

SECRETARIAT MANAGEMENT GROUP (SMG)

**THURSDAY, 17 DECEMBER 2020 at 9.30AM
(VIRTUAL MEETING VIA MICROSOFT TEAMS)**

APPROVED

Present: Lesley Hogg
Tara Caul
Gareth McGrath
Richard Stewart

In Attendance: Janet Hughes
Aine Kerr
Susie Brown
Shauna Mageean
Paul Gill
Paula McClintock
Julie Devlin

Opening/Review

The meeting commenced at 9.35 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 20 November 2020 would be published within the next few days.

4. SMG Action Points

The outstanding action points were reviewed and progress was noted.

Post Project Evaluation Registry

Richard Stewart, Director of Corporate Services, advised that a communication would be issued to Heads of Business (HoBs) in early

January, in relation to the new Post Project Evaluation Registry, with a further communication to all staff thereafter.

Vacant Posts

Lesley Hogg, Clerk/Chief Executive, confirmed that she would meet with Directors in January to discuss the current vacant posts within the Assembly.

Action: Lesley Hogg to arrange a meeting with Directors in January 2021, to discuss the current vacant posts within the Assembly.

5. Political Update

Lesley noted that it had been an extremely busy year and she recorded her thanks to all staff and contractors for their efforts and hard work during very challenging times.

Tara Caul, Director of Legal, Governance and Research Services, noted a major change to the legislative competence test (Section 6 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998) in January 2021. She confirmed that a paper was being prepared for the Speaker in relation to this matter.

CORPORATE SUPPORT

6. Draft Assembly Commission Agenda

It was noted that the next Assembly Commission meeting would take place in early February 2021.

Proposed items for the meeting included:

- Clerk/Chief Executive's Report
- Additional HR Support for MLAs including possible Insurance Cover
- Assembly Members Pension Scheme Annual Report and Accounts
- Centenary Events in 2021
- Review of the Financial Assistance to Political Parties Scheme
- Youth Assembly

CORPORATE SERVICES

Aine Kerr, Senior HR Manager, joined the meeting at 9.57am for agenda item 7.

7. HR Management Information

Aine Kerr presented the monthly HR Management Information as at 1 December 2020.

SMG noted that the Staff in Post (SiP) figure on 1 December 2020 (including agency and inward seconded staff) was 348.3 Full Time Equivalents (FTE) against an agreed staff complement (including complement plus) of 385.8 FTE.

It was identified that some AG8 vacancies for posts that required specialised skills would arise in January 2021 (for example, the AG8 in the Legal Services Office). SMG agreed that posts requiring specialised skills could be filled externally but that where specialised skills were not needed, existing staff should be used.

Aine provided information on temporary promotion and deputising arrangements, together with details of the current number of agency workers assigned to the Assembly Secretariat.

SMG reviewed the Recruitment Schedule, and Aine advised that interviews had completed for the positions of Senior Assistant Assembly Clerk and Parliamentary Reporter. It was also noted that the closing date for the Deputy Head of Information Systems post was 21 December 2020.

Tara advised that the priority had changed in relation to the competition for the Legal Adviser posts, and proposed that interviews should be planned during the Summer Recess 2021. Aine agreed to update the schedule accordingly.

Sickness absence information was provided and it was noted that for the period December 2019 to November 2020, the average days lost to sickness absence per FTE member of staff was 7.8 days, compared with an average of 11.5 days during the period December 2018 to November 2019. Aine informed SMG that there continued to be a reduction in short term absences.

Aine Kerr left the meeting at 10.25am.

8. Review of Building Maintenance

It was noted that a detailed meeting involving the Clerk/Chief Executive, Directors and the Head of Building Services had taken place on 16 December 2020, in relation to the review of building maintenance; that further information had been requested; and that a paper would be presented to SMG at a later stage pending the receipt of further information.

Richard passed on David Lynn's (Head of Buildings Services) thanks to the members of SMG for their helpful input at the recent meeting.

PARLIAMENTARY SERVICES

Susie Brown, Head of Communications, joined the meeting at 10.28am for agenda items 9 and 10.

9. **Business Case for the Procurement of a Broadcasting Technical Adviser**

Susie Brown presented this paper and sought approval from SMG to proceed with the procurement of a Broadcasting Technical Adviser to undertake two pieces of work, namely:

- To carry out a Post Project Evaluation on the current Broadcasting, Associated Equipment Maintenance and Related Services contract; and
- To advise on and take an active role in the Broadcasting, Associated Equipment Maintenance and Related Services contract re-tender project due in 2021-2022.

Susie advised that it was also intended that the Broadcasting Technical Adviser would provide ad-hoc technical advice and assistance on the implementation of the Lifecycle Equipment Maintenance Plan for Broadcasting.

Susie informed SMG that whilst the Communications Office managed the Broadcasting Contract, its staff did not have the in-depth technical knowledge, skills or experience to provide specialist technical broadcasting advice and guidance to SMG and the Assembly Commission; and that having access to an independent expert was therefore critical.

SMG noted the anticipated cost of the technical advice over a two-year period.

Following consideration, SMG approved the business case and highlighted the importance of early engagement with the Procurement Office and Legal Services regarding procurement.

As the value of the business case was in excess of the Clerk/Chief Executive's delegated authority, Lesley stated that she would seek approval from the Speaker.

Action: Lesley to seek the Speaker's approval for the business case to procure a broadcasting technical adviser.

10. **Sequencing of Proposed Broadcasting Projects 2021-2024**

Susie advised SMG that much of the broadcasting equipment in Parliament Buildings was approaching end of life, at end of life or beyond end of life and that the Lifecycle Equipment Maintenance Plan for

Broadcasting considered by SMG at its November meeting, set out a multi-year programme of broadcasting equipment replacement.

In light of this, Susie sought approval, in principle, to the proposed sequencing of three major broadcasting projects between 2021 and 2024, as follows:

- Upgrade of room 21;
- Upgrade of the broadcasting systems in the Assembly and Senate Chambers; and
- Upgrade of rooms 29 and 30.

Susie also provided details on the anticipated cost of the three projects.

Following consideration, SMG approved, in principle, the proposed sequencing of the three projects as outlined, to replace broadcasting equipment in Parliament Buildings.

Susie also sought approval of the preparation of a feasibility study on increasing broadcasting capacity, to enable more than three committee meetings to be broadcast simultaneously.

SMG agreed that the current broadcasting capacity limitation was becoming increasingly problematic and that a feasibility study to increase broadcasting capacity should be prepared.

Susie Brown left the meeting at 11.09am.

Meeting suspended at 11.09am and resumed at 11.21am.

Shauna Mageean, EU Affairs Manager, joined the meeting at 11.21am for agenda item 11.

11. Quarterly Update on EU Exit

Shauna Mageean updated SMG on the latest news regarding EU Exit and developments in respect of the Internal Market Bill, the expected Taxation (Post-Transition Period) Bill, and a potential Future Relationship Bill.

SMG thanked Shauna for a very comprehensive update.

Shauna Mageean left the meeting at 11.44pm.

Paul Gill, Clerk Assistant, joined the meeting at 11.45am for agenda item 12.

12. Staffing Support for the Business Office and Committee on Procedures

Paul Gill presented this paper and outlined the rationale behind the current staffing resources allocated to the Business Office and Committee on Procedures. It was noted that the volume of work in both business areas had increased significantly since the staffing resources had been agreed.

Paul informed SMG that the current staffing resources were no longer sufficient to support the volume of work and sought approval to increase the staff complement in Clerking by one AG4, split equally between the Business Office and the Committee on Procedures, and for the additional AG7, who had supported the Business Office since October 2016, to be treated as part of Clerking's permanent complement.

Richard sought confirmation that the business improvement efficiencies that had informed the staffing resources in the Business Office and the Committee on Procedures were not being unwound. Paul confirmed that the efficiencies were still being maintained, and that the request for additional staffing resource was due to the increase in the volume of work.

Following consideration, SMG approved an increase in the Clerking staff complement by one AG4, subject to the necessary budget being available, and one AG7.

Paul Gill left the meeting at 12.09pm.

13. Members' Survey 2021

Gareth McGrath, Director of Parliamentary Services, advised SMG that field work in support of the Members Survey 2021, would be undertaken during January and February 2021, with Members being invited to participate in interviews with RalSe researchers.

It was noted that a Research report would be prepared following analysis of the findings and presented to SMG for consideration, together with an associated action plan.

Paula McClintock, Head of Finance, joined the meeting at 12.10pm for agenda item 14.

14. Management Accounts

Paula presented the Management Accounts for November 2020 and SMG noted the current forecast outturn for 2020/21.

Paula advised that the January Monitoring exercise commissioned by the Department of Finance (DoF) was the final Monitoring round of the year

and was being carried out in two phases. She confirmed that the first phase was complete and that the deadline for submission of the second phase was 4 January 2021.

Paula stated that further amendments may be required in the second phase to the Annually Managed Expenditure portion of the budget in relation to the Members' Pension Scheme Finance costs, once figures from the Government Actuary's Department (GAD) were received, but that no further changes were proposed to Departmental Expenditure Limits at this time.

SMG discussed the risk of Members potentially incurring Finders' Fees for agency staff who are subsequently appointed as permanent members of staff.

SMG requested that this matter be highlighted to Members.

Action: Paula to issue a guidance note to all Members, in relation to potential Finders' Fees if agency staff are subsequently appointed as permanent members of their staff.

In relation to SMG's approval of an increase in the Clerking staff complement by one AG4 subject to the necessary budget being available, Lesley asked Paula if sufficient funds were available. Paula confirmed that it was likely that there would be sufficient budget available to meet the cost of an additional AG4 post.

On reviewing the Capital Plan, Paula sought SMG's approval of a bid for £24.7k, which had been received from the Head of Communications to cover the cost of purchasing replacement vision mixer equipment for the Assembly Chamber and Senate Chamber, due to system failure. Paula advised that approval of this bid would push the current forecast above the agreed budget envelope, by £20k and she proposed prioritising the remaining capital projects in order to manage this potential overspend from within the existing envelope.

Gareth advised that he anticipated underspends on other capital projects detailed within the Capital Plan for the Parliamentary Services Directorate, totalling approximately £17k, which he stated could be offset against the £20k potential overspend.

Paula also stated that she had been advised of a small underspend in another project on the Plan, which could also be used to reduce the potential £20k overspend.

On the basis of sufficient funds having been identified internally to meet the majority of the potential overspend, SMG approved the bid of £24.7k for the vision mixer replacement equipment.

SMG reviewed the latest Decision Authorisation System (DAS) report and Paula asked that Directors check their records, as there were a number of variations to DAS records in the system that required sign off.

SMG noted it had been a very busy period for the Finance Office and thanked Paula and her team for their efforts in completing the January Monitoring return and all the work involved with implementing the new Assembly Members Determination.

Paula McClintock left the meeting at 12.40pm.

LEGAL, GOVERNANCE AND RESEARCH SERVICES

Julie Devlin, Governance Officer, joined the meeting at 12.40pm for agenda items 15 and 16.

15. Quarterly Review of Corporate Risk Register

SMG noted that the Clerk/Chief Executive and Directors had met on 2 December 2020 to discuss the Corporate Risk Register in detail.

SMG approved the Corporate Risk Register for December 2020 and noted that it would be reviewed by SMG again in March 2021. SMG also noted that the Corporate Risk Register would be presented to the Assembly Commission and the Secretariat Audit and Risk Committee (SARC) at their next meetings.

16. Annual Review of Corporate Governance Framework

Julie Devlin presented an updated version of the Corporate Governance Framework. She confirmed that it had been revised to closely align with the Governance Statement included in the Assembly Commission's Annual Report and Accounts, following consideration of an initial draft by SMG at its meeting on 23 October 2020 and at a subsequent workshop on 12 November 2020.

Following consideration, SMG approved the revised Corporate Governance Framework, subject to some minor amendments.

Lesley thanked Tara and Julie for all the hard work that they had put in to revise and update the Corporate Governance Framework, which she said was much more streamlined.

Tara recorded her thanks to the Clerk/Chief Executive and Directors for their input and assistance with the review.

Julie Devlin left the meeting at 12.48pm.

OTHER ITEMS

17. Directorate Updates

SMG noted the Directorate updates.

Corporate Services

Finance Office

Richard advised that the Fraud and Bribery Policy had been re-issued to staff following an interim review of legislative changes.

Building Services

Richard informed SMG that the Assembly Commission had attained the Platinum award, which was the highest possible quintile ranking in the annual Northern Ireland Environmental Benchmarking Survey run by Business in the Community.

SMG noted the work done by the Sustainable Development Office in achieving the Platinum award and recorded their thanks and congratulations to all involved.

Support Services

SMG noted the cost of the catering element of the support services contract, against the budget as agreed at the SMG meeting in July 2020.

Legal, Governance and Research Services

Information Standards

Tara informed SMG, that changes anticipated to UK Data Protection law following the end of the EU Exit Implementation Period at the end of the year, could potentially have an impact on contracts and applications used by the Assembly Commission which process personal data outside of the UK. She advised that Ryan Fleming, the Data Protection and Information Standards Officer (DPISO) had collated returns from business areas and prepared a table showing actions taken regarding the contracts and applications identified to ensure compliance.

Action: The DPISO and Head of Procurement to issue notes to HoBs highlighting the key changes to procurement processes, General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the Data Protection Act, following the end of the EU Exit Implementation Period.

Examiner of Statutory Rules (ESR)

Tara advised SMG of the heavy workload within the office of the ESR.

Internal Audit

Tara provided an update on the Internal Audit Reviews for:

- Equality and Good Relations Unit;
- Corporate Procurement Cards;
- Mobile Phones;
- Secretariat Pensions;
- Secretariat Travel;
- Information Systems Infrastructure and Hansard;
- Procurement Office;
- Speaker's Office; and
- Accounts Payable.

Assembly Members (Remuneration Board) Bill

Tara noted that the Assembly Members (Remuneration Board) Bill had been introduced on 7 December 2020 and SMG thanked the Project Team and the other Assembly Commission staff involved with its production.

Procurement

Tara advised that due to a significant increase in workload, a meeting would be arranged with the Clerk/Chief Executive, Directors and the Head of Procurement to prioritise procurement work.

Parliamentary Services

Gareth advised that Liz Beaton had taken up post as Internal Communications Officer on 14 December 2020.

18. AOB

There was no other business.

19. Date of next meeting

Next meeting to take place on 29 January 2021.

20. Proposals for Agenda Items for Next Meeting

- Centenary Events 2021
- Review of the Financial Assistance to Political Parties Scheme
- Health and Safety Report
- Additional HR Support for MLAs including possible Insurance Cover
- Section 75 Secretariat Staff Survey
- Cycle to Work Scheme
- Review of Building Maintenance
- Review of Data Breach Management Plan
- Public Engagement Activity: Biannual Report
- Youth Assembly

The meeting ended at 1.16pm.