

SENIOR MANAGEMENT TEAM (SMT)

**FRIDAY, 30 JANUARY 2026 at 9.30 PM
ROOM 106, PARLIAMENT BUILDINGS**

APPROVED

Present:

**Lesley Hogg, Clerk/Chief Executive
Steven Baxter, Director of Corporate Services
Tara Caul, Director of Legal, Governance and Research Services
Gareth McGrath, Director of Parliamentary 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 Martin, Deputy Head of HR (Item 7)
Suzanne Murphy, Deputy Head of Finance (Items 8 and 9)
Richard Anderson, Health and Safety Manager (Item 10)
Christine Watts, Environmental Services and Health and Safety
Manager (Item 12)
Mary-Ellen Nutt, Head of IT (Items 14, 15 and 16)
Robert McCausland, IT Security Officer (Items 15 and 16)
John Hart, Head of Communications (Items 17)**

The meeting commenced at 9.32 am.

1. Apologies

None.

2. Declaration of Interests

There were no declarations of interest.

3. Minutes of previous meeting

It was noted that the minutes from the meetings on 3 and 15 December 2025 had been published.

4. SMT Action Points

The outstanding action points were reviewed and progress was noted.

Robin Ramsey joined the meeting at 9.33 am for agenda items 5 and 6.

5. Political Update

Robin Ramsey noted that the Speaker had written to the Executive Office about the Legislative Programme, and was continuing to consider Members' Bills.

CORPORATE SUPPORT

6. Draft Assembly Commission Agenda

Proposed agenda items for the next Assembly Commission meeting were considered.

Robin noted the joint Speaker and First Minister/deputy First Minister event to be held in Parliament Buildings on 20 February 2026 in relation to the unveiling of a memorial to victims and survivors of Historical Institutional Abuse.

Robin also referred to a likely visit by Speaker Skelly from the Legislative Assembly of Ontario on 9 February 2026, to explore a partnership with the Assembly.

Robin Ramsey left the meeting at 9.44 am.

CORPORATE SERVICES

Karen Martin joined the meeting at 9.44 am for agenda item 7.

7. HR Management Information

Karen Martin presented the monthly HR Management Information as at 1 January 2026.

Karen advised that the Staff in Post (SIP) figure on 1 January 2026 (including agency and inward seconded staff) was 393.3 Full Time Equivalents (FTE) against a staff complement (including complement plus) of 408.5 FTE.

SMT noted the temporary promotion/deputising arrangements and agency worker assignments currently in place.

Karen sought approval of a complement change application for a temporary increase in Clerical Supervisor complement within the Organisational Development and Learning Team. SMT approved the increase.

SMT also considered, and approved in principle, subject to the Head of IT clarifying the position with HR, a staff complement change application for a temporary complement plus increase for a Senior Business Analyst, along with two forms relating to suppression/unsuppression of posts, within the IS Office.

SMT noted the Recruitment Schedule and Karen provided an update on recruitment activity.

Tara Caul recorded her thanks to HR for the support provided to her directorate in relation to the extensive recruitment exercise for Research and Information Services (RaISe) which had recently completed.

Karen referred to the Assembly Commission's current Guaranteed Interview Scheme (GIS) for applicants with a disability and sought approval from SMT on proposed changes to how the GIS is implemented.

Karen briefed SMT on the proposed changes outlining the reasoning for same. Karen also noted that Trade Union Side had been consulted on the proposed changes and was content.

Following consideration, SMT asked for a slight change to be made to the SMT paper to provide clarification.

Action: Karen to update the paper as proposed by SMT and re-circulate for final approval.

Sickness absence information was provided and it was noted that for the period January 2025 to December 2025, the average sickness absence per FTE member of staff was 10.4 days, which represented a reduction of 0.9 days when compared to 11.3 days for the period January 2024 to December 2024.

Short and long-term absence figures were noted.

Karen noted that the last Section 75 Monitoring Survey had been carried out in 2024, at which point it was envisaged that (as part of the Systems Review Project) a new HR Management System (HRMS) would be in place, which would enable staff to review and update their Section 75 information negating the need for further surveys. However, as the new HRMS is not yet in place, and to ensure that equality screening information is up to date, Karen sought approval to carry out a further Section 75 Monitoring Survey, noting that as with previous surveys, completion would be voluntary and anonymous.

Following discussion, SMT approved the issuing of a further Section 75 Monitoring Survey to staff.

Karen Martin left the meeting at 10.15 am.

Suzanne Murphy joined the meeting at 10.17 am for agenda items 8 and 9.

8. Abridged Management Accounts November/December 2025

Steven Baxter noted that due to resourcing pressures within the Finance Office the paper being presented focussed mainly on the final December Monitoring position as submitted to the Department of Finance (DoF) on 6 January 2026, and he stated that a more detailed Management Accounts paper would be produced for the January Management Accounts.

Steven advised that the Finance Office was reviewing the end to end Management Accounts process in order to introduce efficiencies, noting that the current process takes circa four weeks of effort every month.

Suzanne Murphy advised SMT of the final December Monitoring position for Resource DEL, Capital DEL and Windsor Framework Democratic Scrutiny Committee (WFDSC) costs.

Lesley Hogg referred to variances recorded against Admin costs and salaries and asked for the usual Management Accounts spreadsheets to be provided to review these.

Action: Steven to provide SMT with the usual Management Accounts supporting spreadsheets.

On reviewing the capital projects, Lesley noted that the information provided did not reflect the most up-to-date position for some projects and stressed the importance of being provided with up to date information to inform decision making. Steven agreed to carry out a deep dive of the capital projects, and provide SMT with an updated position in relation to anticipated capital expenditure in the January Management Accounts.

9. In-depth Review of Payroll Calculation and Standardisation of Units of Time

Suzanne noted that, following consideration of a paper on proposed revisions to calculations within the Staff Handbook at the SMT meeting on 28 March 2025, SMT had asked for an in-depth review of policies potentially impacted by a changes in the calculation of the daily rate of pay to be undertaken and for legal advice to be obtained.

Suzanne subsequently presented the findings of the in-depth review, in the context of the legal advice received, and recommended calculations which would benefit from a standardised approach.

Following initial discussion, SMT agreed, in light of the amount of information provided, that a more detailed discussion and consideration of the findings of the review was required.

Action: Meeting to be arranged to allow SMT to consider the review findings in more detail.

SMT acknowledged the significant amount of work that had gone in to carrying out and reporting on the review and thanked Suzanne and all involved for their efforts.

Suzanne Murphy left the meeting at 11.04 am.

The meeting suspended at 11.04 am and resumed at 11.19 am.

Change to agenda running order.

11. Provision of Washroom Facilities in Parliament Buildings

This paper was not considered at the meeting and will instead be issued to SMT for consideration by correspondence.

Christine Watts joined the meeting at 11.17 am for agenda item 12.

12. Goods Lift Replacement Business Case

Christine Watts presented and sought approval of a business case to replace the three goods lifts within the basement kitchen of Parliament Buildings.

Christine advised that the goods lifts were over 30 years old and had reached the end of their serviceable life.

Tara Caul sought clarification on the consultation process in relation to the business case and asked for the paper to be updated to record any consultation with the Procurement Office.

Clarification of the procurement route was also sought, and it was agreed that Steven would provide information clarifying the current arrangements for use of the framework for remedial works.

Following consideration, SMT approved the business case, subject to the work being completed in this financial year, confirmation of the procurement route/strategy and whether the Assembly Commission is to be the contracting authority.

Action: Christine to update the paper in relation to the consultation process.

Action: Steven to provide SMT with information clarifying the arrangements for use of the remedial works Framework.

Christine Watts left the meeting at 11:35 am.

Richard Anderson joined the meeting at 11.35 am for agenda item 10.

10. Health and Safety Management Report 2025

Richard Anderson presented the Health and Safety Management Report, providing SMT with a detailed account on accidents/near misses, other health and safety issues and training undertaken during 2025.

Richard noted that the new electronic Display Screen Equipment (DSE) Self-Assessment had launched this month and confirmed that 100 completed questionnaires had been received to date.

Richard advised that the annual Fire Risk Assessment of Parliament Buildings had been carried out in October 2025, and he updated SMT on the actions taken in relation to recommendations made.

Richard informed SMT of issues that had arisen which were being addressed in relation to the emergency evacuation following a fire drill in September. Lesley requested that going forward any issues of this nature are also reported to SMT via the following Corporate Services directorate update to enable timely action to be taken.

Richard noted that the Health and Safety Sub-Committee, which had been renamed the Health and Safety Group, continued to meet on a regular basis.

Richard advised that 135 health checks had been organised for staff on behalf of the Health and Wellbeing Group.

In relation to a near miss that was reported, SMT requested that regular risk assessments be carried out.

SMT thanked Richard for his comprehensive report and efforts throughout the year.

Richard Anderson left the meeting at 11.55 am.

LEGAL, GOVERNANCE AND RESEARCH SERVICES

Melissa Sharples joined the meeting at 11.56 am for agenda item 13.

13. Procurement Policy Update

Melissa Sharples presented a paper which provided details of the Northern Ireland Executive's Public Procurement Policy Statement and sought SMT approval on proposed additional operational measures for the Assembly Commission to take to align to this Statement as good practice.

SMT approved the proposed additional operational measures noting that it had considered them in detail at a separate meeting.

SMT reviewed and approved the Social Value in Procurement Policy, which would be appended to the Assembly Commission's existing Procurement Policy.

SMT also reviewed and approved a change to the current delegated procurement control limits to align to the Northern Ireland Public Procurement Policy.

Action: Procurement Office to communicate policy changes to relevant stakeholders.

Melissa Sharples left the meeting at 11.58 pm.

Mary-Ellen Nutt joined the meeting at 11.58 pm for agenda items 14, 15 and 16.

14. Policy for the Use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) by Northern Ireland Assembly Commission Staff

Tara presented and sought approval of a draft Policy for the Use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) by Northern Ireland Assembly Commission (Assembly Commission) staff.

Tara referred to one outstanding issue to be addressed within the draft Policy, namely the requirement for staff to acknowledge when content has been generated using an AI tool. Tara noted that it was her recommendation that such an acknowledgment should be required, but as there were different views on this she asked SMT to decide whether staff should be required to do this. Following discussion, the SMT majority view was that such an acknowledgement was not required given that AI was likely to quickly become a regularly used administrative tool but that an acknowledgement could be included by the author if desired, and it was agreed that the Policy should be amended accordingly.

Steven proposed, and SMT approved, one further minor amendment to the Checklist.

SMT subsequently approved the draft Policy subject to the two amendments as discussed.

SMT also agreed that an AI Governance Group be established by the Head of IT, to take over from the AI Steering Group, and that basic training on AI would be provided to all Assembly Commission staff.

Action: Mary-Ellen to issue the AI Policy to all staff.

Lesley acknowledged the work that had gone in to developing the draft Policy and recorded her thanks to all members of the AI Steering Group.

PARLIAMENTARY SERVICES

Robert McCausland joined the meeting 12:19 pm for agenda item 17.

15. Business Case for the Procurement of a Security Operations Centre and Associated Services

Mary-Ellen presented and sought approval of a business case for the procurement of a Security Operations Centre (SOC) and associated services.

Mary-Ellen outlined the preferred approach to procuring a SOC and associated services, noting that extensive market sounding and due diligence had been carried out to ensure that the approach being recommended in the business case was the right fit for the Assembly.

Following consideration, SMT approved the business case.

SMT thanked Mary-Ellen and Robert McCausland for the comprehensive paper.

16. Draft Digital, AI and Cyber Strategy 2026-2031

Mary-Ellen noted that a paper on the draft Digital, AI and Cyber Strategy 2026-2031 was being finalised and would be circulated to SMT for consideration in due course.

In the interim, SMT was asked to consider the draft Strategy document that had been produced.

SMT reviewed the draft Strategy document and provided some initial comments and agreed to forward any additional comments to Mary-Ellen over the next couple of weeks.

Action: Mary-Ellen to consider any further comments provided by SMT on the draft Strategy document, update as necessary, and re-circulate a revised version together with a cover paper to SMT for approval by correspondence.

Robert McCausland left the meeting at 12.43 pm.

Mary-Ellen Nutt left the meeting at 12.48 pm.

John Hart joined the meeting at 12.49 pm for agenda item 17.

17. Strategic Communications Update

SMT received a communications update from the Head of Communications.

John Hart left the meeting at 12.57 pm.

OTHER ITEMS

19. SMT/Assembly Commission Papers Cleared via Correspondence/meeting

Blue Flax Refurbishment Project.

20. 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.

In particular, Tara highlighted ongoing litigation cases; the re-launch of the Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series (KESS); recruitment within Research and Information Services (RaISe); and the current procurement projects.

Tara noted that the next Assembly Commission Audit and Risk Committee meeting was scheduled for 18 February 2026.

Parliamentary Services

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

Corporate Services

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

18. AOB

SMT welcomed the commencement of the launch of the Assembly Commission's Leadership Framework and it was noted that SMT would be changing its name to Senior Leadership Team (SLT) when the Framework was rolled out to staff.

SMT recorded its thanks to Catherine McIntosh, Organisational Development and Learning (L&D) Manager, and the wider L&D team on the creation of the Leadership Development Programme.

19. Date of Next Meeting

It was noted that the next meeting would take place on 27 February 2026.

20. Proposals for Agenda Items for Next Meeting

- Business Case for Travel Management Services
- Performance and Wellbeing Conversations Policies

- Business Case for Proposed Additional Modules iTrent 2025/28
- New Corporate Systems Review Project
- Sensitivity Review 2004 to 2006 Release
- Records Management Policy
- Branding
- Corporate Communications Strategy
- Internal Communications Quarterly Update
- Strategic Communications Update

The meeting ended at 1.23 pm.