

SENIOR MANAGEMENT TEAM (SMT)

**FRIDAY, 31 MAY 2024 at 9.30 AM
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
Robin Ramsey, Adviser to the Speaker/Head of Corporate Support
(Items 5 and 6)
Sinéad McDonnell, Head of HR (Items 7,8, 9 and 10)
Maria Bannon, Equality Manager (Item 7)
Cathy McGowan, Learning and Development Manager (Item 8)
Gary Browne, Senior Accountant (Items 11 and 11.1)
Terri Quigley, Head of Building Management (Item 12)
Donna-Marie Clark, Data Protection and Governance Officer (Item 13)
Melissa Sharples, Head of Procurement (Item 14)
Mary-Ellen Nutt, Head of IT (Item 15)
Clare Maguire, Public Engagement Manager (Item 16)
Michael Cairns, Acting Head of Communications (Item 17)
Dan Hull, Chair of the Internal Communications Group (Item 18)**

The meeting commenced at 9.32 am.

1. Apologies

There were no apologies.

2. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

3. Minutes of previous meeting

It was noted that the minutes from the meeting on 26 April 2024 were in the process of being published.

4. SMT Action Points

The outstanding action points were reviewed and progress was noted.

Robin Ramsey joined the meeting at 9.37 am for agenda items 5 and 6.

5. Political Update

Lesley Hogg referred to the upcoming General Election and noted that relevant guidance had issued to Assembly Commission staff.

6. Draft Assembly Commission Agenda

Robin Ramsey advised that the next Assembly Commission meeting was scheduled for 20 June 2024.

Proposed items for the meeting included:

- Clerk/Chief Executive's Report
- Defects in the Roof of Parliament Buildings
- Business Case for Remedial Works to Roof of Parliament Buildings
- Assembly Members (Salaries and Expenses) Determination
- Briefing Paper Systems Review Project
- Assembly Members Pension Scheme and Accounts
- Annual Equality Progress Report to the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland 2023-2024
- Assembly Commission Audit and Risk Committee Report to the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission for the Year Ended 31 March 2024

Robin Ramsey left the meeting at 9.51 am.

CORPORATE SERVICES

Sinéad McDonnell joined the meeting at 9.51 am for agenda items 7, 8, 9 and 10.

Maria Bannon joined the meeting at 9.51 am for agenda item 7.

7. Consultation to Inform Development of a Draft Disability Action Plan and Draft Good Relations Action Plan (2025-2030)

Sinéad McDonnell and Maria Bannon presented draft Disability and Good Relations Action Plans for 2025-2030, noting that the current Plans would conclude in 2025.

Sinéad sought SMT approval of a proposed development and consultation timeline for 2024-2025 in relation to the new Plans. SMT noted and was content with the proposed timeline.

SMT considered the draft Plans, and approved them for pre-consultation with Trade Union Side and external stakeholders, subject to some minor amendments.

Action: Draft Disability and Good Relations Action Plans to be amended as proposed by SMT and pre-consultation exercise to be initiated.

SMT thanked Maria for the work that had gone into preparing the draft Plans for 2025-2030, which SMT noted were very comprehensive and well presented.

Maria Bannon left the meeting at 10.14 am.

Cathy McGowan joined the meeting at 10.14 am for agenda item 8.

8. Annual Report of Learning and Development Activities and Associated Spend for 2023/24

Sinéad McDonnell and Cathy McGowan provided SMT with an update on the corporate learning and development activities for staff and the associated spend for the period 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024.

Sinéad advised that 684 training days had been delivered in the reporting period, which was an average of two days of learning per full-time equivalent (FTE) staff member. Sinéad noted that these figures, whilst good, tended to understate the level of learning going on in the organisation, as informal learning (on-the-job) is not always recorded by staff on their iTrent training record.

SMT asked that in future communications to staff, the 70/20/10 Model for learning and development should be highlighted to remind staff that the majority of learning is informal and should also be recorded on iTrent.

Sinéad provided information on the level of attendance and vacancy rates for classroom training events in 2023/24. She highlighted the increased non-attendance in the latter part of the reporting period which was primarily related to the resumption of normal Assembly business and the increased workloads of staff. Sinéad also spoke of the challenges involved in getting commitment from staff to avail of training and advised that the Learning and Development Team was looking at ways to improve attendance rates.

Sinéad informed SMT of the final Corporate and Development Learning spend against budget as at 31 March 2024, noting an underspend of £13.7k.

Cathy highlighted major successes throughout the reporting period, namely:

- the design, delivery and evaluation of four modules of the new Assembly Commission Management and Leadership Programme; and

- continued collaboration with other legislators through the Interparliamentary Learning Network.

SMT asked Cathy to work with the Internal Communications Officer to publicise some of the learning success stories during the year, particularly around supporting staff studying under the Assistance to Study Policy.

Sinéad asked about the level of detail in the Bi-annual and Annual Reports of Learning and Development Activities provided to SMT, and if it remained appropriate going forward. SMT stated that it was conscious of the time that went into producing the reports and agreed that a summary of activity was needed, but that consideration could be given to ceasing to report on some areas that took a lot of time to pull together. Steven to liaise with Sinéad and Cathy in relation to this.

SMT thanked Cathy and the Learning and Development Team for the work undertaken during the reporting period and for the comprehensive and detailed report presented.

Cathy McGowan left the meeting at 10.34 am.

9. HR Management Information

Sinéad presented the monthly HR Management Information as at 1 May 2024, which she noted also included information on expenditure under the Temporary Agency Worker Contract, an update on case management and annual equality information.

Sinéad advised that the Staff in Post (SIP) figure on 1 May 2024 (including agency and inward seconded staff) was 343.8 Full Time Equivalent (FTE) against a staff complement (including complement plus) of 388.5 FTE.

SMT noted the temporary promotions/deputising arrangements and agency worker assignments currently in place. Sinéad advised of increased expenditure in relation to agency worker assignments following resumption of normal Assembly business, but confirmed that current expenditure was still within the overall Temporary Agency Worker Contract budget and that this would continue to be monitored.

Sinéad updated SMT on recruitment activity.

On reviewing the Recruitment Schedule, Tara Caul asked for the post of Senior Statistician to be added to the non-scheduled section of the Schedule.

Sickness absence information was provided and it was noted that for the period May 2023 to April 2024, the average sickness absence per FTE member of staff was 14 days, which was the same for the period May 2022 to April 2023.

SMT noted the annual equality information as at 1 May 2024.

SMT also noted case management activity since 1 November 2023.

Gareth McGrath advised that a decision on a complement change application form submitted for a temporary increase in complement plus within Parliamentary Services, was no longer required and he stated that the request would be deferred to a future meeting.

SMT considered and approved a staff complement change request from the Clerk Assistants, to amend previously agreed posts within the Windsor Framework Democratic Scrutiny Committee from complement plus to complement.

10. Right to Work in the United Kingdom (UK)

Sinéad presented a draft policy on the Right to Work in the UK.

Following consideration, SMT approved the policy for inclusion in the Staff Handbook.

Sinéad McDonnell left the meeting at 10.46 am.

Gary Browne joined the meeting at 10.46 am for agenda item 11 and 11.1.

11. Provisional Outturn at March 2024

Gary Browne presented provisional outturn figures for 2023-24.

SMT noted underspends on the provisional outturn figures for Resource DEL and Capital DEL when compared to the Spring Supplementary Estimates (SSEs).

Gareth McGrath expressed his disappointment at the level of underspend in Admin costs for the Parliamentary Services Directorate and stated that he would follow up on this with his Heads of Business (HoBs).

Lesley noted her disappointment at the overall level of underspends for Admin costs. Specifically in relation to the underspend in Staff costs, Lesley asked Gary if the Finance Office was liaising closely with the HR Office in relation to the starting of new staff. Gary stated that the monitoring of this could be improved and he agreed to feed this back to senior members of the Finance Team.

Steven Baxter highlighted the unique set of circumstances that arose this year with a return to Assembly Business in early February making year-end estimates more complex than a business-as-usual year. Steven also stated that without Finance Business Partners, it was unlikely that the management of expenditure against budget in relation to Staff Costs would improve.

In relation to the provisional outturn for Capital, Lesley recorded her thanks to all those involved in the management and delivery of the projects and associated expenditure, which had come in very close to budget.

Steven asked that Directors reinforce with their Budget Managers the need for careful management of the capital expenditure for 2024/25.

11.1 Management Accounts April 2024

Gary presented the Management Accounts for April 2024.

SMT noted current forecast outturns for Resource DEL and Capital DEL.

Gary outlined and sought SMT approval of bids and surrenders brought forward by budget holders in Admin costs and Capital. Following consideration, SMT approved the bids and surrenders as presented.

Gary referred to the June monitoring exercise and, in light of the quantum of surplus funds identified, proposed that no surrender be made and a NIL return submitted. SMT was content with this proposal.

Gary Browne left the meeting at 11.13 am.

Meeting suspended at 11.13 am and resumed at 11.20 am.

Terri Quigley joined the meeting 11.20 am for agenda item 12.

12. Annual Environmental Management Review 2023-2024

Terri Quigley presented the Environmental Management Review for the period April 2023 to March 2024.

Terri advised that the reporting of some of the measurements of some of the targets and historical outturns had been updated to align with the actual bills as opposed to the Building Energy Management System (BEMS) readings.

SMT noted the progress made against the environmental targets for 2023-2025. SMT was disappointed that the Environmental Working Group had yet to be established and was keen for this to be progressed as soon as possible.

On reviewing the progress made against the Continuous Action Plan for 2023-2024, Lesley noted that this was not the final version as agreed by SMT in August 2023, and she asked for this to be amended accordingly. Steven stated that while the plan was functional, it perhaps could be more strategic and aspirational in nature. Terri agreed to review this. The draft Continuous Action Plan for 2024-2025 was also reviewed and some amendments proposed.

Action: Terri to update the paper and Action Plans as proposed, and re-circulate to SMT for final approval.

Terri advised SMT of new climate change reporting duties required under Section 42 of the Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland) 2022. In light of this, SMT asked Terri to prepare a paper outlining the new requirements and how these would be met, for consideration at the September 2024 SMT meeting.

Action: Terri to prepare a paper on the new climate change reporting duties, for consideration by SMT at its September 2024 meeting.

Terri Quigley left the meeting at 11.45 am.

LEGAL, GOVERNANCE AND RESEARCH SERVICES

Donna-Marie Clark joined the meeting at 11.46 am for agenda item 13.

13. Sensitivity Review 2001 to 2002 Release

Donna-Marie Clark presented a paper, which sought approval to release six 2001 to 2002 files to the Public Records Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI).

Following discussion, SMT approved the six 2001 to 2002 release files for transfer to PRONI, and noted that the Assembly Commission would be notified in advance of the release.

Donna-Marie left the meeting at 11.50 am.

Melissa Sharples joined the meeting at 11.50 am for agenda item 14.

14. Implementation of New Procurement Legislation

Melissa Sharples provided SMT with information on the Procurement Act 2023 and the new procurement regulations that are due to come into effect from 28 October 2024.

Melissa advised that the new legislation would mean significant changes for the Procurement Office and outlined the proposed approach for implementing the new legislative requirements over the next five months.

SMT noted the new legislative requirements and was content with the implementation approach proposed by the Head of Procurement as set out in the Action Plan provided.

Melissa also outlined a proposal to introduce a requirement for all new projects to consider the potential for incorporating relevant and proportionate social value into Assembly Commission regulated contracts (i.e. those above a certain threshold, currently £116k). SMT agreed that this was a sensible and pragmatic approach.

SMT thanked Melissa for her excellent paper.

Melissa Sharples left the meeting at 12.04 pm.

Change to agenda running order.

PARLIAMENTARY SERVICES

Clare Maguire joined the meeting at 12.05 pm for agenda item 16.

16. Revised Sponsored Events in Parliament Buildings Policy

Clare Maguire presented a draft 'Sponsored Events in Parliament Buildings Policy' for approval by SMT.

Clare noted that, following an audit of the 'Speaker, Assembly Commission and Member Sponsored Events at the Northern Ireland Assembly', several recommendations had been made in relation to the 'Events in Parliament Buildings and its Grounds' policy, and consequently the policy had been revised.

Following consideration, SMT approved the draft revised policy for presentation to the Assembly Commission for approval at its meeting in June 2024.

SMT thanked Clare for her work on producing the revised policy.

Clare Maguire left the meeting at 12.12 pm.

Michael Cairns joined the meeting at 12.15 pm, for agenda item 17.

17. Strategic Communications Update

SMT received a communications update from the Acting Head of Communications.

Michael Cairns left the meeting at 12.25 pm.

Mary-Ellen Nutt joined the meeting at 12.25 pm for agenda item 16.

15. Cyber Security Review

SMT noted that the findings from the Cyber Security Assurance Review and IT Strategy Reviews, both of which had been considered in detail at a separate meeting with the Head of IT and Deputy Head of IT on 30 May 2024.

As Steven had not been able to attend the meeting on 30 May 2024, it was noted that he would meet with Mary-Ellen to discuss the findings from the reviews.

SMT noted that Mary-Ellen accepted the findings and recommendations in the Cyber Security Assurance Review. SMT agreed to implement the Priority one recommendations and that Mary-Ellen would progress the Priority two and three recommendations, reporting to the Director of Parliamentary Services and in conjunction with other relevant business areas.

Lesley requested that SMT be updated on the progress made against the recommendations in twelve months' time.

SMT noted that the IT Strategy Review provided a good foundation to inform the development of the Assembly Commission's IT Strategy, that Mary-Ellen would progress the recommendations from the review reporting to the Director of Parliamentary Services and that a draft IT Strategy would be presented to SMT in due course.

On considering a recruitment request, SMT approved the request in principle, subject to the post being evaluated. SMT noted that a staff complement change request would be submitted for approval later in the year, following evaluation of the post.

SMT thanked Mary-Ellen and her team for their participation in the review and also those business areas that had fed into it.

Mary-Ellen Nutt left the meeting at 12.45 pm.

OTHER ITEMS

Dan Hull joined the meeting at 12.45 pm for agenda item 18.

18. A Joint Staff Survey: Draft Questions

Dan Hull advised that the forthcoming joint staff survey would be conducted by the Assembly Commission and the Senedd, as the Scottish Parliament had decided not to participate on this occasion.

Dan subsequently sought approval of proposed draft questions for use in the survey. Following consideration, SMT suggested some minor amendments to the proposed questions and agreed that consideration needed to be given to the inclusion of questions in relation to HoBs, within the section on Leadership and Managing Change.

Steven noted that he would liaise with the Head of HR on the proposed questions and contact Dan directly with any further proposed changes.

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

Dan stated that there was currently no budget set aside to cover the cost of the survey and SMT agreed that he should bid for the necessary funds.

SMT thanked Dan and the members of ICG for all the work that had been undertaken on the joint staff survey thus far.

Dan Hull left the meeting at 1.20 pm.

19. Assembly Commission Papers Cleared by Correspondence

- Defects in the Roof of Parliament Buildings
- The Assembly Members (Remuneration Board) Bill
- Budget 2024-25 Motion
- Financial Assistance for Political Parties Scheme 2024
- Personal Security and Safety of Members and their Staff at Constituency Offices, or Members' Private Dwellings
- Financial Assistance for Political Parties Scheme 2024
- Corporate Plan 2023-2028 and Annual Plan 2023-2024
- Request for the Assembly Commission to Display a Portrait of His Majesty The King

20. Directors' Updates

Legal, Governance and Research Services

Legal Services

Tara advised that the number of formal requests for legal advice received by the Legal Services Office during the period 18 April 2024 to 24 May 2024 had increased from the previous reporting period.

Litigation

Tara noted ongoing litigation.

Learning and Development

Tara noted that the recent UK and Ireland Parliamentary Lawyers conference hosted by Legal Services had been a great success, and she recorded her thanks to Simon Kelly, Adam Leitch and Julie Devlin for organising it.

Governance

Tara advised that the next Assembly Commission Audit and Risk Committee meeting was scheduled for 26 June 2024.

Information Commissioners Office (ICO)

Tara provided an update on ICO complaints.

Research and Information Service (RaISe)

Tara noted an increasing level of research requests.

Procurement Office

Tara updated SMT on the ongoing procurement projects.

Corporate Services

Finance Office

Steven referred to the ongoing workload within the Finance Office and the need to complete the independent review

Support Services

Steven advised that a new price had been agreed for the three-course meal in the Members' Dining Room and that a deposit for Christmas bookings had been introduced.

Systems Review Project

Steven provided SMT with an update on the Systems Review Project and advised that an Options paper would be considered by the Project Board at the end of June 2024.

Usher Services

Steven noted that the recruitment for Ushers had completed.

Steven also advised that a review of the lower east carpark was being undertaken.

Parliamentary Services

Gareth McGrath provided a detailed account of the work undertaken by all business areas within the Parliamentary Services Directorate, since last reported at the SMT meeting on 26 April 2024.

Broadcasting - Senate Chamber

Gareth advised that the refurbishment of the Senate Chamber was progressing well.

21. AOB

There was no other business.

22. Date of Next Meeting

It was agreed that the next meeting would take place on 4 July 2024.

23. Proposals for Agenda Items for Next Meeting

- Review of Child Protection (Safeguarding) Policy
- The Evacuation of Disabled Persons from Parliament Buildings
- Review of Fraud Prevention and Anti-Bribery Policy and Response Plan
- Draft Assembly Commission Paper on the Assembly Members (Salaries and Expenses) Determination
- Draft Assembly Commission Paper on the Defect in the Roof of Parliament Buildings
- Draft Assembly Commission Paper on the Business Case for Remedial Works to Roof of Parliament Buildings
- Draft Assembly Commission Paper on the Systems Review Project
- Draft Assembly Commission Paper on the Annual Equality Progress Report to the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland 2023-2024
- Review of Fraud and Bribery Self-Assessment Checklists, Bribery Risk Assessment and Action Plan
- Quarterly Review of the Corporate Risk Register
- Review of Data Protection Policy
- Business Case for the New Website
- Strategic Communications Update

The meeting ended at 1.42 pm.