

SECRETARIAT MANAGEMENT GROUP (SMG)

FRIDAY, 23 OCTOBER 2020 at 9.30AM
(VIRTUAL MEETING VIA MICROSOFT TEAMS)

APPROVED

Present: Lesley Hogg
Tara Caul
Gareth McGrath
Richard Stewart

In Attendance: Janet Hughes
Robin Ramsey
Paula McClintock
Karen Martin
Cathy McGowan
Maria Bannon
Ryan Fleming
Jonathan McMillen

Opening/Review

The meeting commenced at 9.32am.

1. Apologies

No apologies were received.

2. Declarations of Interest

Gareth McGrath, as Trustee and Board Member of Politics Plus, declared an interest in agenda item 22.

3. Minutes of previous meeting

It was noted that the minutes and unrestricted papers from the meeting on 24 September 2020 had been published on 21 October 2020.

Lesley Hogg, however, advised that an error with a date noted in the recently published minutes had been brought to her attention and sought SMG's approval to amend and re-publish. SMG approved the change of date.

Action: Corporate Support Unit to arrange for the published minutes of the 24 September 2020 SMG meeting to be amended.

4. SMG Action Points

The outstanding action points were reviewed and progress was noted.

A revised completion date of March 2021 was agreed for the action from the 24 January 2020 meeting, in relation to a review of financial management process.

Robin Ramsey, Adviser to the Speaker/Head of Corporate Support, joined the meeting at 9.42am for agenda items 5 and 6.

5. Political Update

Lesley noted that substantive changes had been made on 16 October 2020 by the Health Protection (Coronavirus Restrictions) (No.2) (Amendment No.9) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 to the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 which came into operation on 23 July 2020. In light of this, Lesley confirmed that SMG, in conjunction with the COVID-19 Response Group had reviewed all of the Assembly Commission's current health and safety arrangements and COVID-19 mitigation measures in place since March 2020 and agreed that no further amendments were considered necessary.

It was noted, however, that Regulation 6 made specific reference to the organisation, operation or participation in workplace gatherings of more than 15 people, which are not prohibited "when it is not reasonably practicable for the duties of any person participating in the gathering to be carried out at that person's private dwelling".

Therefore, Directors were asked to speak with their Heads of Business (HoBs), to ensure that all those staff within their business areas who were able to work from home were doing so and to ensure that all work that continued to be required in the building was being undertaken.

Action: Directors to speak with their HoBs to ensure that all those staff within their business areas who were able to work from home were doing so and also to ensure that all work that continued to be required in the building was being undertaken.

Lesley noted the work being carried out in relation to using alternative technology for procedural business.

SMG recorded its thanks for the continuing work of the COVID-19 Response Group.

CORPORATE SUPPORT

6. Draft Assembly Commission Agenda

Robin Ramsey confirmed that the next Assembly Commission meeting was scheduled for 11 November 2020.

Proposed items for the meeting included:

- Clerk/Chief Executive's Report
- Assembly Members (Remuneration Board) Bill
- Pay Claim 2020
- Consideration of Extending the Assembly Commission's Annual Dates for the Lighting of Parliament Buildings
- Politics Plus Report on 2019 Activity
- Behaviour Code

Robin Ramsey left the meeting at 9.55am.

CORPORATE SERVICES

Paula McClintock, Head of Finance, joined the meeting at 9.55am for agenda item 7.

7. Management Accounts

Lesley requested that Paula explain why equality screening was not necessary in future monthly Management Accounts submissions to SMG.

Action: Paula to explain why equality screening is not necessary in future Management Accounts submissions to SMG.

Paula presented the Management Accounts for September 2020.

Paula advised that the management accounts had been updated to show the forecast against the October Monitoring position, which was agreed by the Clerk/Chief Executive and Directors at a meeting on 1 October 2020. It was noted that the outcome of the October Monitoring round had still to be formally notified.

Paula confirmed that the Assembly Commission's Annual Report and Accounts for the year ended 31 March 2020 had been certified and laid at the Assembly.

In relation to forecast expenditure for Secretariat Salaries, it was noted that significant work had been undertaken in preparing the Monitoring submission to review all of the vacant posts and to realign the forecast with the planned recruitment activity and scheduled engagement of agency staff. Paula confirmed that all of these factors had been

incorporated into the most recent forecast and stressed to Directors the importance of engaging with the Finance Office as early as possible when considering bringing in new staff, as the budget would need to be closely monitored.

SMG reviewed the Capital Plan and noted the capital spend to date.

Paula informed SMG of three surrenders against the Capital Plan in relation to, the HyperV project, the Parliament Buildings Security System and the Broadcasting Router Matrix.

Paula also asked SMG to consider a bid from the IS Office for the purchase of fifty additional Swivel licences, to enable remote working for Assembly staff, at a cost of £1.3k. SMG approved the bid.

Lesley queried why no expenditure had been recorded against 'Starleaf' on the Capital Plan. Paula agreed to investigate this with the relevant business area and provide an update in the November report to SMG.

Lesley also queried the update recorded against the purchase of a presentation screen for the Great Hall, which stated that procurement had commenced. It was noted that expenditure for this had not yet been approved and that the procurement should not proceed until approval had been granted by SMG. The question of whether a new screen needed to be purchased was also raised, as the Head of IS had previously indicated that there were a number of other screens available within the building. Gareth to look into this and report back to SMG.

Action: Gareth to speak with the Head of Public Engagement in relation to the procurement of a presentation screen for the Great Hall and report back to SMG.

In relation to the funds in the Capital Plan for office furniture, Lesley queried why the business case for this had not been progressed.

Action: Richard to identify why the business case for office furniture has not been progressed.

Paula advised SMG that she would be writing to HoBs later that day, in relation to the budget exercise for 2021-22, seeking returns for their respective business areas within two weeks. Paula highlighted to Directors the importance of completing these returns within the deadline.

SMG reviewed the Decision Authorisation System (DAS) report and Lesley queried why a number of the DAS records still had no authorisation dates recorded. Paula advised that this was a legacy issue with the DAS system and that some entries could only be changed by the person who had created the DAS, which caused problems with updating if that person no longer worked in that particular business area. In order to address this issue Paula agreed to review and annotate the report with the correct dates.

Lesley also highlighted a number of anomalies in relation to the value of expenditure recorded against a number of the items on the report and Tara Caul raised an issue regarding a generic date (1900-01-00) which appeared on several occasions in the DAS report as the authorised date. Paula agreed to investigate these anomalies with the relevant business areas and provide updates in next month's report to SMG.

SMG recorded their thanks to Paula, Billy Mahoney and the rest of the Finance team for their work on producing the Annual Report and Accounts for the year ended 31 March 2020, which had been recognised by the Secretariat Audit and Risk Committee and the Audit Office as being of high quality.

Paula McClintock left the meeting at 10.34am.

Karen Martin, Deputy Head of HR, joined the meeting at 10.34am for agenda items 8 and 9.

8. HR Management Information

Karen Martin presented the monthly HR Management Information as at 1 October 2020.

SMG noted that the Staff in Post (SiP) figure on 1 October 2020 (including agency and inward seconded staff) was 340.0 Full Time Equivalents (FTE) against an agreed staff complement (including complement plus) of 383.8 FTE.

On reviewing the table of staff complement and temporary (complement plus) posts, Tara raised a query in relation to the AG5 complement recorded against Research and Information Service (RaISe) and it was agreed that Karen would liaise with the Head of RaISe.

Action: Karen to review the AG5 complement recorded against RaISe with the Head of RaISe.

Tara also asked for a further minor amendment to be made to the approved staff complement table for her Directorate.

Karen provided information on temporary promotion and deputising arrangements. Following review, Lesley stated that permanent staff resources must be fully utilised before employing any further agency staff, particularly in relation to AG8 positions.

SMG reviewed the Recruitment Schedule, which had been amended to show which recruitment team was managing each competition, as requested at the last meeting.

Karen informed SMG of the progress on recruitment competitions.

Lesley asked that the advertising date on the schedule for the recruitment of an Independent Financial Review Panel (IFRP) Chairperson and Members, be amended to March 2021.

Tara also advised that the advertising date for the Governance Officer post, currently recorded on the schedule for 19 November 2020, required further consideration.

Gareth stated that he would be keen for the advertising of the Internal Communications Officer position to be moved up the priority list.

It was agreed that any amendments to recruitment priorities would be further discussed at the meeting planned for 6 November 2020.

Lesley sought assurance from Karen that the job specifications for generic posts were reviewed regularly to ensure they remained fully reflective of the Assembly's requirements. Karen confirmed job specifications were reviewed with interview panels ahead of all recruitment competitions.

Sickness absence information was provided and it was noted that for the period October 2019 to September 2020, the average days lost to sickness absence per FTE member of staff was 9.3 days, which represented a decrease of 2.2 days when compared with the same period last year.

Richard advised SMG that an alternative occupational health (OH) provider had been procured for a period of one year with the contract taking effect from 2 November 2020.

It was also noted that Occupation Health Service (OHS) had started to accept a small number of telephone referrals.

Cathy McGowan, Learning and Development Manager, joined the meeting at 10.54am for agenda item 9.

9. Bi-annual Review of Learning and Development Activities

Cathy McGowan provided SMG with an update on the progress made from April 2020 to September 2020, in relation to the implementation of Corporate Learning and Development (L&D) activities for Secretariat staff.

Cathy advised that the L&D team had had to be innovative in how learning solutions were offered and delivered to staff during this reporting period, due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. It was noted that despite the challenges raised by the COVID-19 pandemic coupled with a busy parliamentary programme, the L&D team had still managed to implement a range of activities to enable the continued delivery of learning and development within the Assembly Secretariat.

Cathy confirmed that a total of 148.47 training days had been delivered via, socially distanced classroom based training in the new L&D training room, e-learning courses and online conferences.

Cathy presented a budget versus spend profile for four of the five categories within the L&D Framework and sought SMG's approval to the proposed changes to the Corporate L&D budget for the remainder of the financial year. It was noted under Category 2: Assembly Business Skills, that at present no budget had been assigned to this category from a corporate learning and development perspective, as the activities arising from the Corporate Strategy and the future development of a Learning and Development Strategy would inform the activities that would take place under this category.

Following discussion, SMG approved the proposed changes to the Corporate L&D budget as outlined and requested that the proposal to add MLAs and their staff to the LinkS platform, be progressed as quickly as possible.

Action: Cathy to progress the proposal to add MLAs and their staff to the LinkS platform and update SMG accordingly.

Action: Karen to provide an update on the proposal to add MLAs and their staff to the LinkS platform to Lesley, for inclusion in her report to the Assembly Commission at its November meeting.

Cathy advised SMG of a new opportunity in relation to the establishment of an Inter-Parliamentary Coaching Network. She confirmed that the L&D team had been approached by the L&D Manager from the Welsh Parliament, who had instigated a collaboration between all L&D teams from each of the UK Parliamentary bodies, to explore the feasibility of creating an 'Inter-Parliamentary Coaching Network'. Cathy informed SMG that this group had met virtually on several occasions to explore the parameters of creating a network of staff qualified as coaches, who could offer a range of support throughout the network. Cathy sought SMG approval to gauge the level of interest within the existing group of certified coaches in the Secretariat and explore the range of areas where coaching could be offered.

SMG was very supportive of this initiative and was content for Cathy to gauge the level of interest from certified coaches within the Secretariat. SMG also suggested extending this to staff who had done coaching but didn't have a formal qualification.

Karen referred to the new 'Getting on Board' programme which had been rolled out in August 2020 and acknowledged the key role that the L&D team had played in implementing this. It was noted that initial feedback was very positive.

SMG also acknowledged the efforts of the HR team in relation to the implementation of this new programme.

In relation to staff training, Tara requested that the proposed online Section 75 training be progressed as soon as possible and advised that updated GDPR and Data Protection training needed to be rolled out to all staff before the end of March 2021. Tara also highlighted the importance of completing the review of the Assistance to Study policies during this financial year to allow for the application process to reopen in 2021.

SMG thanked Cathy for a very comprehensive report.

Cathy McGowan left the meeting at 11.13am.

Whilst Karen was still in attendance, SMG considered a draft Behaviour Code which she had produced in consultation with the Clerk/Chief Executive and Directors.

SMG approved the draft for presentation to the Assembly Commission at its next meeting.

Action: Karen to prepare a paper for the next Assembly Commission meeting, seeking approval of a Behaviour Code.

Karen Martin left the meeting at 11.18am.

Meeting suspended at 11.18am and resumed at 11.32am.

Maria Bannon, Equality and Good Relations Manager, joined the meeting at 11.32am for agenda items 10 and 11.

10. Good Relations Action Plan 2016-21: April 2020 to October 2020 Update

Maria Bannon provided SMG with a progress update on the actions in the Good Relations Action Plan 2016-21 for the six-month reporting period.

Maria advised that of the 41 actions in the plan, 27 had been completed, 7 were progressing/ongoing, 4 were partially achieved, 1 was overdue and 2 had been suspended.

The impact of COVID-19 on Assembly Commission business and consequently some of the actions in the Good Relations Action Plan particularly for engagement activities and education visits was noted.

In relation to the overdue action on the 'development of an e-learning good relations package for staff training', Maria advised that this was to be developed in consultation with forum members and that the work of the forum was behind schedule due to COVID-19. It was noted that

there was nothing more the Assembly's Good Relations and Equality Unit could do at this time to progress this action and SMG agreed that this should be reflected in the progress update in the action plan.

SMG recognised the importance of this training and Maria advised that she had been considering some form of interim training. SMG was keen for interim training to be rolled out to staff as soon as possible.

Action: Maria to look into the possibility of rolling out some form of interim training in relation to good relations, whilst awaiting the development of an e-learning good relations package.

On reviewing other actions within the plan, it was agreed that two which were recorded as 'In progress' should be amended to 'Complete for the Reporting Period'. Also in relation to an action recorded as 'Partially achieved' it was agreed that the update should be reviewed in light of New Decade, New Approach.

Action: Maria to revise the progress updates on the actions as discussed and agreed by SMG.

Action: Maria to arrange for the Good Relations Action Plan to be published on the Assembly's website.

SMG considered a RaISE report on the findings of a visitor survey. Maria advised that a visitor survey was normally conducted at regular intervals throughout the year but as Parliament Buildings had been closed to the public in March 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the survey period was shorter than usual. SMG was concerned that limited data was available for the latest visitor survey and the resulting impact this had on the report's findings.

Maria confirmed that a review of the visitor survey was currently being undertaken, and that a revised survey would be presented to SMG as part of the March 2021 Good Relations Action Plan update.

11. Gender Action Plan Six-monthly Update: October 2020

SMG noted the progress update on the Gender Action Plan 2019-23 for the six-month reporting period.

Maria advised that of the 14 actions in the plan, 6 had been completed, 3 were in progress, 4 were overdue and 1 had been suspended.

In relation to the overdue actions, it was noted that additional resources had been secured for the Equality Unit and that those projects would now be progressed.

SMG agreed that HoBs should be reminded to invite those staff members involved with specific projects to appear with them at SMG meetings and

also to consult the gender balance checklist when forming new internal groups or panels.

Action: Equality Unit to periodically remind HoBs during review meetings, to invite those staff members involved with specific projects to appear with them at SMG meetings and also to consult the gender balance checklist when forming new internal groups or panels.

SMG discussed the action to 'Implement a Senior Women's Network' and it was agreed that no further meeting of the group was required. Lesley to provide Maria with a revised update.

Action: Maria to revise the progress update for the action in relation to the Senior Women's Network, as advised by Lesley.

Maria Bannon left the meeting at 12.17pm.

12. Sustainable Development Office Revised and Updated Targets

Paper deferred to November SMG meeting.

13. Request for Job Evaluation

It was noted that SMG had held a separate meeting to discuss the job evaluation request and was content for the post to be re-evaluated. SMG also noted that it was some time since the Job Evaluation Policy had been reviewed and that a review should be undertaken.

Action: Corporate Support Unit to advise the Deputy Head of HR to proceed with the job re-evaluation.

Action: Richard to ask the HR office to commence a review of the Job Evaluation Policy.

LEGAL, GOVERNANCE AND RESEARCH SERVICES

Ryan Fleming, Data Protection and Information Standards Officer, joined the meeting at 12.17pm for agenda item 14.

14. Report and Self-Assessment of the Information Security Group (ISG)

Ryan Fleming presented the Annual Report and Self-Assessment of ISG for the year to September 2020.

SMG noted the work undertaken by the ISG during the reporting period and the future actions for consideration by the group.

Ryan confirmed that the majority of the future actions centred around training and ensuring that ISG had an oversight of all data protection incidents.

It was also noted, that in light of anticipated changes in data protection law, Information Standards had begun the process of establishing with HoBs and Contract Managers whether any applications used by business areas, process personal data outside of the United Kingdom. Tara highlighted the importance of identifying all applications which fall into this category.

Going forward, Lesley asked that ISG consider removing a number of the historic references from the report as she thought that many were no longer necessary.

Action: Tara to ask ISG to consider removing a number of historic references from future reports.

SMG recorded its appreciation and thanks to the ISG for its ongoing work and for its comprehensive report.

Ryan Fleming left the meeting at 12.28pm.

15. Update of the Corporate Governance Framework

SMG reviewed the Corporate Governance Framework and following discussion, agreed that it should be more closely aligned with the Governance Statement included in the Assembly Commission's Annual Report and Accounts.

It was agreed that a meeting would be arranged with the Clerk/Chief Executive, Directors and Governance Officer to discuss revisions to the Corporate Governance Framework, before a paper was presented at the next SMG meeting.

Action: Tara to arrange a meeting with the Clerk/Chief Executive, Directors and Governance Officer to discuss revisions to the Corporate Governance Framework, prior to presenting the revised framework at the next SMG meeting.

Action: Governance Officer to present a revised Corporate Governance Framework to SMG at its next meeting.

Meeting suspended at 12.34pm and resumed at 1.30pm.

Jonathan McMillen, Head of Legal Services, joined the meeting at 1.30pm for agenda item 16.

16. Assembly Members (Remuneration Board) Bill

Jonathan McMillen noted that the Assembly Commission had previously considered a paper on Independent Financial Review Panel Reform (IFRP) and a draft Bill, at its meeting on 30 September 2020.

Jonathan subsequently presented a draft Assembly Commission paper outlining the changes that had been made to the Bill following discussion at the September Assembly Commission meeting, together with a revised draft Bill and Explanatory Financial Memorandum (EFM).

Following consideration, SMG approved the paper and the revised draft Bill and EFM for presentation to the Assembly Commission at its next meeting, subject to some minor amendments.

Action: Jonathan to update the paper as agreed by SMG and present at the next Assembly Commission meeting.

SMG recorded their thanks to all those on the Project Board and Project Team for their work on producing the draft Bill.

Jonathan McMillen left the meeting at 1.56pm.

17. RaISe Digital Strategy

Tara noted that a meeting had taken place with the Clerk/Chief Executive, Directors and colleagues from RaISe on 7 October 2020, to discuss this paper in detail.

SMG were very impressed with the Digital Strategy presented and were happy to support its implementation. SMG also noted that RaISe had gained much learning through its development of the Digital Strategy, much of which would be of relevance and interest to a number of other business areas, and asked it to consider how this, and any future training might be shared with other business areas.

ACTION: Tara to ask RaISe to consider how the learning gained from the development of the Digital Strategy, and any future training might be shared with other business areas.

SMG thanked John Power, Dan Hull, Aidan Stennett and Thomas Proctor for all their work in producing such a creative and innovative Digital Strategy.

18. Personal Data Breach Report

SMG noted the data breaches outlined in the report and was content that appropriate action had been taken.

SMG also discussed a review of the Data Breach Management Plan and it was agreed that a paper would be prepared for a future SMG meeting.

Action: Tara to prepare a paper on the Review of the Data Breach Management Plan for a future SMG meeting.

PARLIAMENTARY SERVICES

19. Implementation of the Internal Communications Strategy 2020-2023

Gareth noted that a meeting had taken place with the Clerk/Chief Executive, Directors, the Head of Communications and the Internal Communications Officer on 8 October 2020, to discuss the paper in detail.

Gareth confirmed that the revised strategy presented had incorporated revisions agreed at this earlier meeting.

On further review of the strategy, Tara sought clarification on how it would dovetail with the requirements in the Corporate Strategy, in relation to recognising achievements. SMG agreed to add some further detail to the strategy to address this.

Richard queried the section on 'Outcomes and Evaluation' and following discussion it was agreed that this required further review.

Lesley also requested that some detail be included in relation to AsslSt and its development.

It was agreed that an updated draft would be prepared and presented at the next SMG meeting taking account of the revisions discussed and that once approved consultation would take place with Trade Union Side (TUS) and the Internal Communications Group (ICG).

Action: Gareth to arrange for the Strategy to be updated as discussed and prepare a revised paper for presentation to SMG at its next meeting.

Gareth advised that a quarterly update on the Internal Communications Strategy and Activity would be provided to SMG going forward.

Action: The provision of quarterly updates to SMG on the Internal Communications Strategy and Activity, to be added to the SMG Forward Work Plan, with effect from January 2021.

20. Increase in staff complement of the Education Service

Gareth sought approval from SMG for a proposed increase in the complement of the Education Service of one AG7 and one AG6, to assist

with the delivery of the Assembly Commission's proposals for the establishment of a Youth Assembly.

SMG approved the request for an increase to the Education Service staff complement as requested, subject to the evaluation of the posts.

21. Request for Job Evaluation

It was noted that SMG had held a separate meeting to discuss the job evaluation and was content for the post to be re-evaluated.

Action: Corporate Support Unit to advise the Deputy Head of HR to proceed with the job re-evaluation.

22. Politics Plus Report on 2019 Activity

SMG noted a report from Politics Plus to the Assembly Commission on its activity and outcomes for 2019, together with Politics Plus's audited financial statement for the year ended 31 December 2019.

Gareth confirmed that the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the Assembly Commission and Politics Plus had been terminated with effect from 30 June 2020 and that this would therefore be Politics Plus's final report to the Assembly Commission.

Gareth advised that it was intended that Politics Plus would be 'wound up' by 31 March 2021, and that a methodology for transferring assets and liabilities to the Assembly Commission would need to be determined and that this would be the subject of a future paper for consideration by SMG.

Action: Gareth to prepare a paper on the methodology for transferring assets and liabilities of Politics Plus to the Assembly Commission, for consideration by SMG at a future meeting.

A draft paper for presentation to the Assembly Commission at its next meeting was considered and approved.

OTHER ITEMS

23. Directorate Updates

SMG noted the Directorate updates.

Corporate Services

Finance Office

Richard advised that investigations into the possible provision of Directors' and Officeholders' Liability insurance as previously requested by SMG had been completed and that an update paper would be presented to SMG at its next meeting.

Support Services

SMG noted the catering costs for September 2020 and Richard confirmed that these would be kept under review. Lesley requested that a comparison of actual costs against forecast costs, as opposed to the costs for the same period in the previous year, be referenced in future monthly updates to SMG.

Action: Richard to reference actual catering costs compared with forecast costs in future monthly updates to SMG.

COVID-19

Richard informed SMG that a dedicated sanitising team providing 90 hours per week had been put in place, at no additional cost to the Assembly Commission as a result of staff redeployment from catering.

Legal, Governance and Research Services

Legal Services

Tara advised SMG of the increasing workload within Legal Services and it was noted in particular that legal advice on a significant number of Private Members' Bills had been provided to the Bill Office.

Tara informed SMG of two recent appointments within the Legal Services Office.

COVID-19

Tara informed SMG that in light of the recent changes to the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020, the Assembly library had been closed for a period of 4 weeks with effect from 16 October 2020.

RaISe

SMG noted the high volume of papers published by RaISe over the last month.

24. Date of next meeting

Next meeting to take place on 20 November 2020.

25. Proposals for Agenda Items for Next Meeting

- Insurance Policy Update
- Disability Action Plan – Six-Monthly Update
- Audit of Inequalities – Six-Monthly Update
- Maintenance and Minor Capital Works Review
- Roof Project Defects Update
- Sustainable Development Office Revised and Updated Targets
- Revised Corporate Governance Framework
- Draft Interim Members Development Plan
- Update on Private Members' Bills
- Business Case for Broadcasting Consultancy
- Internal Communications Strategy 2020-2023
- Starleaf Post-Project Evaluation
- Life Cycle Equipment Maintenance and Replacement Plan for IS
- Life Cycle Equipment Maintenance and Replacement Plan for Broadcasting

The meeting ended at 3.15pm.