

SECRETARIAT MANAGEMENT GROUP (SMG)

THURSDAY, 24 SEPTEMBER 2020 at 9.30AM
ROOM 135, PARLIAMENT BUILDINGS

APPROVED

Present: Lesley Hogg
Tara Caul
Gareth McGrath
Richard Stewart

In Attendance: Janet Hughes
Robin Ramsey
Paula McClintock
Sinéad McDonnell
Karen Martin
Jonathan McMillen
Shauna Mageean
Tracey Wilson

Opening/Review

The meeting commenced at 9.35am.

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 31 July 2020 had been published that day.

4. SMG Action Points

The outstanding action points were reviewed and progress was noted.

Lesley Hogg, Clerk/Chief Executive, referred to an ongoing action from the January 2019 SMG meeting, in relation to the 'Development of an Unacceptable Behaviours Policy'. She confirmed that the Speaker had written to the Committee on Standards and Privileges, proposing the

establishment of a joint Working Group between the Committee and the Assembly Commission and advised that she would follow up on this with the Speaker's Office.

Action: Lesley to contact the Speaker's Office to enquire if a response had been received from the Committee on Standards and Privileges, regarding a proposal to establish a joint Working Group with the Assembly Commission.

Gareth McGrath, Director of Parliamentary Services, advised that the action from the SMG meeting on 3 July 2020, in relation to the 'Replacement Broadband Router Matrix', could now be marked as 'complete', as costings had been provided to SMG.

Richard Stewart, Director of Corporate Services, stated that an action from the last SMG meeting, in relation to establishing the vacant posts that would be filled by 1 September 2020, had been marked as 'complete,' as he had hoped to report on this at the meeting. However, he advised that further meetings would be required to discuss this issue in more detail and it was agreed that the action should remain on the action list, with an update provided at the next meeting.

Robin Ramsey, Adviser to the Speaker/Head of Corporate Support, joined the meeting at 9.44am for agenda items 5 and 6.

5. Political Update

Lesley noted the increase in Assembly business following the Summer Recess, in respect of committee meetings and plenary sittings; that this had led to more staff being in the building; and that the COVID-19 Risk Assessments had been reviewed to take account of this increased activity. Lesley also stated that staff continued to work from home where this was possible and dependent on business need.

CORPORATE SUPPORT

6. Draft Assembly Commission Agenda

Robin Ramsey confirmed that the next Assembly Commission meeting was scheduled for 30 September 2020.

Proposed items for the meeting included:

- Clerk/Chief Executive's Report
- IFRP Reform Bill
- COVID-19 Planning
- Pay Claim 2020
- Consideration of extending the Assembly Commission's annual dates for the lighting of Parliament Buildings

- Update on progress towards the implementation of 'New Decade, New Approach' – September 2020 Update
- Letter from NIPSA regarding proposed partial Electronic Access Control (EAC) system in Parliament Buildings
- Business case for the future provision of temporary workers for the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission
- Secretariat Audit and Risk Committee Annual Report 2019/2020

Robin Ramsey left the meeting at 9.59am.

CORPORATE SERVICES

Paula McClintock, Head of Finance, joined the meeting at 10.08am for agenda item 7.

7. Management Accounts

Paula presented the Management Accounts for August 2020.

SMG noted the current forecast outturn position and proposed surrenders / bids for each category of expenditure.

Paula highlighted an underspend in Secretariat Salaries, which she advised was mainly due to a slippage in the recruitment programme and the delay in engaging additional agency workers due to the COVID-19 restrictions. She confirmed that anticipated expenditure in this category had been re-forecasted, to take account of the above. However, to inform the impending return for the October monitoring round, Paula proposed meeting with the Clerk/Chief Executive and Directors to discuss the unfilled posts within each Directorate and establish which ones were likely to be filled by the end of the financial year and agree the October Monitoring return.

Action: Paula to arrange a meeting with the Clerk/Chief Executive and Directors, to review the staff complement figures and establish how many of the vacant posts are likely to be filled between now and the end of March 2021 and to agree the October Monitoring return.

Paula provided SMG with a summary of the forecasted underspends by Directorate in relation to Administration Costs.

Paula also confirmed that the biggest changes in the forecast outturn were in respect of Constituency and Members' Support Staff costs, which had been amended to reflect the 2020 Determination.

Lesley sought confirmation that the retrospective elements of the Determination for Members' Support Staff salaries had been processed.

Paula confirmed that all of the salary adjustments would be made in the September pay run.

SMG recorded their thanks to Paula and the Pay Team for the tremendous amount of work carried out in order to get the backdated salaries processed in the September pay run.

In relation to capital expenditure, Paula advised SMG of the spend to date and asked that SMG consider four additional bids for capital budget, as follows:

- £10k request from Building Services to cover the purchase of replacement and specialist chairs;
- £5.5k request from IS Office to replace a damaged Clevertouch screens;
- £4.2k request from the Communications Office to cover additional expenditure on the Virtual Committee Meetings project; and
- £71.1k request from the Communications Office to cover additional expenditure for the Router Replacement Project.

Following consideration of the bids outlined, SMG approved the £10k for replacement chairs, the £4.2k for the Virtual Committee Meetings project, but sought further clarification on whether a replacement Clevertouch screen was necessary, due to there being others available for use in the building. It was agreed that Gareth would review the requirement to replace the damaged Clevertouch screen. It was also noted that a paper outlining the reasoning behind the additional bid of £71.1k, required for the Router Replacement Project would be considered in detail at agenda item 20.

Action: Gareth to review the requirement to replace the damaged Clevertouch screen.

On reviewing the Capital Plan, Lesley noted that status updates were still missing on a number of projects, and she asked that an action from last month's meeting, in relation to reviewing the window of time given to Heads of Business (HoBs) to complete returns, which had been recorded as 'complete', be revisited, as there still appeared to be an issue. Lesley stated that it was important to have the most up to date picture of anticipated expenditure for the remainder of the financial year for the next monitoring round.

Tara Caul, Director of Legal, Governance and Research Services, queried the level of funds remaining in the Travel budget, and it was agreed that all budget areas would be reviewed in advance of the October monitoring round.

Action: All budget areas to be reviewed in advance of the October monitoring round.

Paula McClintock left the meeting at 10.49am.

Change to agenda running order.

Sinéad McDonnell, Head of HR, joined the meeting at 10.50am for agenda items 10 and 11.

10. Staff Complement of the temporary Recruitment Team

Sinéad McDonnell presented this paper and sought approval from SMG to extend the tenure of the temporary Recruitment Team within the HR Office.

It was noted that SMG had approved the creation of a temporary Recruitment Team in June 2019, for a period of one year but that as the first appointments within the Team were not made until September 2019, the one-year period ended on 1 September 2020.

Sinéad advised SMG that the temporary Recruitment Team had been tasked with carrying out two specific projects related to recruitment, namely:

- completion of the Implementation Programme arising from the Review of Recruitment and Selection and Induction for a six-month period; and
- delivery and management of the Recruitment Schedule when the Assembly resumed normal business for a twelve-month period.

Sinéad updated SMG on the work that had been undertaken in respect of the two projects outlined but stated that progress had been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and the resumption of Assembly business in January 2020.

Sinéad advised that in March 2020, recruitment advertising was paused and 'live' competitions were suspended and whilst other work was carried out during April, recruitment did not re-start until May 2020. She said that it had therefore not been possible to achieve the original plan of completing recruitment within 12 months.

In light of the above, Sinéad sought approval from SMG to extend the tenure of the temporary Recruitment Team, to progress the remaining recruitment and selection competitions. She advised that 11 recruitment competitions had been planned between October 2020 and January 2021 and that there were a further 20 recruitment competitions on the recruitment schedule to be administered in the next 12 months.

Following discussion, SMG agreed in principle, to extend the tenure until the end of August 2021, in order to manage and deliver the recruitment competitions on the recruitment schedule, but that it would be kept under review.

11. Consideration of a Consultancy Business Case to Procure Learning and Development Consultancy Services

Sinéad noted that she had met with the Clerk/Chief Executive and Directors in February 2020, to discuss the corporate learning and development budget for 2020/21 and agree the next steps in the development of the Learning and Development Strategy. She said that at this meeting, it was agreed that the procurement of a consultant/consultancy firm to undertake this work should be explored.

Sinéad therefore, presented a Consultancy Business Case for consideration by SMG. She confirmed that she had consulted with the Assembly's Procurement Office on the steps needed to procure consultancy and also considered a range of alternative options, but stated that what was proposed in the business case was considered the best way forward. She also confirmed that RalSe was willing to assist with the Training Needs Analysis survey.

SMG confirmed its support for the Consultancy Business Case and thanked Sinéad and her team for the work done in developing the business case. SMG also asked that priority be given to taking this matter forward.

As the value of the consultancy 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 consultancy business case.

Sinéad McDonnell left the meeting at 11.15am.

Karen Martin, Deputy Head of HR Manager, joined the meeting at 11.15am for agenda items 8 and 9.

8. HR Management Information

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

SMG noted that the Staff in Post (SiP) figure on 1 September 2020 (including agency and inward seconded staff) was 336.2 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, Lesley queried the duration date recorded against one of the posts within the IS Office and it was agreed that this would be changed to 'ongoing'.

Tara also requested an amendment to reflect the fact that the temporary legal adviser posts listed related to the Examiner of Statutory Rules.

Temporary promotions/deputising arrangements currently in place were noted, as well as agency worker assignments.

Karen informed SMG of the updated position in relation to the Recruitment Schedule, following a meeting held with the Clerk/Chief Executive and Directors on 11 September 2020, when consideration was given to the priority of competitions.

Lesley asked that as requested at the meeting, that the Recruitment Schedule be split between the two recruitment teams.

Action: Karen to arrange for the Recruitment Schedule to be split between the two recruitment teams.

Sickness absence information was provided and it was noted that for the period September 2019 to August 2020, the average days lost to sickness absence per FTE member of staff was 9.9 compared with an average of 11.3 during the same period for 2018/19.

Due to the limited service provided by Occupational Health Service (OHS) during the COVID-19 pandemic, Karen updated SMG on the procurement of an alternative occupational health (OH) provider for a period of one year. She confirmed that this was at an advanced stage and that it was anticipated the alternative contract could be in place from early October 2020, subject to SMG approval.

Karen advised that referrals in relation to ill-health retirement and injury at work still needed to be submitted to OHS and that it would be necessary therefore, to continue to retain a Service Level Agreement with OHS, in addition to any other OH provider that the Assembly Commission may wish to engage.

Karen confirmed that the current OHS charging structure would remain the same and that in light of the fact that an additional cost would be incurred in respect of a second contract with an alternative OH provider, sought approval from SMG to continue with the procurement of a second contract.

SMG agreed that it was unacceptable to not have the necessary support available for staff, and was content to proceed with the tender exercise for an alternative OH provider.

9. Approval of the Post Project Evaluation for the current Agency Workers Contract and business case for the future provision of temporary workers

Karen presented the Post Project Evaluation (PPE) for the current agency workers contract.

She provided an update on the extent to which the project objectives for the current contract were met and the lessons learned in relation to what went well and what did not.

SMG noted and was content with the PPE update provided.

Karen subsequently presented a business for the future provision of temporary workers. She outlined a number of options for consideration by SMG, with a recommendation to proceed with the option for the Assembly Commission to establish its own panel of service providers for the supply of temporary workers, delivered under a framework arrangement.

SMG considered the expected benefits and dis-benefits of the preferred option.

Following discussion, SMG was content with the rationale behind the preferred option, subject to an amendment to the anticipated annual number and cost of temporary worker placements proposed in the business case.

The duration of the proposed contract was also considered and SMG agreed a term of three years with two one-year extension options.

SMG also agreed as part of the tender specification that the Assembly Commission would seek to eliminate or minimise the payment of Finder's Fees.

Due to the potential value of the contract, it was noted that approval would be required from the Assembly Commission. SMG agreed that the updated business case should be presented to the Assembly Commission at its next meeting.

Action: Karen to update the business case as agreed by SMG and prepare a paper for presentation at the next Assembly Commission meeting.

Karen Martin left the meeting at 12.15pm.

Meeting suspended at 12.15pm and resumed at 12.25pm.

12. Support Services Contract Cost

Richard presented this paper, which was a follow-up to one presented at the July 2020 SMG meeting.

Richard stated that the actual costs of the contract, excluding cleaning, for July and August were closely aligned to the estimates provided to SMG for the June monitoring round.

SMG noted the actual costs of the Support Services contract for the first five months of the current financial year and the anticipated cost until 31 March 2021, taking account of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Richard highlighted the ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on sales, in relation to the catering element of the contract. He stated that the loss of revenue continued to erode the capability to offset costs associated with the contract, for both the Assembly Commission and the service provider. It was agreed that this would be kept under review and that any vacant posts that arose should only be filled if absolutely essential.

SMG discussed the possibility of the service provider availing of the Government's replacement Furlough Scheme and it was agreed that the appropriateness of applying this scheme should be reviewed and discussed with the service provider.

Action: Richard to review the Government's replacement Furlough Scheme and discuss with the service provider the possibility of availing of the scheme.

SMG also agreed to provide the Assembly Commission with an update on the Support Services Contract, at its next meeting.

Action: Lesley to provide the Assembly Commission with an update on the Support Services Contract, at its next meeting.

13. Letter from NIPSA regarding proposed Partial Electronic Access Control (EAC) system in Parliament Buildings

SMG noted a letter from NIPSA requesting that a previous proposal regarding partial EAC, be referred to the Assembly Commission again for consideration.

SMG agreed to refer the matter to the next Assembly Commission meeting.

Action: Richard to prepare a paper for presentation to the Assembly Commission at its next meeting.

14. COVID – 19 Planning

Richard presented a draft Assembly Commission paper, outlining the comprehensive range of measures that were in place in Parliament Buildings to mitigate the risk of COVID-19 infection. He stated that the paper also sought the Assembly Commission's view on a recommendation in relation to the current restrictions on public access to the building.

Following discussion, SMG approved the paper for presentation at the next Assembly Commission meeting, subject to the inclusion of some additional information.

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

15. Pay Claim 2020

Richard presented a draft Assembly Commission paper in relation to the 2020 pay claim submitted by NIPSA.

Richard outlined the elements of the pay claim submitted and following discussion, SMG approved the paper for presentation at the next Assembly Commission meeting, subject to a minor amendment.

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

LEGAL, GOVERNANCE AND RESEARCH SERVICES

16. Quarterly Review of Corporate Risk Register

It was noted that the Clerk/Chief Executive and Directors had met on 9 September 2020 and discussed the contents of the Corporate Risk Register in detail.

SMG approved the contents of the Corporate Risk Register and noted that it would be reviewed by SMG again in December 2020 and by the Secretariat Audit and Risk Committee (SARC) at its next meeting.

17. Biannual Review of Directorate Risk Registers

SMG reviewed the contents of the August 2020 Directorate Risk Registers for Corporate Services, Legal, Governance and Research Services and Parliamentary Services, and noted that they would be reviewed by SARC at its next meeting.

SMG also considered emerging Risk Clusters and agreed that there were no further risks that required escalation to the Corporate Risk Register.

Meeting suspended at 1.13pm and resumed at 2.02pm.

Jonathan McMillen, Head of Legal Services, joined the meeting at 2.02pm for agenda item 18.

18. IFRP Reform

Jonathan McMillen presented a draft Assembly Commission paper in relation to IFRP Reform including a draft Bill, for consideration by SMG.

Following detailed discussion, SMG approved the paper and the draft Bill 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.

Jonathan McMillen left the meeting at 3.13pm.

PARLIAMENTARY SERVICES

Shauna Mageean, EU Affairs Manager, joined the meeting at 3:15pm for agenda item 19.

19. Quarterly Update on EU Exit

Shauna Mageean provided SMG with an update on EU exit as at 11 September 2020 and on the developments in respect of the Internal Market Bill and legislative competence of the Assembly.

SMG thanked Shauna for a very comprehensive report.

Shauna Mageean left the meeting at 3.34pm.

Tracey Wilson, Information Officer, joined the meeting at 3.35pm for agenda item 20.

20. Replacement Broadcast Router Matrix – Update

Tracey Wilson presented this paper, seeking an increase to the previously agreed capital budget for the replacement Broadcast Router Matrix project, in order to allow the contract to be awarded to the preferred supplier.

It was noted that following the procurement competition for the router and its associated equipment, the capital cost of the preferred supplier's solution was higher than the budget allocation previously approved by SMG and Tracey explained the reasons for this.

Tracey confirmed that following a review of the submitted tender costs, the prior market sounding exercise and the overall procurement process, a number of lessons learned relating to the procurement process, project scoping and the use of external expertise had been identified which would be carried over into upcoming broadcasting-related projects. SMG noted the outcome of the procurement exercise for the Router Matrix element of the project, as well as the issues that had arisen.

SMG also noted the lessons learned as outlined in the paper.

SMG sought confirmation of the timeline for the proposed works. Tracey advised that it would be mid-November before the equipment would be on site, but that the changeover to the new system could be done over a weekend, and the rest of the work done while the Assembly was sitting.

Following discussion, SMG approved in principle, the increase to the capital budget, subject to funds being made available when reviewing budgets at the October Monitoring round meeting.

Tracey Wilson left the meeting at 4.00pm.

21. Update on progress towards the implementation of 'New Decade, New Approach' – September 2020 Update

Gareth presented a draft Assembly Commission paper, providing an update on progress towards the implementation of those actions in 'New Decade, New Approach' (NDNA) which are either wholly or partially within the vires of the Assembly Commission.

Following consideration, SMG approved the paper for presentation to the Assembly Commission at its next meeting.

Action: Gareth to present the update paper on NDNA at the next Assembly Commission meeting.

OTHER ITEMS

22. Directorate Updates

SMG noted the Directorate updates.

Corporate Services

Support Services

Richard stated that the ongoing extremely low footfall in Parliament Buildings, as well as the impact of the Summer Parliamentary break, had resulted in a significant increase of the Support Services contract costs, but as discussed earlier in the meeting, this was being kept under review.

Building Services

Richard advised that Health and Safety staff from within Building Services continued to work with Heads of Business to support the return of increasing numbers of building users. He confirmed that meeting rooms were being assessed for their maximum capacity and agreed layouts would be provided in compliance with social distancing guidelines.

HR Office

Richard confirmed that a new indicative timeline for the Pay and Grading Project had been forwarded to TUS as, staffing for the project team had been affected by the resumption of normal assembly business in January 2020.

Equality Unit

Richard highlighted again the staffing pressures within the Equality Unit and the impact this was having on progressing two programmes of work. Lesley enquired why no additional resource had been transferred into the Unit since this had first been discussed by SMG at its meeting on 3 April 2020 and five months had now elapsed.

Richard advised that the additional resource was now in the process of being finalised.

Richard Stewart left the meeting at 4.15pm.

Legal, Governance and Research Services

Internal Audit

Tara advised that the following Internal Audit Reports had issued during August:

- Follow-up Review of Support Services; and
- Review of Members' Expenses (final testing).

Tara also confirmed that a draft report on the follow-up Review of Cyber-Security was issued in mid-September and that work was ongoing in relation to the draft reports on mobile phones and on the follow-up of Secretariat travel.

Information Standards

Tara spoke about the Information Management System Project and asked that a separate meeting be arranged with the Clerk/Chief Executive and Directors to discuss the staffing of the project team.

Action: Tara to arrange a meeting with the Clerk/Chief Executive and Directors to discuss the staffing of the Information Management System Project Team.

Research and Information Service (RaISe)

Tara updated SMG on the work that had been carried out in the library in preparation for its proposed re-opening, including the installation of perspex screens at the issue desk, limited seating area, hand sanitiser unit and 72 hour quarantine procedure for books. SMG was content that

the work undertaken met regulations/guidelines in respect of COVID-19 and agreed with the proposal to re-open the library on 28 September 2020.

Parliamentary Services

Broadcasting

Gareth advised SMG of the additional costs incurred for broadcasting services, due to the requirement to facilitate plenaries and committee meetings throughout July, which is normally a period of recess.

Clerking

Gareth also informed SMG that the deadline for proposals from Members for initial proposals for Private Members' Bills had been 18 September 2020 and that the Non-Exec Bills Team was supporting 31 Bill proposals at various stages in the process, alongside an Assembly Commission Bill.

23. AOB

Router Matrix Business Case – additional information requested by SMG on building works

SMG considered and approved the revised building works capital element of the replacement Router Matrix business case, which had been deferred from the previous meeting pending the provision of more detailed costings.

Lessons learned in relation to resumption of normal Assembly business

Lesley asked Directors to consult with their HoBs to identify any lessons learned arising from the resumption of normal Assembly business.

Action: Directors to consult with their HoBs to identify any lessons learned arising from the resumption of normal Assembly business in January 2020.

Christmas Closure

Richard sought SMG's views on the closure of the Building during the Christmas period. The proposal to close the Building from 24 December until 4 January was approved by SMG.

24. Date of next meeting

Next meeting to take place on 23 October 2020.

25. Proposals for Agenda Items for Next Meeting

- Insurance Policy Update
- Gender Action Plan Six-Monthly Update: October 2020
- Good Relations Action Plan 2016-21: October 2020 Six-Monthly Monitoring Update
- Sustainable Development Target Outcomes for 2018/19 and 2019/20 and Proposed Targets for 2020/21
- Review of Corporate Governance Framework
- Report and Self-Assessment of the Information Security Group
- Data Breach Report
- RaISe Digital Strategy
- Report on the Activities of Politics Plus – 2019
- Draft Interim Member Development Plan
- Internal Communications Strategy and Values Engagement Plan 2020-2023.

The meeting ended at 4.22pm.