

SECRETARIAT MANAGEMENT GROUP (SMG)

FRIDAY, 1 APRIL 2022 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
Jonathan McMillen
Eddie Kelly
Paula McClintock
Billy Mahoney
Karen Martin
Sinéad McDonnell

Opening/Review

The meeting commenced at 9.36 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 25 February 2022 had been published.

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 9.39 am for items 5 and 6.

5. Political Update

Lesley Hogg, Clerk/Chief Executive, noted that the Assembly was now in dissolution and she recorded her thanks for the tremendous performance and effort of staff throughout the mandate, particularly over the last few weeks.

Richard Stewart, Director of Corporate Services, suggested carrying out a lessons learned exercise following the end of the mandate, to assist with future mandates.

Gareth McGrath, Director of Parliamentary Services, advised that a lessons learned report in relation to the Bill Office was being prepared and would be presented at a future SMG meeting.

Lesley agreed that it would be beneficial to carry out a broader lessons learned exercise in relation to mandate planning, for consideration by SMG at a later stage.

CORPORATE SUPPORT

6. Draft Assembly Commission Agenda

Robin Ramsey noted that the date of next Assembly Commission meeting had yet to be agreed.

Proposed items for the next meeting included:

- Clerk/Chief Executive's Report
- The Good Relations Action Plan 2016-21 Closure Report
- Constituency Office Broadband Services

Corporate Support Unit Update

Robin advised SMG of the final costs in relation to the Artefacts exhibition in Parliament Buildings, and recorded his thanks to all those involved in its delivery.

Robin also informed SMG that the current Personal Secretary to the Speaker was retiring this month and that a competition for her successor was being advertised next week.

Lesley recorded her thanks to all involved with the excellent Artefacts and Women Parliamentarians of Northern Ireland exhibitions in Parliament Buildings. She noted that the Women Parliamentarians of Northern Ireland exhibition had only been up for a short period of time, due to the launch of the Artefacts exhibition, but stated that consideration would be given to setting this up again in another part of the building.

Robin Ramsey left the meeting at 10.05 am.

LEGAL, GOVERNANCE AND RESEARCH SERVICES

Jonathan McMillen, Head of Legal Services, joined the meeting at 10.06 am for agenda item 7.

7. Litigation Update

Jonathan McMillen provided SMG with an update on litigation to which the Assembly Commission is currently a named party.

Lesley noted that the Legal Services Office had been particularly busy over the last number of months and she thanked Jonathan and the Legal Services Team for their efforts.

Jonathan McMillen left the meeting at 10.27 am.

8. Quarterly Review of the Corporate Risk Register

SMG noted that the Clerk/Chief Executive, Directors and Data Protection and Governance Officer, had met on 22 March 2022 to discuss the Corporate Risk Register in detail.

SMG approved the Corporate Risk Register for March 2022.

Eddie Kelly, Acting Head of Internal Audit, joined the meeting at 10.28 am for agenda item 9.

9. Review of the Internal Audit Strategy 2020/21 – 2022/23 and Draft 2022/23 Internal Audit Plan

Eddie Kelly presented the Internal Audit Strategy 2020/21 – 2022/23, which had been updated following the annual review.

SMG also considered the draft 2022/23 Internal Audit Plan, which had been developed following discussions with the Clerk/Chief Executive and Directors, a review of Corporate and Directorate risk registers, and consideration of the results of previous audit activity.

Eddie advised that there was scope for the inclusion of additional work in the Audit Plan for 2022/23, and it was agreed this would be kept under review.

Following consideration, SMG approved the updated Internal Audit Strategy 2020/21 – 2022/23 and Audit Plan for 2022/23.

Action: Updated Internal Audit Strategy and Audit Plan for 2022/23 to be presented to SARC at its meeting in May 2022 and uploaded onto AsslSt.

Eddie Kelly left the meeting at 10.32 am.

CORPORATE SERVICES

Paula McClintock, Head of Finance, joined the meeting at 10.33 am for agenda items 10, 11 and 12.

Billy Mahoney, Senior Accountant – Secretariat, joined the meeting at 10.33 am for agenda items 10 and 11.

10. Management Accounts

Billy Mahoney presented the Management Accounts for February 2022.

SMG noted the current forecast outturn for Resource DEL and Capital.

Billy advised of underspends against Resource DEL for Secretariat and Members' salaries.

In relation to General Administration Expenditure (GAE), Billy stated that the Finance Office would be working closely with Members to ensure all items of expenditure for the 2021/22 financial year were receipted within the next few weeks.

On reviewing the Capital Plan, Billy advised of two underspends since the last SMG update. These related to the replacement kitchen equipment which cost slightly less than originally quoted and an amount within the Provision of Internet Connections project, which should have been expensed and paid from GAE as opposed to capital, as it related to the line rental of the new internet line. Billy advised this only became apparent on receipt of the detailed invoice.

Lesley highlighted the importance of business areas correctly classifying costs as GAE or capital when bidding for funds for projects and asked that a review be undertaken of ongoing capital projects to check that the classifications were correct.

Action: Billy to review the three-year Capital Plan with budget managers to check that the capital classification of projects was correct.

SMG considered and approved a bid from the Communication Office of £2.9k for web stream equipment.

11. Business Case for the Finance Software Package Renewal

Billy presented a business case for the finance software package renewal.

It was noted that retrospective approval was being sought as the contract had expired on 16 March 2022 and the reasons for this were discussed.

Following consideration, SMG approved the business case for the renewal of the current finance software packages (SUN systems and INFOR Q&A), for a further twelve months, with an option for a further six months' extension thereafter.

To avoid any future retrospective approvals of business cases, Lesley asked that Directors arrange for a list to be prepared of the contracts that they have responsibility for. Lesley stated that the list should include contract end dates, and be closely monitored by HoBs, with contact made with the Procurement Office well in advance of contract expiry dates.

Action: Directors to arrange for a list to be prepared of the contracts that they have responsibility for. The list should include the contract end date and be closely monitored by HoBs to ensure that replacement contracts are retendered and awarded before existing contracts expire.

Billy Mahoney left the meeting at 11.00 am.

12. Insurance Policy Update

Paula McClintock provided SMG with an update on the existing insurance policies currently held by the Assembly Commission, the cover provided and the proposed renewal premiums.

Paula highlighted the potential for future premiums to be curtailed through the award of a multi-year term for the various policies. SMG agreed that consideration would be given to the possibility of increasing the term as part of next year's renewal process.

SMG reviewed the limit of liability on the Combined Employers' and Public Liability policy and was content that the current level was sufficient.

Following discussion, SMG was content to proceed with the renewals as outlined in the paper.

SMG also noted additional services offered by the insurance broker in relation to Security Risk/Crisis Resilience and Health and Safety Executive Mental Health Compliance Review. Paula advised that the insurance broker had offered to provide a free one-hour consultation on both of these issues, and that the Head of Security had availed of the consultation on the security risk/crisis resilience, which included access to consultation on Business Continuity Planning. SMG agreed that a one-hour consultation on a Mental Health Compliance Review should also be taken forward.

Action: Paula to take forward the arrangements for a one-hour consultation on a Mental Health Compliance Review.

Paula provided an update on existing insurance claims. Lesley asked that, going forward, SMG be notified when insurance claims were settled, with a breakdown of the settlement also provided.

Paula McClintock left the meeting at 11.24 am.

Meeting suspended at 11.27 am until 11.46 am.

Sinéad McDonnell, Head of HR, and Karen Martin, Deputy Head of HR, joined the meeting at 11.46 am for agenda items 13 and 14.

13. HR Management Information

Karen Martin presented the monthly HR Management Information as at 1 March 2022.

Karen advised SMG that the Staff in Post (SiP) figure on 1 March 2022 (including agency and inward seconded staff) was 351 Full Time Equivalents (FTE) against an agreed staff complement (including complement plus) of 391.6 FTE.

SMG noted the temporary promotions/deputising arrangements and agency worker assignments currently in place.

Karen informed SMG of the updated position in relation to the Recruitment Schedule and queried the priority of some competitions. Gareth McGrath, Director of Parliamentary Services, requested that a number of competitions within his Directorate be re-prioritised.

Action: Karen to re-prioritise competitions on the Recruitment Schedule and issue a revised version to SMG.

Following a discussion on a possible change to the current policy on references for public appointment competitions, SMG agreed arrangements for references in relation to public appointments. It was also agreed that a separate meeting would be arranged to consider the management of references for Assembly Commission staff appointments.

Action: Karen to arrange a separate meeting to consider the management of references for Assembly Commission staff appointments.

Sickness absence information was provided and it was noted that for the period March 2021 to February 2022, the average days lost to sickness absence per FTE member of staff was 9.4 days, compared with an average of 6.4 days during the period March 2020 to February 2021.

Karen informed SMG that the Assembly Commission's Disability Action Plan for 2022-25 required the HR Office to sign up to the Disability Confident Scheme. She advised that the Disability Confident Scheme had three levels; that employers initially joined the scheme at Level 1

(Disability Confident Committed); and that employers then progressed through the levels as their confidence increased. Karen confirmed that the Senior HR Management Team was content that the Assembly Commission met the five commitments for joining the Scheme, with its current policies and procedures.

Karen therefore proposed that the HR Office proceed with registration at Level 1, with a view to possibly obtaining Level 2 status in the future, following further consultation with SMG.

SMG was content with the proposal to proceed with registration at Level 1.

14. Proposed Corporate Learning and Development Activities and associated Budget for 2022/23

SMG considered and approved the proposed Corporate Learning and Development activities and budget for the 2022/23 financial year.

Sinéad noted that a meeting had been arranged with the Clerk/Chief Executive and Directors for early June, to sign off on the Learning and Development Strategy: Four-Year Implementation Plan.

Sinéad McDonnell and Karen Martin left the meeting at 12.17 pm.

15. Review of Building Maintenance and Minor Capital Works Projects

Richard Stewart presented a paper outlining the findings of a review of the provision of building maintenance services at Parliament Buildings.

Richard stated that the review had been considered in detail by the Clerk/Chief Executive, Directors and the Head of Building Services, at a number of separate meetings, most recently on 22 March 2022.

It was noted that the review considered a number of options, and Richard stated the recommendation was to proceed with Option 2, as outlined in the paper, as it provided the services required to maintain Parliament Buildings to the required standard.

Following consideration, SMG approved Option 2 as recommended in the paper.

16. Staff Complement changes arising from the Systems Review Project

SMG noted that the Clerk/Chief Executive and Directors had met on 22 March 2022 to discuss in detail, staff complement changes arising from the Systems Review Project.

Following consideration, SMG approved an increase in staff complement of one AG6 Systems Administrator, to support the new corporate systems solution. SMG also indicated that it would be content to approve a further AG6 System Administrator on a temporary basis to provide additional support during the implementation period, but Richard stated that the most important element of the Systems Administrator role would take place after implementation using the skills and knowledge gained during implementation. Therefore, temporary support for this activity was not seen as necessary.

Richard advised of the risk of increasing the staff complement by one AG6 as opposed to two, as requested in the paper.

Lesley stated that as systems administration was currently provided by staff in the relevant business areas, staff in those business areas should be trained to support to the dedicated systems administrator.

17. Staffing Resources – Corporate Services Directorate

SMG noted the paper in relation to the staffing resources within the Corporate Services Directorate, and agreed that the matter required further discussion.

Action: Further meeting to be arranged to discuss staffing resources within the Corporate Services Directorate.

PARLIAMENTARY SERVICES

18. Office of the Official Report (Hansard): Temporary Increase in Complement

SMG noted that the Clerk/Chief Executive, Directors and the Editor of Debates, had met on 22 March 2022 to discuss, in detail, the temporary increase in staff complement within the Office of the Official Report (Hansard), to assist with the delivery of simultaneous interpretation of Assembly business in Irish and Ulster Scots.

Following consideration, SMG approved the temporary increase of three AG6s and two AG5s.

19. EU Affairs Staffing Support

SMG noted that the Clerk/Chief Executive, Directors and Paul Gill (Clerk Assistant), had met on 22 March 2022 to discuss, in detail, an increase in the staff complement of the EU Affairs Team by one AG6.

Following consideration, SMG approved the increase of one AG6, but agreed that the associated increase in complement should not take effect until normal Assembly business resumed. SMG also agreed that the level of EU Affairs staffing support would be kept under review.

20. Directors' Updates

Corporate Services

Sustainable Development

Richard advised that work was progressing on the installation of the electronic vehicle charging point in the lower east car park.

COVID-19

Richard advised that COVID-19 signage in Parliament Buildings had been amended, following changes to the Regulations and guidance and that a communication would issue to staff and building users, regarding the availability of Lateral Flow Tests within Parliament Buildings.

HR Office

Richard noted that the contract for Recruitment Advertising had been awarded to the Anderson Spratt Group.

Legal, Governance and Research Services

Internal Audit

Tara provided an update on the Internal Audit Reviews for:

- Members' Expenses
- Broadcasting Infrastructure
- Business Office
- Accounts Payable
- Freedom of Information (Fol)
- Information Assurance

Information Standards

Tara advised of some significant delays from business areas in relation to responses to Fol requests and asked Directors to ensure that Fol requests were given priority by their Information Asset Owners and business areas.

Procurement Office

SMG noted the ongoing procurement projects.

Tara confirmed that Melissa Sharples had taken up the position of Head of Procurement on a temporary basis.

End of Mandate

Tara recorded her thanks to all the staff within the Legal, Governance and Research Services Directorate for the level of work undertaken during the mandate.

Parliamentary Services

SMG noted the work undertaken by the Parliamentary Services Directorate, since last reported at the SMG meeting on 25 February 2022.

21. Items cleared by correspondence

SMG Register of Interests – reviewed March 2022, no updates required.

22. AOB

There was no other business.

23. Date of Next Meeting

It was agreed that the next meeting would take place in May 2022, date to be confirmed.

24. Proposals for Agenda Items for Next Meeting

- Review of Data Protection Policy
- Biannual Review of the Directorate Risk Register
- Public Engagement Activity: Biannual Report
- Complaints Policy and Procedures Report for 2021-22
- Internal Communications Biannual Update
- Internal Communications Group Update
- New Good Relations Action Plan (for public consultation)
- Gender Action Plan – 6 Monthly Update
- Audit of Inequalities Closure Report 2016-21
- Audit of Inequalities 2022-26 and Equality Scheme 2022-26
- Annual Plan 2021-22 Outturn

The meeting ended at 1.27 pm.