assembly Commission's current Records Management process and options for alternative methods of managing corporate information, was discussed in detail by the Clerk/Chief Executive, Directors and the Information Standards and Data Protection Officer, at a meeting on 3 June 2020.

SMG noted that the updated version of the paper in the pack, took account of the comments from the June meeting.

SMG therefore noted the paper and approved the establishment of a Project Board and Project Team to move the project forward.

Meeting suspended until 1:13pm until 1:47pm.

PARLIAMENTARY SERVICES

Tracey Wilson, Information Officer, joined the meeting at 1:47pm for agenda item 14,

14. Replacement Broadcast Router Matrix

Gareth presented the business case for the replacement broadcast router matrix.

Following consideration, SMG approved the business case subject to clarification of the costs of the associated building works as these seemed excessive for the work outlined.

Action: Tracey Wilson to request a detailed breakdown of the costs of associated building works from Building Services and forward to the Clerk/Chief Executive and Directors.

Richard highlighted concerns about the deliverability of the project in the timeframe and asked that Gareth ensure that any other planned broadcasting-related project was highlighted early, especially with Building Services.

Lesley emphasised the importance of having life cycle equipment maintenance and replacement plans and requested that they be produced for Information System (IS), Building Services and Broadcasting.

Action: Gareth to arrange for life cycle equipment maintenance and replacement plans to be produced for IS and Broadcasting.

Action: Richard to arrange for a life cycle equipment maintenance and replacement plan to be produced for Buildings Services.

Tracey Wilson left the meeting at 2:13pm.

Paul Gill, Clerk Assistant, and Shauna Mageean, EU Affairs Manager, joined the meeting at 2:14pm for agenda item 15.

15. EU Exit – Assembly Business and Capacity Issues

Paul Gill outlined the position in respect of forthcoming EU exit business for the Assembly and the capacity issues that this raised.

Paul raised concerns in relation to the staffing resources available to manage the additional work anticipated.

SMG noted the paper and acknowledged the significant amount of work anticipated before the end of the transition period of 31 December 2020 and beyond. It was agreed that Gareth and Paul, in conjunction with Angela Kelly, Examiner of Statutory Rules, would give detailed consideration to the options for managing the additional work anticipated and prepare a paper for discussion at a meeting of the Clerk/Chief Executive and Directors.

Following this meeting, a further paper is to be prepared and presented at the next SMG meeting to address the staff capacity issues associated with EU Exit scrutiny.

Action: Further paper to be prepared by Paul in conjunction with Angela Kelly, to address the staff capacity issues associated with EU Exit scrutiny and presented at a future SMG meeting.

Paul Gill and Shauna Mageean left the meeting at 2:50pm.

OTHER ITEMS

16. Directorate Updates

SMG noted the Directorate updates.

Corporate Services

Building Services

Richard advised that there had been renewed interest in the Cycle to Work Scheme, as some members of staff were choosing to avoid public transport and cycle into work in light of COVID-19. He stated that some staff had suggested that the current threshold of £1,000 be reviewed to allow them to purchase an electric bike. Lesley enquired whether there was any HMRC financial threshold for Cycle to Work Schemes.

Action: Richard to check if there is any financial threshold for the Cycle to Work Scheme with HMRC and advise the Clerk/Chief Executive and other Directors.

It was noted that the next ISO14001 audit would be taking place on 15 August and depending on the restrictions in place at the time, that it may be a 'virtual' 3-day audit.

Finance Office

Richard asked SMG to note that the Assembly's recent decision to confer a function on the Assembly Commission to determine the allowances payable to Members, was likely to impact the workload of the Pay Team if any changes were made to the current arrangement under the Determination issued by the IFRP in 2016.

Legal, Governance and Research Services

Internal Audit

Tara Caul, Director of Legal Governance and Research Services, advised that the following Internal Audit Reports had issued in June:

- Review of Members Expenses 2019/20 (Interim Testing);
- Review of Broadcasting Infrastructure; and
- Review of the Administration of the Assembly Members Pension Scheme.

It was noted that the draft report on the Administration of Members' Expenses had been issued to management. It was also noted that the Review of the Equality and Good Relations Unit was outstanding and that the final report would be issued on receipt of the Management response.

Action Richard to circulate a copy of the draft report on the Review of the Equality and Good Relations Unit to the Clerk/Chief Executive and other Directors with a draft management response for consideration and approval.

Tara also advised that some new reviews were being planned and recommended that if business areas received notification that they were being audited in the autumn, that HoBs carry out some preparatory work over the summer.

Procurement Office

Tara provided details of the projects currently being worked on and asked Directors to ensure that if they were aware of projects which were not on the list, they should bring these to John Gibson's attention as early engagement with the Procurement Office was key to successful outcomes.

Action: Directors to advise John Gibson of any projects not on the Procurement list as soon as possible.

Parliamentary Services

Clerking

Gareth advised that the Non-Executive Bills Team was currently supporting the development of 21 Private Members' Bills, as well as an Assembly Commission Bill.

It was also noted that the Starleaf video conferencing system was now available for three committees to use simultaneously. Gareth stated that this was a welcome development which facilitated improved remote participation in committee meetings.

17. Items cleared by correspondence

Approved - Use of Starleaf video conferencing system to support Assembly committee meetings.

18. AOB

There was no other business.

19. Date of next meeting

Next meeting to take place during the latter part of week commencing 27 July 2020.

20. Proposals for Agenda Items for Next Meeting

- Review of Financial Reporting Processes
- Further Insurance Policy Update
- Sustainability Report
- Methodology for progressing a peer review of the Northern Ireland Assembly against the benchmarks set out in the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association's (CPA) 'Recommended Benchmarks for Democratic Legislatures'
- Business Case for Repairs and Maintenance
- Capacity issues associated with EU Exit Scrutiny
- COVID-19 Risk Assessment/Planning for Return

The meeting ended at 3.07pm.