

**SECRETARIAT MANAGEMENT GROUP (SMG)
FRIDAY, 3 APRIL 2020 at 10.30AM
(VIRTUAL MEETING VIA MICROSOFT TEAMS)**

APPROVED

Present: Lesley Hogg
Tara Caul
Gareth McGrath
Richard Stewart

In Attendance: Janet Hughes
John Gibson
Stephanie Mallon
Brian Devlin
Peter Hall
Simon Burrowes
Robin Ramsey

Opening/Review

The meeting commenced at 10.35am.

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 12 February 2020 had been published earlier that day.

4. SMG Action Points

The outstanding action points were reviewed and progress was noted.

In relation to an action from the January 2019 meeting on 'Inappropriate Behaviours Policy – Key Principles', Richard Stewart, Director of Corporate Services, advised that Clerking and HR staff were scheduled to attend a meeting with colleagues in Westminster to discuss the review of their inappropriate behaviours process and to consider the lessons they have learned. However, Richard explained that this meeting had

been cancelled as a result of the General Election and would now be further delayed due to the Coronavirus pandemic, but he confirmed that contact would be made with Westminster as soon as the current situation settled down. SMG did, however, note that a letter had issued from the Speaker to the Committee on Standards and Privileges asking that the committee consider any changes that may be required to the Code of Conduct in relation to this matter.

Richard highlighted that due to a lack of staffing resources within the Equality Unit over the last few months and the absence of an IT resource to assist one of the team with working from home, it was likely that there would be slippage on the deadlines for some of the equality related actions.

Richard advised that additional staffing resources might be required to progress this work and confirmed that he would notify the Clerk/Chief Executive and Directors of his requirements in the next few weeks. It was noted, that in light of the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic on some areas of work, there might be spare capacity in other business areas to assist with the workload in the Equality Unit.

Action: Richard to advise the Clerk/Chief Executive and Directors of the potential assistance required to manage the workload within the Equality Unit over the next number of months.

5. Political Update

Lesley Hogg, Clerk/Chief Executive, acknowledged the excellent work carried out by the COVID-19 Response Group, IS Office, HR Office and other business areas over the past few weeks, in responding to the Coronavirus pandemic.

Lesley noted that a tremendous amount of work had been carried out to facilitate working from home for the vast majority of Secretariat staff, the holding of Assembly committee meetings semi-remotely through video and tele-conferencing and enabling access to the Microsoft Teams software, she commended the hard work and efforts of staff to deliver solutions to enable the work of the Assembly to continue in such difficult times.

SMG acknowledged that the swift move to a more modern working environment, would make the organisation think differently about how it might work going forward.

LEGAL, GOVERNANCE AND RESEARCH SERVICES

John Gibson, Head of Procurement, joined the meeting at 11am for agenda item 6.

6. Northern Ireland Assembly Commission Procurement Policy

It was noted that the Clerk/Chief Executive and Directors had considered a draft paper, at a meeting on the 7 November 2019, introducing the concept of a Corporate Procurement Policy and the various strategic drivers discussed.

John Gibson confirmed that the draft Corporate Northern Ireland Assembly Procurement Policy as presented, had been out to consultation with Heads of Business.

Following detailed discussion and consideration, SMG proposed a number of amendments to the Policy, and requested that it be amended and re-circulated to SMG for final approval. Lesley also noted that the Section 75 Screening Form did not indicate that it had been approved and requested that this was added.

It was agreed that going forward, any minor factual changes to the Policy could be agreed by the Head of Procurement and the Director for Legal, Governance and Research Services, but that all other changes should be referred to SMG for approval.

Action: John to update the policy as discussed and re-circulate to SMG for final approval.

Action: Tara Caul, Director of Legal, Governance and Research Services, to approve the Section 75 Screening Form.

SMG thanked John for the vast amount of work put in to drafting the Policy, which SMG agreed was a very useful document.

John Gibson left the meeting at 12.32pm.

Comfort break until 12.43pm.

CORPORATE SERVICES

7. Management Accounts

Richard Stewart presented the Management Accounts for February 2020.

Richard confirmed that in December 2019, surrenders of Resource DEL and Capital were made to the Department of Finance (DoF) for the January Monitoring round, on the basis that there would be no return to full Assembly business before the end of the financial year.

Richard noted that following subsequent political developments shortly after the return was submitted, SMG agreed that the need for additional funding should be highlighted. An adjustment during the second phase of the January Monitoring exercise to reflect the potential appointment of the Executive and of normal Assembly business was made in early January.

Richard also advised that DoF had notified public sector entities that the administrative deadline for the production of the Annual Report and Accounts for 2019-20 had been relaxed by 2 months, meaning a revised deadline for submission of our Accounts to the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) of 3 August 2020.

8. Revised Travel Authorisation Policy

It was noted that the paper was deferred to next SMG meeting.

9. HR Management Information

Richard presented the HR Management Information as at 16 March 2020.

He informed SMG that the Staff in Post (SiP) figure (including agency and seconded staff) was 328.9 Full Time Equivalents (FTE) against an agreed staff complement (including complement plus) of 375.8 FTE. It was noted that the SiP figure represented an increase of 24.8 when compared with the figure quoted as at 1 January 2020, which was largely the result of an increase in agency workers since full Assembly business resumed.

It was noted that the complement plus table still did not include the agreed end dates for a number of posts, and Lesley again asked for these be included in future reports.

Action: Agreed end dates to be included in the complement plus table.

SMG noted a very significant increase in the number of temporary promotions from existing merit lists over the last couple of months, which had been necessary to meet the business needs following resumption of normal Assembly business in January, pending permanent recruitment.

SMG reviewed the Recruitment Schedule, and Richard sought confirmation from Tara on the priority ranking of two additional AG4 Legal Adviser posts, which had been approved by SMG and added to the non-prioritised section of the schedule. Tara confirmed that she was content

with the ranking as long as the posts could be filled by Interchange/Agency in the interim. She stated that if there were any difficulties in filling these posts, as proposed, that the priority ranking may need to be reviewed.

The priority ranking of the vacant Web Manager post in the Communications Office was also discussed and it was agreed that this could be added to the non-prioritised section of the schedule and filled by Interchange/Agency in the interim.

It was noted that there would be a delay in the ongoing and live recruitment competitions due to the Coronavirus pandemic, but that this would be kept under review. SMG did, however, discuss the position in relation to the IS Scholarship interviews which were due to take place week commencing 23 March, and proposed looking into whether these could be done electronically. SMG agreed to raise this issue with Brian Devlin later in the meeting.

It was also noted that the Northern Ireland Public Service Ombudsman recruitment competition planned for the start of April had been paused, and Lesley confirmed that consideration would be given to progressing this in the next few weeks, depending on the Coronavirus situation.

10. Good Relations Action Plan 2016-21: March 2020 six-monthly monitoring update

Richard provided SMG with a progress update on the actions in the Good Relations Action Plan 2016-21, for the six-month reporting period ending March 2020.

Richard highlighted an overdue action in relation to the development of an e-learning good relations package for staff training, which had not progressed, due to staffing issues, but confirmed that the intention was to move this forward over the next month or so.

It was noted that all other actions were either complete, in progress or suspended for practical reasons due to restrictions during the current Coronavirus pandemic.

SMG also considered a report on the findings of the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission's Secretariat Equality and Good Relations Survey 2018. Richard confirmed that a Cross-Directorate Working Group established to consider the issues raised in this report had held an initial meeting in December 2019 and planned to hold a second meeting in the coming months. Lesley was keen for the group to continue to meet as planned, using the technology available to allow this to be done remotely, if possible.

Richard confirmed that the briefing note on the findings of the Northern Ireland Assembly Visitors Survey (Good Relations) Autumn 2019, that

accompanied the update, had been considered in detail by the Clerk/Chief Executive and Directors at a meeting on 24 January 2020.

Following consideration, SMG was content for the updated actions table and the briefing note on the findings of the Visitors Survey, to be presented to the Assembly Commission at its next meeting and for the Equality and Good Relations Survey 2018 Report to be published on AsslSt.

Action: Equality Unit to prepare a paper for presentation at the next Assembly Commission meeting, reporting the position on the Good Relations Action Plan 2016-21 as at 31 March 2020, incorporating the findings of the Visitors Survey Autumn 2019.

Action: Equality Unit to arrange for the Equality and Good Relations Survey 2018 Report to be published on AsslSt.

11. Gender Action Plan six-monthly update: March 2020

Richard provided a progress update on the Gender Action Plan 2019-23, for the six-month reporting period ending March 2020.

Richard highlighted three actions which were recorded as overdue. He stated that they all related to the development of a Transgender Policy, which had not been progressed due to staffing resources in the Equality Unit over the last few months. He was conscious that work on this policy needed to progress as soon as possible and Lesley stated that consideration should be given to identifying staff resources from within other business areas to assist with this piece of work.

Richard also referred to the action in relation to 'Implementing a Senior Women's Network', and stated that further discussion was required to determine the structure of the network and if it was still required. Lesley stated that as noted in the Action Plan, a further meeting would be arranged with senior females in the spring to discuss whether there was still a need for a network in view of the other measures that were now in place.

Action: Equality Unit to prepare a progress update on the Gender Action Plan as at March 2020, for presentation to the Assembly Commission at its next meeting.

SMG also considered statistics for the 2018-19 period and a final overview analysis for the three-year period from 2016-17 to 2018-19 on the gender balance of staff presenting at SMG and Assembly Commission meetings.

Richard stated that the statistics indicated some gender imbalance but that that was mainly due to the fact that a number of staff of the same sex were regular presenters at SMG meetings, due to their specific

roles. SMG agreed that there was no need for any further action at this stage and Richard confirmed that this would continue to be monitored and reviewed and action taken should the need arise.

12. Proposed Corporate Learning and Development Activities and Associated Budget for 2020/21

It was noted that the proposed Corporate Learning and Development Activities and Associated Budget for 2020/21 was discussed in detail by the Clerk/Chief Executive and Directors at a meeting on 14 February 2020.

SMG was content to approve the proposed Corporate Learning and Development activities and associated budget for the 2020/21 financial year, as outlined in the paper.

Meeting suspended at 1.27pm and resumed at 2.07pm.

LEGAL, GOVERNANCE AND RESEARCH SERVICES CONTINUED

13. Quarterly Review of the Corporate Risk Register

Tara presented the latest draft of the Corporate Risk Register, stating that it would be reviewed by SMG again in June 2020 and by the Secretariat Audit and Risk Committee (SARC) in May 2020.

It was noted that the Clerk/Chief Executive and Directors had met on 1 April and discussed the Corporate Risk Register in detail to ensure that any new potential risks due to the current Coronavirus pandemic were incorporated.

Following further consideration, SMG agreed the contents of the current draft Corporate Risk Register, subject to a few minor amendments.

Action: Tara to update the Corporate Risk Register as agreed.

Lesley thanked Tara for the work done to reflect the risk and risk responses to the Coronavirus pandemic in the Corporate Risk Register.

14. Biannual Review of Directorate Risk Registers

SMG reviewed the contents of the February 2020 Directorate Risk Registers for Corporate Services, Legal, Governance and Research Services and Parliamentary Services, and noted that they would be reviewed by SARC in May 2020.

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

SMG noted that the Directorate Risk Registers were historical, and therefore did not reflect the risk or risk responses to the Coronavirus pandemic. Tara confirmed that such risk responses were, however, reflected in the Corporate Risk Register as presented to SMG at item 13.

15. Human Resources in the Research and Information Service (RaISe)

Tara presented this paper, highlighting the increased staffing pressures in RaISe, stemming from the need to support the Assembly's additional scrutiny responsibilities in three specific areas, namely, Cultural Expression, Brexit and EU relations and the area in Human Rights, that had arisen from recent political developments in the "Ireland/Northern Ireland Protocol" and "New Decade, New Approach".

In light of these developments, Tara requested an increase to the RaISe staffing complement, of two AG5 Research Officers with specialist knowledge in "Governance, Institutions and Europe" and "Culture, Heritage, Sport, Leisure and Languages". Following consideration, SMG agreed to this request. A query was however raised by Gareth McGrath in relation to the statement in the paper that the complement in RaISe had been reduced by 7 posts through SP15+ and Voluntary Exit Scheme (VES) and whether this number was in fact 5.8 posts, on the basis that 2 posts had been merged to fund a higher graded post. Tara agreed to follow this up.

Action: Tara to ask John Power, Head of Research and Information Service, to discuss the reduction in posts in RaISe as a result of SP15+ and VES with Gareth McGrath and John to advise SMG of the outcome of these discussions.

Lesley cautioned against comparing numbers of RaISe staff against the Scottish Parliament and National Assembly for Wales, as the total number of staff in those legislatures was significantly higher than the Northern Ireland Assembly across virtually all business areas and that RaISe was not unique in this regard.

16. Records Management Process and the Sensitivity Review

SMG noted the records management process within the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission. SMG also noted the additional process to be followed for records, determined by the Public Records Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI), that are required to be transferred to them for permanent preservation. Tara highlighted that such records must be considered by the Assembly Commission prior to transfer to PRONI for public access and that the process was known as the 'sensitivity review'.

- Action:** Information Standards to provide a further submission regarding the revised retention and disposal schedule, including the process for approval by PRONI and the Department for Communities, to SMG at a future meeting.
- Action:** Information Standards to arrange for training for all Information Asset Owners (IAOs) who will be involved in the sensitivity review exercise.

PARLIAMENTARY SERVICES

Peter Hall, Assembly Clerk and Simon Burrowes, Head of Official Report and Public Engagement, joined the meeting at 2.40pm for agenda item 17.

17. **Proposal for an Assembly Commission-supported Youth Assembly**

Peter Hall presented this paper, outlining the proposal and high level structure for an Assembly Commission-supported Youth Assembly, including details on the anticipated additional annual running cost.

To assist in the development of the proposed Youth Assembly model, Peter confirmed that considerable engagement and discussion had taken place with a wide range of relevant stakeholders, including the statutory, public, and community and voluntary sectors; colleagues in other jurisdictions and the Assembly Secretariat; and the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY).

Staffing resources were also discussed and it was noted that the model outlined required the recruitment of two full-time youth workers to support one of the existing Education Officers, and additional input from existing Secretariat staff at various levels.

It was agreed that Simon Burrowes would identify one of the Education Officers within the Education Service to take on the detailed development and management role set out in the proposed model. It was also agreed that the proposed model should be presented to the Assembly Commission at its next meeting for approval.

Action: Simon to identify one of the Education Officers within the Education Service to take forward the detailed development and management role in the proposed Assembly Commission-supported Youth Assembly.

Action: Gareth McGrath to prepare a paper for consideration by the Assembly Commission at its next meeting.

SMG commended Peter and Simon on an excellent paper and thanked them for all their work in developing the proposed model.

Peter Hall and Simon Burrowes left the meeting at 3pm.

Stephanie Mallon, Senior Assistant Clerk, joined the meeting at 3.03pm for agenda item 18.

Brian Devlin, Head of IS, joined the meeting at 3.03pm for agenda items 18 and 20.

18. Legislative Work Bench Contract

Stephanie Mallon presented this paper, and sought approval to extend the current Legislative Workbench bill template software contract for an additional two to four years.

Stephanie stated that the Legislative Work Bench (LWB) maintenance and support contract was scheduled to end in September 2021 (with no further extensions available under the contract). She added that to procure a new system for the management of legislation at this time would be problematic, given the language aspects of 'New Decade, New Approach' and the fact that all associated procedural requirements had not yet been developed by the Committee on Procedures.

Stephanie explained that the development of a tender specification would be difficult in the absence of procedural requirements and undertaking a procurement competition to deliver a contract at the end of the current contract, carried a high risk of wasting public funds and procuring a product which may not be fit for purpose.

Stephanie confirmed that the LWB is currently fit for purpose and performed the task it was contracted to do, for both the Bill Office and for the Office of the Legislative Council (OLC) within the Executive Office. She stated that an extension to the current contract would allow the continued operation of the existing LWB system, while giving time to consider the requirements for the system in the future, the best route for servicing those needs and the optimum timelines.

SMG considered the implications under the Public Contracts Regulations 2015 in relation to modifying the contract by extending it for an additional two years and also in relation to extending the contract beyond two years. Following discussion, and to ensure compliance with the Regulations, SMG agreed to proceed with a two-year extension only to the current contract.

Stephanie Mallon left the meeting at 3.31pm.

Change to agenda running order.

20. Staffing in the Information Systems (IS) Office

Brian Devlin presented this paper, outlining a number of issues in relation to staffing resources within the IS Office, and sought approval from SMG on recommendations made to address these issues.

Following consideration, SMG approved the recommendations as outlined in the paper, including the appointment of a Deputy Head of Service and the corresponding suppression of the Application Development Manager post.

Brian raised concerns about delaying the undergraduate recruitment due to the ongoing Coronavirus pandemic and the impact this may have on the pool of suitable candidates. In order to keep recruitment moving in this area and avoid any delays, Lesley proposed that consideration be given to carrying out video interviews. Brian agreed to follow this up with HR.

Action: Brian to liaise with HR Office on whether it would be possible to progress the IS Scholarship undergraduate interviews by carrying them out electronically.

Brian also updated SMG on remote access working for staff, during the Coronavirus pandemic. He confirmed that all laptop users with remote access were now able to avail of the Microsoft Teams software. Brian stated that if more laptops were available, some of the staff that are still required in Parliament Buildings due to the nature of their work, may be able to work offsite. SMG was content for Brian to obtain a quote for a number of additional laptops, on receipt of which they would give the matter some further consideration.

Action: Brian to obtain a quote for a number of additional laptops and inform SMG upon receipt.

Brian Devlin left the meeting at 4pm.

19. Members Survey 2016-17 Action Plan – final update (April 2020)

SMG noted the final update on the implementation of the Members Survey 2016-17 Action Plan.

Gareth McGrath, Director of Parliamentary Services, confirmed that a new Members Survey would be undertaken in January 2021.

Action: Gareth to undertake a New Members Survey in January 2021.

OTHER ITEMS

Simon Burrowes, Acting Chair of the Internal Communications Group, joined the meeting at 4.11pm for agenda item 21.

21. Internal Communications Group (ICG) Report on the 2019 Staff Survey

Simon Burrowes presented the ICG Report on the findings of the Staff Survey undertaken in October 2019.

SMG noted the contents of the survey report and the recommendations proposed by ICG in their accompanying paper.

SMG agreed with ICG's request to publish the Staff Survey Report and ICG's accompanying SMG submission paper on AsslSt, as soon as possible. SMG also agreed that a separate meeting should be set up to consider the findings and recommendations from the ICG Report in detail and agree a course of action.

Action: Simon to arrange for the report on the 2019 Staff Survey and accompanying ICG SMG submission paper to be published on AsslSt.

Action: Lesley Hogg to arrange a separate meeting with Directors to discuss the findings and recommendations from ICG and consider the actions to be taken going forward.

SMG thanked Simon and Barbara Love for a very comprehensive report and all the work undertaken by ICG.

Simon Burrowes left the meeting at 4.34pm.

22. Items cleared by correspondence

SMG Register of Interests – updated March 2020.

23. Directors' Updates

SMG noted the Directorate updates.

Legal, Governance and Research Services

Tara provided SMG with an update on the Internal Audit Reviews for:

- Members' Expenses (interim testing 2019/20);
- Administration of Members' Expenses;
- Mobile Phones;
- Cyber-security; and
- Public Engagement.

24. AOB

There was no other business.

25. Date of next meeting

Next meeting to take place during week commencing 27 April 2020.

Action: Janet Hughes to check diary commitments of SMG and agree a date for the next meeting.

26. Proposals for Agenda Items for Next Meeting

- Insurance and Litigation Update
- Internal Audit Plan
- Post-Project Evaluation: Support Services Contract
- Audit of Inequalities
- Proposed Approach to Staff Monitoring
- Travel Authorisation Policy
- Complaints Policy Annual Activity Report
- Extension to the Assembly Broadcasting and Related Services Contract

Robin Ramsey, Adviser to the Speaker/Head of Corporate Support, joined the meeting at 4.45pm.

SMG considered agenda items for the next Commission meeting, proposed items included:

- Clerk/Chief Executive's Report
- Proposal for an Assembly Commission-supported Youth Assembly
- Extension to the Assembly Broadcasting and Related Services Contract
- Insurance and Litigation Update
- Good Relations Action Plan 2016-21: Monitoring Update
- Gender Action Plan Update
- Complaints Policy Annual Activity Report

Proposed date for the next Assembly Commission meeting, early May 2020.

Action: Janet to liaise with Assembly Commission Members to agree a suitable date to meet in May 2020.

The meeting ended at 5.03pm.