

SENIOR MANAGEMENT TEAM (SMT)

**FRIDAY, 26 SEPTEMBER 2025 at 9.30 PM
ROOM 106, PARLIAMENT BUILDINGS**

Present:

**Lesley Hogg, Clerk/Chief Executive
Tara Caul, Director of Legal, Governance and Research Services
Gareth McGrath, Director of Parliamentary Services
Paula Ewart, Interim Director of Performance and Improvement
Sinéad McDonnell, Head of HR (Deputising for Steven Baxter, Director of Corporate Services)**

In Attendance:

**Janet Hughes, Clerical Supervisor
Krystal Clarke, Executive Assistant
Robin Ramsey, Adviser to the Speaker/Head of Corporate Support (Items 5 and 6)
Karen Steele, Deputy Head of Finance (Items 7 and 7.1)
Suzanne Murphy, Deputy Head of Finance (Item 8)
Donna-Marie Clark, Data Protection and Governance Officer (Items 11 and 12)
John Hart, Head of Communications (Items 13, 14 and 15)
Liz Beaton, Internal Communications Officer (Item 13)
Dan Hull, Chairperson of the Internal Communications Group (Item 16)**

The meeting commenced at 9.35 am.

1. Apologies

Apologies were received from Steven Baxter, Sinéad McDonnell deputised.

2. Declaration of Interests

There were no declarations of interest.

3. Minutes of previous meeting

It was noted that the minutes from the meeting on 7 August 2025 had been published.

4. SMT Action Points

The outstanding action points were reviewed and progress was noted.

Robin Ramsey joined the meeting at 9.36 am for agenda items 5 and 6.

5. Political Update

Lesley Hogg noted that a further Assembly Commission motion would need to be tabled for the appointment of a new Commissioner for Standards in the coming weeks.

SMT noted that there was an expectation of a further Legislative Programme being received from The Executive in the next few weeks and that this could influence the potential number of Members Bills that might be able to be accommodated.

CORPORATE SUPPORT

6. Draft Assembly Commission Agenda

Robin Ramsey noted that a date for the next Assembly Commission meeting was being considered.

Proposed items for the meeting included:

- Clerk/Chief Executive's Report
- Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman Salary Arrangements
- Review of the Transgender Policy and Guidance on Assisting and Supporting Transgender Visitors and Other users of Parliament Buildings
- Request for the Assembly Commission to Display a Portrait of His Majesty The King
- Delegated Authority Arrangements
- Security Review Recommendations Made by Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) and the Outworkings of the Terrorism (Protection of Premises) Act 2025 (aka Martyn's Law)

Robin Ramsey left the meeting at 9.46 am.

CORPORATE SERVICES

Karen Steele joined the meeting at 9.46 am for agenda items 7, 7.1 and 8.

7. Management Accounts July 2025

Karen Steele presented the Management Accounts for July 2025, highlighting movements from the June Monitoring position in relation to Resource DEL, Capital DEL and the Windsor Framework Democratic Scrutiny Committee (WFDSC) costs.

Karen outlined, and sought SMT approval on, a number of internal bids brought forward by budget holders in Admin costs. Following consideration, SMT approved all bids.

The forecast in relation to Members' Office and Staffing Costs and Allowances was noted and Lesley Hogg requested, ahead of the end of year monitoring round, that the Finance Office write to Members to seek an indication of their expected year-end outturn, highlighting that any excess funds could be returned to DoF for use in the wider public sector.

Action: Finance Office to write to Members to seek an indication of their expected year-end outturn, highlighting that any excess funds could be returned to DoF for use in the wider public sector.

On reviewing the Capital position, SMT noted that a bid for additional funds for the Broadcasting Modernisation project had in the most part been offset by a surrender of monies from the Long Gallery project. SMT approved the small residual bid.

7.1 Management Accounts August 2025

Karen presented the Management Accounts for August 2025.

SMT noted the current forecasts for Resource DEL, Capital DEL and the WFDSC costs.

Karen advised of a surrender in relation to Admin costs.

Karen stated that Staff Salaries had not been reprofiled since the Opening budget and the forecast had not been updated since June 2025. SMT noted the need for a profiled reforecast of Staff Salaries for the next management accounts, in order to establish an accurate estimate of the potential shortfall in budget which was highlighted last month due to the proposed pay rise.

Action: Finance Office to reprofile Staff Salaries and provide an updated forecast in the September 2025 management accounts.

Karen also advised of an underspend against forecast in Capital and it was agreed that Directors would liaise with their Heads of Business (HoBs) to establish if there were any 2026-27 projects that could be brought forward and completed in 2025-26.

Action: Directors to liaise with their HoBs to establish if there are any 2026-27 capital projects that could be brought forward and completed in 2025-26.

Karen referred to the audit recommendation made by the Northern Ireland Audit Office, in relation to the removal from the Fixed Asset Register and disposal of all assets with a nil net book value and not in use. SMT noted that

work on this needed to be progressed and it was agreed that Karen would email HoBs requesting this be undertaken.

Action: Karen to email HoBs asking that they review the Fixed Asset Register and make the necessary arrangements for the disposal of any assets not in use in relation to their business area, in advance of the financial year end.

Lesley noted that an updated position in relation to a number of items on the Capital Plan had not been provided and she asked that Directors raise this with their relevant HoBs.

Action: Directors to remind their HoBs to provide updates for all items on the Capital Plan in relation to their respective business areas.

Lesley highlighted the importance of timely, detailed budget scrutiny ahead of the next Monitoring Round.

Paula Ewart recorded her thanks to Karen and the Finance Team for all the work and effort that had gone in to completing the recent upgrade of the Sun Finance system.

Karen Steele left the meeting at 10.09 am.

Suzanne Murphy joined the meeting at 10.09 am for agenda item 8.

8. Business Case Review - Insurance Brokering Service 2026/27 to 2030/31

Suzanne Murphy presented and sought SMT approval of a business case for sourcing and appointing insurance brokers for the five-year period 2026/27 to 2030/31.

Suzanne advised that the current contract expires in December 2025 and she outlined three potential options, with a recommendation to proceed with Option 3, to procure a professional, commercial insurance brokering service.

Tara Caul queried the provision of Cyber Security insurance cover. Suzanne advised that the Head of IS was engaging with the insurers on this matter, and she confirmed that in the interim Cyber Security had been identified as a risk with mitigating measures in place.

Lesley stated that it would be beneficial for a detailed update on the provision of Cyber Security insurance cover to be included in the March 2026 Annual Insurance Policy Renewal paper to SMT.

Action: Head of Finance to provide a detailed update on the provision of Cyber Security insurance cover in the March 2026 Annual Insurance Policy Renewal paper to SMT.

Following consideration, SMT approved the business case.

Suzanne Murphy left the meeting at 10.23 am.

9. HR Management Information

Sinéad presented the HR Management Information as at 1 September 2025.

Sinéad referred SMT to a staff complement change request from the Director of Parliamentary Services. Following consideration, SMT approved the requested restoration of 0.4 Full Time Equivalent (FTE) in the Assembly Clerk complement.

Sinéad updated SMT on recruitment activity.

On reviewing the Recruitment Schedule, Sinéad highlighted a number of competing recruitment requirements and following discussion, SMT agreed the priority of competitions until the end of December, noting that the competitions to be held during the first quarter of 2026 would be given further consideration at the October SMT meeting.

SMT acknowledged and was appreciative of the work involved in managing the volume of competitions and recorded its thanks to the Recruitment Team.

10. North Lift Upgrade Business Case

This paper was deferred to a future meeting.

The meeting adjourned at 10.39 am and resumed at 10.49 am.

LEGAL, GOVERNANCE AND RESEARCH SERVICES

Donna-Marie Clark joined the meeting at 10.49 am for agenda items 11 and 12.

11. Quarterly Review of the Corporate Risk Register

Donna-Marie Clark advised that she had met with the Clerk/Chief Executive and Directors, on 10 September 2025, to discuss the Corporate Risk Register (CRR) in detail.

SMT noted and approved the CRR for September 2025, subject to a further minor amendment.

12. Biennial Review of the Risk Management Strategy, Including Mandatory Review of Risk Appetite

SMT noted that the Risk Management Strategy (RMS) and risk appetite had also been reviewed in detail, at the meeting on 10 September 2025.

SMT approved revisions to the RMS and, following further consideration, agreed the risk appetite for each risk category.

Donna-Marie Clark left the meeting at 11.22 am.

PARLIAMENTARY SERVICES

John Hart joined the meeting at 11.22 am for agenda items 13, 14 and 15.

Liz Beaton joined the meeting at 11.22 am for agenda item 13.

13. Internal Communications Quarterly Update

Liz Beaton provided an update on internal communications from June 2025 to mid-September 2025.

Liz highlighted activities such as the staff webinars; “Let’s Celebrate” and “Let’s Meet” sessions; and September Directorate meetings. Liz also noted the work undertaken by the various Corporate Working Groups.

SMT thanked Liz and all those involved in organising and supporting staff engagement activities over the last few months.

Liz Beaton left the meeting at 11.52 am.

14. Business Case for the Refurbishment of the Communications Unit Offices B4 and B5

John Hart presented and sought approval of a business case for the refurbishment of the Communications Unit Offices B4 and B5.

Following consideration, SMT approved the business case.

15. Strategic Communications Update

SMT received a communications update from the Head of Communications.

John Hart left the meeting at 12.10 pm.

OTHER ITEMS

Dan Hull joined the meeting at 12.11 pm for agenda item 16.

16. Update on the Work of the Internal Communications Group (ICG) April to September 2025 and Timing of the 2026 Staff Survey

Dan Hull provided an update on the activities of ICG for the period April 2025 to September 2025.

Dan noted that ICG had met six times since the last update to SMT in March 2025 and had discussed a range of issues, including feedback from staff on the response to the results of the 2024 Staff Survey; communication of the IS Modernisation Project with staff; the forthcoming Wellbeing at Work Questionnaire; the pilot Staff Webinar held on 18 June; the approach and timing of the next Staff Survey; and provided initial feedback on the 'Let's Celebrate' All Staff Event and the team taking forward the staff questionnaire on Artificial Intelligence (AI) usage.

Dan informed SMT of a Good Ideas Forum ICG sub-group chaired by Catherine McIntosh, Organisational Development and Learning Manager, and stated that Catherine was working on a paper for presentation to SMT at its November meeting.

In relation to the 2026 Staff Survey, Dan outlined and sought approval of ICG's proposed approach, to undertake a joint survey with the Senedd Cymru and the Scottish Parliament in March 2026.

Following discussion, SMT approved the approach for the 2026 Staff Survey as proposed.

SMT recorded its thanks to ICG for the work undertaken over the last six months.

Dan Hull left the meeting at 12.21 pm.

17. SMT/Assembly Commission Papers Cleared via Correspondence/Meeting

- Security Review Recommendations Made by Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) and the Outworkings of the Terrorism (Protection of Premises) Act 2025 (aka Martyn's Law)
- Pay Claim 2025
- Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman Salary Arrangements
- Assembly Commission Budget 2026-29
- Review of the Transgender Policy and Guidance on Assisting and Supporting Transgender Visitors and Other users of Parliament Buildings
- HR Management Information August 2025

18. Directors' Updates

Legal, Governance and Research Services

Tara provided an update on the work undertaken by all business areas within the Legal, Governance and Research Services Directorate and, in particular, highlighted the ongoing litigation cases; staffing vacancies within Research and Information Services (RaISe); and the current procurement projects.

Tara noted the high volume of ongoing procurement projects and growing pipeline of new initiatives currently being managed by the Procurement Office

and referred to a number of projects that had been removed from the Procurement Office workplan, due to agreed deadlines having passed without any updates from the relevant business areas. In light of this, Tara asked that Directors review the update provided to ensure that procurement projects within their directorate were progressing in line with deadlines.

Corporate Services

Sinéad provided an update on all business areas within the Corporate Services Directorate.

In particular, Sinéad updated SMT on the Sun Finance system upgrade; the Electronic Access Control project; and the Northern Ireland/All Ireland Information Exchange Forum hosted by Usher Services.

Lesley provided an update on the progress on internal audits.

Parliamentary Services

SMT noted the work undertaken by all business areas within the Parliamentary Services Directorate.

Gareth McGrath updated SMT on the elements of the Modernisation Project in relation to the website redevelopment and the Windsor Framework Legislation Tracking System.

Performance and Improvement

Paula Ewart informed SMT that she was currently reviewing a number of Finance and HR manual processes, with a view to improving efficiency by introducing more automated systems. Some examples of initial areas of focus identified include upgrading the Sun Finance system and reviewing how it works with PECOS to generate increased real time reporting, simplifying and automating supplier on-boarding process, improving agency worker timesheet administration and digitising Members ordering from Office Resources. The potential to automate some minute taking by the use of AI is also being investigated.

19. AOB

There was no other business.

20. Date of Next Meeting

It was noted that the next meeting would take place on 24 October 2025.

21. Proposals for Agenda Items for Next Meeting

- The Leadership Framework
- Review of Performance Conversations
- Wellbeing Framework

- Temporary Worker Contract – Post Project Evaluation and Business Case
- North Lift Upgrade Business Case
- Annual Plan 2025-26 Update as at 30 September 2025
- Information Security Group Annual Report and Self-Assessment
- Biannual Review of Directorate Risk Registers
- Review of Information Assurance Policy
- Business Case for an Electronic Document Records Management System
- Security Operations Centre Business Case
- IT Strategy
- Strategic Communications Update

The meeting ended at 1.08 pm.