

SECRETARIAT MANAGEMENT GROUP (SMG)

THURSDAY, 27 MAY 2021 at 9.30 AM
(VIRTUAL MEETING VIA MICROSOFT TEAMS)

APPROVED

Present: Lesley Hogg
Tara Caul
Gareth McGrath
Richard Stewart

In Attendance: Janet Hughes
Robin Ramsey
Maria Bannon
Thomas Proctor
Sinéad McDonnell
Christine Watts
Karen Martin
Susie Brown
Liz Beaton
Simon Burrowes

Opening/Review

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 and unrestricted papers from the meeting on 30 April 2021 were published on 26 May 2021.

4. SMG Action Points

The outstanding action points were reviewed and progress was noted.

Lesley Hogg referred to an outstanding action from the SMG meeting on 23 October 2020, in relation to the preparation of a paper on the methodology for transferring assets and liabilities of Politics Plus to the Assembly Commission. Gareth McGrath provided an explanation as to the reason for the delay in completing this action, however, in the interim Lesley asked to be provided with a written update on the approach being taken.

Action: Gareth to provide SMG with a written update on the approach being taken in relation to the transferring of assets and liabilities of Politics Plus to the Assembly Commission.

Robin Ramsey, Adviser to the Speaker/Head of Corporate Support, joined the meeting at 9.45 am for agenda items 5, 6 and 7.

5. Political Update

SMG discussed a number of matters impacting on the business of the Assembly.

Lesley noted that summer recess dates had been agreed by the Business Committee and communicated to MLAs and staff.

CORPORATE SUPPORT

6. Draft Assembly Commission Agenda

Robin Ramsey noted that the next Assembly Commission meeting had been scheduled for 30 June 2021.

Proposed items for the meeting included:

- Clerk/Chief Executive's Report
- Assembly Commission Annual Plan 2020-21 End of Year Performance Report
- Assembly Commission Annual Plan 2021-22
- Potential Rescheduling of the Assembly Members (Remuneration Board) Bill
- Maternity, Paternity and Adoption Provisions for MLAs' Constituency Offices
- Review of the Display of Artefacts in Parliament Buildings
- Outline Business Case – Systems Review Project
- Fol Costings
- Support Services Contract
- Report on the 2021 Members' Survey and Action Plan
- Draft Member Induction and Development Framework
- Five-year Review on the Application of the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission's Equality Scheme 2016-21
- Secretariat Audit and Risk Committee Annual Report 2020-21

A potential plenary debate in relation to a motion from the Committee on Procedures on simultaneous interpretation was discussed and it was agreed that Gareth would prepare a briefing paper for the Assembly Commission.

Action: Gareth to prepare a briefing paper for the Assembly Commission, in advance of a potential plenary debate in relation to a motion from the Committee on Procedures on simultaneous interpretation.

Corporate Support Unit Update

Robin advised SMG that he was in the process of convening a working group to consider options for a Clerk/Chief Executive staff briefing event, to be held before the start of the summer recess and would bring forward proposals. SMG agreed that in light of the Coronavirus pandemic and social distancing regulations, that as with last year, this would be a virtual event.

7. Assembly Commission Annual Plan 2020-21 End of Year Performance Report

Robin presented a draft Assembly Commission paper on the Annual Plan 2020-21 End of Year Performance Report.

Following consideration, SMG approved the paper for presentation to the Assembly Commission at its next meeting.

Robin recorded his thanks to Julie Devlin for her assistance with the preparation of the report.

Robin advised that work was progressing on the Annual Plan for 2021-22 which would be presented to SMG and the Assembly Commission at their meetings on 24 and 30 June 2021 respectively. It was agreed that a separate meeting would be arranged with the Clerk/Chief Executive, Directors and the Head of Corporate Support, to discuss the 2021-22 Annual Plan in detail prior to presentation at the June SMG meeting.

Action: Clerk/Chief Executive's Office to arrange a meeting with Directors and Head of Corporate Support, to discuss the Assembly Commission Annual Plan for 2021-22.

Robin Ramsey left the meeting at 10.16 am.

CORPORATE SERVICES

Maria Bannon, Equality and Good Relations Manager, joined the meeting at 10.16 am for agenda items 8, 9, 10, 11 and 12.

8. Draft Five-year Review Report on the Application of the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission's Equality Scheme 2016-21

SMG noted that progress made on the application and implementation of equality scheme commitments, as outlined in the draft Review Report had been considered in detail at a separate meeting with the Clerk/Chief Executive, Directors and Maria Bannon on 12 May 2021.

SMG approved the draft Review Report for presentation to the Assembly Commission at its next meeting, subject to some minor amendments.

It was noted that the Review Report would be submitted to the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland and published on the Assembly website, following presentation at the next Assembly Commission meeting.

SMG thanked Maria for the work done in preparing the Review Report.

Action: Maria to update the report as requested by SMG and prepare a paper for presentation to the Assembly Commission at its next meeting.

9. Development of a Good Relations Action Plan 2021-26

SMG noted that the key principles and processes in relation to the development of a Good Relations Action Plan for 2021-26 had been considered in detail at a separate meeting with the Clerk/Chief Executive, Directors and Maria on 23 April 2021.

SMG approved the development of the Good Relations Action Plan 2021-26, in line with the key principles and processes outlined in the paper, subject to some minor amendments.

Action: Maria to update the Good Relations Action Plan 2021-26 as requested by SMG.

10. Section 75 Monitoring Survey for Secretariat Staff

SMG noted that a staff survey for the purposes of monitoring Section 75 categories had been considered in detail at a separate meeting with the Clerk/Chief Executive, Directors and Maria on 14 April 2021.

SMG approved the survey, subject to some minor amendments and also agreed to give further consideration to the frequency of future surveys.

Action: Maria to update the survey as requested by SMG and circulate to staff.

11. Public Consultation on the Draft Transgender Policy

SMG noted that the draft Transgender Policy had been considered in detail at a separate meeting with the Clerk/Chief Executive, Directors and Maria on 14 April 2021.

SMG approved the draft Policy for consultation with staff and a number of external consultees, subject to some minor amendments.

Action: Maria to update the Policy as requested by SMG and commence the consultation exercise.

Thomas Proctor, Researcher, joined the meeting at 11.03 am for agenda item 12.

12. Review of Visitor Survey

Maria presented a revised Parliament Buildings visitor survey, along with proposals for increased distribution and analysis.

SMG provided a number of comments on both the proposed survey and methods of distribution and requested that further consideration be given to streamlining the questions within the survey and the options for implementation.

It was agreed that a further paper incorporating SMG comments would be prepared and presented at an SMG meeting later in the year.

Action: Maria to revise the paper in line with SMG comments and present at an SMG meeting later in the year.

Maria Bannon and Thomas Proctor left the meeting at 11.27 am.

13. Equality and Good Relations Survey: Identified Themes and Issues

Paper deferred to the next meeting.

14. Draft Disability Action Plan 2021-26: Public Consultation

Paper deferred to the next meeting.

15. Staff Complement Change – Equality and Good Relations Unit

Richard Stewart sought SMG approval for an additional temporary AG6 post within the Equality and Good Relations Unit, on a Complement Plus basis until 31 March 2022, to assist with a number of additional activities

over and above the normal workload to be delivered by the Unit during 2021-22.

SMG acknowledged the volume of work to be undertaken by the Unit and approved the change to the Complement Plus figure, by one AG6 for the period up to 31 March 2022, but suggested that going forward, consideration should be given to staggering the end dates of Equality and Good Relations related action plans, to avoid the current situation, whereby a number of plans were expiring at the same time.

16. Abridged Management Accounts – April 2021

Richard stated that due to a variety of factors in the Finance Office, an abridged version of the management accounts was being presented to SMG, which detailed the actual expenditure incurred in April 2021 compared with the budget profile for the month.

Richard highlighted that there had been significant underspends in both Secretariat salaries and constituency costs in the first month of the year, which he advised was due to the fact that full provision for all the anticipated staffing resources for the year was included in the budget and, similarly, provision had been made for the full costs that could arise from the implementation of the Assembly Members (Salaries and Expenses) (Amendment) Determination (Northern Ireland) 2020.

It was noted that both these categories of expenditure would require careful monitoring throughout 2021-22, particularly in light of the implications of ongoing Coronavirus restrictions.

17. Detailed Business Case – Systems Review Project

Richard noted that the Clerk/Chief Executive, Directors and Karen Steele, Project Manager, had discussed the Systems Review Project business case in detail at a meeting on 26 May 2021.

Richard confirmed that Karen was in the process of incorporating comments from the recent meeting into the business case, which he stated would then be re-circulated to SMG via correspondence for final approval, prior to being presented to the Assembly Commission at its next meeting.

SMG recorded their thanks to Karen for the excellent work done to get the project to this stage.

Action: Richard to issue an updated business case to SMG for final approval via correspondence.

Action: Richard to prepare a paper for presentation to the Assembly Commission at its next meeting.

The meeting suspended at 11.45 am until 1.03 pm.

Sinéad McDonnell, Head of HR, joined the meeting at 1.03 pm for agenda item 18.

18. Annual Review of Learning and Development Activities and Spend 2020-21

Sinéad McDonnell presented the annual Review of Learning and Development Activities and spend for 2020-21.

Sinéad noted that it had been a difficult and challenging year as a result of the COVID-19 Pandemic and that the HR Learning and Development Team had had to adapt the methods and type of training delivered. It was noted, however, that in spite of the restrictions, a large number of learning and development activities had been undertaken by staff.

Sinéad outlined the key learning and development activities that had taken place throughout the year. She advised SMG that on average there were 1.51 learning days per member of staff, which she noted was very positive considering the impact of the Coronavirus restrictions on working practices over the last year.

SMG noted the annual spend against the Corporate Learning and Development budget set for 2020/21.

Lesley commented on the use of course evaluation and feedback and stated that it would be useful to see how comments had been taken on board and asked that this be included in future Learning and Development reports.

It was also agreed that a summary of the learning and development activities undertaken during 2020/21 should be issued to staff.

Action: Sinéad to arrange for a summary of the learning and development activities undertaken during 2020/21 to be issued to staff.

SMG thanked Sinéad and the Learning and Development Team for all their efforts in delivering a wide range of training in what had been a very difficult year.

Sinéad McDonnell left the meeting at 1.21 pm.

Christine Watts, Environment Services Manager, joined the meeting at 1.21 pm for agenda item 19.

19. Annual Environmental Management Review

Christine Watts presented the annual Environmental Management Review for 2020-21.

SMG noted the progress made on the Continuous Improvement Action Plan 2020-21.

Christine provided SMG with an update on the achievement to date against the five key targets to be met by 2022, in relation to reductions in electricity, gas and paper consumption, the amount of waste sent to landfill and improvement in the Northern Ireland Assembly's Corporate Social Responsibility performance. Lesley noted that water usage was monitored but not recorded as a target as it was stated that it could not be externally verified. She said that external verification for targets was not a prerequisite and asked that it be included.

Christine presented initiatives for the Continuous Improvement Action Plan 2021-22.

Richard Stewart left the meeting at 1.58 pm.

Following detailed discussion of the proposed initiatives for the 2021-21 Action Plan and the Management Review, SMG proposed some amendments.

Action: Christine to update the Management Review, Continuous Improvement Action Plan 2021-22 and the environmental objective and targets for 2022, as requested by SMG and re-circulate to SMG via correspondence for final approval.

Christine Watts left the meeting at 2.10 pm.

Karen Martin, Deputy Head of HR, joined the meeting at 2.10 pm for agenda item 20.

20. HR Management Information

Karen Martin presented the monthly HR Management Information as at 1 May 2021.

SMG noted that the Staff in Post (SiP) figure as at 1 May 2021 (including agency and inward seconded staff) was 348.8 Full Time Equivalents (FTE) against an agreed staff complement (including complement plus) of 390.5 FTE.

SMG noted the temporary promotions/deputising arrangements currently in place.

On reviewing the current agency worker assignments, Tara Caul asked that amendments be made to the end dates recorded for two agency

worker assignments within the office of the Examiner of Statutory Rules (ESR).

Action: Karen to update the end dates recorded for two agency worker assignments within the office of the ESR.

Richard Stewart re-joined the meeting at 2.16 pm.

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

In relation to the competition for a Senior Software Developer (AG7), it was noted that no applications had proceeded to interview and it was agreed that before advertising the post again, the recruitment panel should review the post and address any issues with filling it.

Action: Before advertising the post again, the recruitment panel for the post of Senior Software Developer (AG7) to review the post and address any issues with filling it.

Sickness absence information was provided and it was noted that for the period May 2020 to April 2021, the average days lost to sickness absence per FTE member of staff was 5.5 compared with an average of 10.6 days during the period May 2019 to April 2020.

SMG reviewed the annual equality information as at 1 April 2021 and noted the case management activity since 1 May 2020.

Karen Martin left the meeting at 2.34 pm.

PARLIAMENTARY SERVICES

Susie Brown, Head of Communications, and Liz Beaton, Internal Communications Officer, joined the meeting at 2.35 pm for agenda item 21.

21. Update on the Implementation of the Draft Internal Communications Strategy

Susie Brown updated SMG on the progress made in relation to the implementation of the draft Internal Communications Strategy.

Susie advised that consultation on the draft Internal Communications Strategy was being progressed in two stages and that stage one, which involved engagement with the Internal Communications Group and Trade Union Side had completed. It was noted that stage two which was consultation with staff would take place in June 2021.

Susie also provided a progress update on the implementation of each of the six objectives within the draft Internal Communications Strategy.

Tara Caul, in her role as Chair of the Strategic Steering Group on Development, Expertise and Well-being of Our People, asked that Susie keep her updated on any ideas emerging from the consultation in relation to opportunities to acknowledge the achievements of staff.

Lesley noted that the draft Internal Communications Strategy stated that stage one of the consultation would inform stage two and asked how the findings from stage one were being taken into account in stage two. Liz advised that upon reflection, the findings of stage one and stage two would be considered in tandem.

Susie advised that a further progress update and revised draft Strategy would be presented to SMG in the Autumn, following the staff consultation. Lesley asked that a forward looking section, outlining plans for the next quarter be included in the next progress update.

Action: Susie to include a section in the next progress update to SMG, outlining plans for the next quarter.

SMG was delighted with the progress being made in internal communications and staff engagement and thanked Susie and Liz for their efforts.

Susie Brown and Liz Beaton left the meeting at 3.09 pm.

OTHER

Simon Burrowes, Chair of the Internal Communications Group, joined the meeting at 3.09 pm for agenda item 22.

22. Update on Work of the Internal Communications Group (ICG)

Simon Burrowes updated SMG on the recent work of ICG. Simon noted that the next staff survey was due to be held in the autumn and asked if SMG wanted ICG to take forward this piece of work. SMG agreed that ICG should take forward the staff survey in the autumn.

Consideration was also given to the future of ICG, in light of the appointment of the Internal Communications Officer (ICO). SMG agreed that there was merit in having ICG as it carried out valuable work and provided a useful sounding board, but noted that further consideration would be given to the terms of reference, membership and structure of the Group, with a view to integrating the role of the ICO within the Group.

Action: SMG to review ICG's terms of reference.

SMG thanked Simon and the members of ICG for their support with internal communications.

Lesley also recorded her thanks to Simon and the Youth Assembly Team for the excellent work undertaken in relation to establishing the Assembly Commission-supported Youth Assembly, noting the fantastic response to the application process.

Simon Burrowes left the meeting at 3.43 pm.

23. Assembly Commission papers cleared by SMG via correspondence

- Consideration of the Publication of a Revised Determination; and
- Update on Designated Days for Flying the Union Flag at Parliament Buildings.

24. Directors' Updates

Corporate Services

Building Services

Richard advised that a discussion on the roof project issues was required in advance of the preparation of a paper for the next SMG meeting.

Action: Clerk/Chief Executive, Directors and Head of Building Services to meet to discuss the roof project issues.

Support Services Contract

Richard advised that a response had been received from the Support Services contractor in relation to its year 5 contract proposal and that he would be preparing a paper for consideration by SMG and the Assembly Commission at their next meetings.

Legal, Governance and Research Services

Internal Audit

Tara provided an update on the Internal Audit Reviews for:

- Equality and Good Relations Unit;
- Accounts Payable;
- Overtime Payments;
- Members Expenses (Final Testing) 2020/21;
- Bill Office;
- Secretariat Pensions;
- Cybersecurity (IS Infrastructure);
- Procurement Office;
- Standing Committees; and

- Clerk/Chief Executive's Office.

Governance

Tara confirmed that SARC had met on 19 May 2021 and would be meeting again in June when its primary item of business would be the consideration of the final draft of the Assembly Commission Annual Report and Accounts for the year ended 31 March 2021.

RaISe

Tara advised that another doctoral student had joined a RaISe Research Team in May 2021 and that RaISe had expressed its thanks to IS Office colleagues for their help with IT requirements for these remote internships.

Tara also informed SMG that the Library would be physically re-opening on Tuesday 1 June 2021.

Procurement Office

Tara informed SMG that a paper was currently being drafted for consideration by SMG on the prioritisation of work within the Procurement Office.

FoI Requests

Tara advised that the FoI Unit had emailed Information Asset Owners, to remind them to keep Directors fully informed on FoI responses within their business areas. She also reiterated that Directors should set a clear direction in relation to handling the FOI responses within their Directorates as soon as a request is received.

Parliamentary Services

Clerking

Gareth advised of increased activity in relation to the introduction of Bills.

Gareth confirmed that the UK Government had introduced the 'Northern Ireland (Ministers, Elections and Petitions of Concern) Bill' in Parliament on 12 May 2021. He said that the Bill would implement a number of aspects of 'New Decade New Approach' and that the date for its second reading was yet to be confirmed.

25. AOB

There was no other business.

Lesley Hogg left the meeting at 4 pm.

26. Date of Next Meeting

The next meeting is scheduled for 24 June 2021.

27. Proposals for Agenda Items for Next Meeting

- Review of the Display of Artefacts in Parliament Buildings
- Assembly Commission Annual Plan 2021-22
- Equality and Good Relations Survey: Identified Themes and Issues
- Draft Disability Action Plan 2021-26: Public Consultation
- Review of Building Maintenance
- Maternity, Paternity and Adoption Provisions for MLAs' Constituency Offices
- Update on Roof Project Issues
- Support Services Contract
- Draft Learning and Development Strategy (and associated Action Plan)
- Quarterly Review of the Corporate Risk Register
- Library Staffing
- RalSe Book Contract
- Fol Costings
- Post Project Evaluation - Replacement Router Matrix
- Post Project Evaluation - Renewal of Microsoft Premier Support 2020
- Post Project Evaluation - Tablet Computer Replacement Project
- Update on EU Exit
- Draft Member Induction and Development Framework
- Report on the 2021 Members' Survey and Action Plan
- Resourcing Simultaneous Interpretation of Assembly Business in Irish and Ulster Scots
- IS Office Staffing
- Review Schedule for Parliamentary Services Directorate Policies
- Prioritisation and Resourcing of Work in the Procurement Office

The meeting ended at 4.13 pm.