

**SECRETARIAT MANAGEMENT GROUP (SMG)
FRIDAY, 31 JULY 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
Karen Martin
Christine Watts
David Lynn

Opening/Review

The meeting commenced at 9.32am.

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 3 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, queried the status update provided in relation to the action, 'Head of HR to arrange training and guidance for staff on the Clever Touch Screens' from the 3 July 2020 meeting. It was noted that this action was marked as 'complete', however, Lesley asked that Richard Stewart, Director of Corporate Services, seek clarification on this, as neither she nor the other members of SMG were aware of any communication being issued to staff offering training.

Action: Richard to clarify the position in relation to the action, 'Head of HR to arrange training and guidance for staff on the Clever Touch Screens', from the 3 July 2020 meeting and advise SMG.

Robin Ramsey, Adviser to the Speaker/Head of Corporate Support, joined the meeting at 9.37am for agenda items 5 and 6.

5. Political Update

In preparation for more staff returning to the building to support the increase in parliamentary activity expected from September, it was noted that SMG was reviewing the health and safety arrangements in the building, in conjunction with the Head of Building Services and the COVID-19 Response Group, and that comprehensive risk assessments were being carried out.

CORPORATE SUPPORT

6. Draft Assembly Commission Agenda

Robin Ramsey informed SMG that the intention was to hold the next Assembly Commission meeting in September 2020.

Proposed items for the meeting included:

- Clerk/Chief Executive's Report
- Consideration of Extending the Assembly Commission's Annual Dates for the Lighting of Parliament Buildings
- Insurance Update
- Draft Bill to Transfer Certain Functions of the Independent Financial Review (IFRP) Panel
- Update on 'New Decade, New Approach'

Robin Ramsey left the meeting at 9.47am.

CORPORATE SERVICES

Christine Watts, Environment and Health and Safety Manager, joined the meeting at 9:48am for agenda item 7.

7. Environmental Management Systems Review

Christine Watts presented the Environmental Management Systems Review for the two-year period April 2018 to March 2020.

She informed SMG that the ISO14001:2015 audit would be carried out remotely the following week.

On reviewing initiatives for the 2020-21 Continuous Improvement Plan, Christine stated that the achievement of some goals particularly in relation to 'single use plastics', would be more challenging to achieve due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the increased use of hand gels and disposable gloves, etc.

The high volume of plastic cups being used throughout the building was also highlighted and Christine advised that the Sustainable Development Office (SDO) would work with Support Services to look for a more sustainable option.

Christine asked that SMG give consideration to making 'Earth Hour' one of the designated 'lighting days' for Parliament Buildings, to show the Northern Ireland Assembly's support for this worldwide movement. She stated that if approved, the lights would be turned off for one hour on the designated day, 28 March, from 8.30 – 9.30pm.

Lesley stated that this was a decision for the Assembly Commission and agreed to discuss the request with the Speaker.

Action: Lesley to discuss the proposal for making 'Earth Hour' one of the designated 'lighting days' for Parliament Buildings with the Speaker.

Christine provided SMG with an update on the achievement to date against the five key targets to be met by 2022, in relation to reductions in electricity, gas and paper consumption, the amount of waste sent to landfill and improvement in the Northern Ireland Assembly's Corporate Social Responsibility performance.

SMG noted the achievement to date against the 2022 targets, however, Lesley stated that as this review covered a two-year period she would have expected to have seen the targets for 2018/19 and 2019/20 fully reported on, as there were a number of other targets in addition to the five key ones reported on, and more clarity in relation to the targets for 2020/21 and what actions were being taken to deliver the 2022 targets.

In light of this, SMG requested a further paper be produced for consideration at the next SMG meeting, detailing all proposed actions for 2020/21 and reporting on achievement against all targets for 2018/19 and 2019/20.

Action: Christine to prepare a further paper for the next SMG meeting, detailing all proposed actions for 2020/21 including the actions being taken to deliver the 2022 targets and reporting on achievement against all targets for 2018/19 and 2019/20.

Lesley also noted that the report did not refer to the fact that the Assembly had not been conducting normal business since January 2017, that a large number of staff had been redeployed, and that this would have had a positive impact on the Assembly Commission's

performance for 2018/19 and 2019/20 and so it was important that context was noted when considering performance against the 2022 targets. She said that it was important to understand the Assembly Commission's baseline and whether performance was better or worse.

Gareth McGrath, Director of Parliamentary Services, queried the number of lights on in all parts of the building and whether sensors could be used to reduce electricity consumption.

Christine advised that there were health and safety issues with sensors on corridor lights especially near staircases, but stated that the lights in corridors had been replaced with energy alternatives.

Christine advised SMG that there had been increased interest in the Cycle to Work Scheme, and that in light of the fact that Cyclescheme NI had removed the £1,000 limit for purchasing equipment, and recent clarification that electric bikes could be purchased under the Scheme, that a proposal would be brought to a future SMG meeting to consider whether any increase should be made to the £1,000 limit that currently applied.

Lesley noted that the report stated that the Assembly Commission had kept the £1,000 limit in place, but that SMG had not been notified of the change or asked to reconsider the matter.

Action: Christine to prepare a paper on the Cycle to Work Scheme for a future SMG meeting, taking into account Cyclescheme NI's removal of the £1,000 limit and the applicability of electric bikes.

Christine informed SMG that significant improvements had been made in terms of the Assembly Commission's carbon footprint with the reduction in business travel, the introduction of temporary homeworking and the adoption of virtual meetings due to the COVID-19 pandemic and she hoped that these positive impacts would continue after the pandemic. Lesley noted that the impact of these would be in relation to 2020/21.

Christine Watts left the meeting at 10.28am.

Karen Martin, Deputy Head of HR, joined the meeting at 10.28am for agenda item 8.

8. HR Management Information

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

SMG noted that the Staff in Post (SiP) figure on 1 July 2020 (including agency and inward seconded staff) was 324.9 Full Time Equivalent

(FTE) against an agreed staff complement (including complement plus) of 375.3 FTE.

Gareth highlighted an error in relation to the number of complement plus posts recorded against Parliamentary Services, and reported to SMG at its meeting on 29 May 2020. Gareth advised that one of the posts, an AG7 complement plus post in the Business Office was cited in the HR Management Information paper as being “not currently filled”, however, he confirmed that this was not the case and that this post had been filled since the Assembly resumed normal business in January 2020. Karen confirmed that she would update the complement plus figures recorded for Parliamentary Services accordingly.

Action: Karen to include the AG7 post in the Business Office in the complement plus figures recorded against Parliamentary Services.

SMG noted the temporary promotions/deputising arrangements and agency work assignments currently in place.

Lesley queried the anticipated end date in relation to one of the deputising arrangements reported. Karen confirmed that she would review this entry, with any necessary update reflected in the report presented to SMG at its next meeting.

Action: Karen to review the end date reported in relation to one of the deputising arrangements and update the report accordingly.

Karen informed SMG of the updated position in relation to the Recruitment Schedule and recent recruitment activity.

SMG noted that interviews for the Software Developer, Research Officer – Economics, Research Officer – Social Justice and Clerk Assistant competitions had taken place and that it was anticipated that the successful applicants would be in post by end August/start of September 2020.

Karen also confirmed that two further competitions had issued yesterday, for the positions of Senior Service Desk Analyst and Human Resources Manager.

Tara Caul, Director of Legal, Governance and Research Services, referred to the outcome of the recent competition for the position of Research Officer – Economics and the fact that there were two vacancies advertised with only one successfully filled. She stated that she was keen for the second vacancy to be filled and requested that it be added to the Recruitment Schedule and re-advertised.

SMG was content for this post to be added to the Recruitment Schedule, however, it was agreed that before re-advertising it would be helpful to attempt to establish any issues with filling the post in order to avoid a

similar outcome when re-advertised. It was agreed that a review of the post would be carried out, with feedback obtained from the interview panel in an effort to establish and address any issues with filling the post, prior to re-advertising.

With regards its priority on the Recruitment Schedule, it was agreed this would be considered by SMG.

Action: Tara to ask Eileen Regan and John Power to review the post of Research Officer - Economics, including feedback obtained from the interview panel, in an effort to establish and address any issues with filling the post, prior to re advertising and to then contact HR to agree a way forward.

Sickness absence information was provided and it was noted that for the period July 2019 to June 2020, the average days lost to sickness absence per FTE member of staff was 10 compared with 10.7 for the same period last year.

Karen concluded by providing SMG with an update on the situation in relation to procuring the services of an alternative Occupational Health Service provider for an interim period. She confirmed that initial contact had been made with potential providers, and that good progress had been made with producing the procurement specification documentation, which she hoped would issue in the next couple of weeks.

Karen Martin left the meeting at 10.48am.

9. Management Accounts

Richard presented the Management Accounts for June 2020.

SMG noted the forecast for income and expenditure for the 2020/21 financial year and Richard also provided an early indication of the anticipated underspends against the opening budget as approved by the Northern Ireland Assembly Audit Committee.

Expenditure to date against the allocated budgets for Administration, Secretariat Salaries and Members' Costs was discussed.

In relation to Administration expenditure, Richard confirmed that as part of the June Monitoring exercise, budget managers were requested to critically review their overall requirements for the year in light of the ongoing COVID-19 restrictions. However, he stated that even after this exercise there were still areas with little expenditure to date, (one being the budget for travel) and he asked Directors to encourage their Heads of Business (HoBs)/budget managers to be as realistic and accurate as possible with regards their forecasts going forward.

Lesley was of the opinion that more action was needed with regards to potential expenditure and requested that Directors review budgets and

forecasts with their HoBs/budget managers in detail, in order to obtain a realistic picture of likely expenditure for the remainder of the financial year.

Action: Directors to have detailed discussions with their HoBs/budget managers to review budgets and forecasts going forward.

With regards the budget for Secretariat Salaries, Richard proposed that Directors review the plan that had been produced and agreed pre the COVID-19 pandemic, in relation to the filling of an additional 50 posts by 1 September 2020, as it was unlikely, due to the current circumstances that all would be filled by that date. SMG agreed to a review of staffing requirements listed in the plan.

Action: Richard to issue a list to Directors of the posts in the plan that have yet to be filled, with a request that they indicate whether or not they were likely to be filled by 1 September 2020.

In relation to Members' Costs, it was noted that additional funds were likely to be required should the Assembly Commission publish a new Determination for allowances payable to Members.

Richard also provided SMG with an update on the current position in relation to Capital expenditure, highlighting the need for Directors and budget managers to closely monitor this expenditure and update the Capital Plan accordingly.

SMG considered a request from the Head of IS, to purchase an additional 30 laptops at a cost of £12k, to meet demand as a result of a number of new starts, broken devices and difficulties with staff using personal devices whilst working from home due to the ongoing pandemic. SMG approved the request.

Lesley noted that as highlighted in previous months, the Capital Plan was not fully up to date and still had some historic references against some items. Gareth confirmed that he regularly requested that the Capital Plan be updated, however, his HoBs had indicated an issue with updating it, as the spreadsheet was only open for a few days each month. It was agreed that Richard would ask the Head of Finance to liaise with HoBs to address the issue raised.

Action: Head of Finance to liaise with HoBs to address the short window that the Capital Plan was open each month for editing, to enable HoBs adequate opportunity to update it.

On reviewing the Decision Authorisation System (DAS), Richard confirmed that progress had been made with regard to reviewing and updating records, however, he re-iterated the need for HoBs to monitor spend against approved limits for their respective business cases recorded on DAS.

Action: Directors to re-iterate to HoBs the importance of reviewing DAS and monitoring spend against approved limits for their respective business cases.

Meeting suspended at 11.10am and resumed at 11.26am.

10. Insurance Policy Update

Richard provided SMG with information on the following additional policies, as requested following consideration of the Insurance Policy at the 30 April 2020 SMG meeting:

- Directors and Officers Liability insurance cover; and
- Employment Liability Practices insurance cover for Members.

In relation to Directors and Officers Liability insurance cover, Richard informed SMG that quotes had been sought from the Assembly's appointed insurance broker, however, he advised that in the current market they had been unable to secure a quote from any provider.

SMG noted the difficulty in securing a quote and considered the best way to proceed. It was agreed that contact would be made with the Welsh and Scottish Parliaments and the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) to check the arrangements they had in place, if any.

Action: Richard to contact the Welsh and Scottish Parliaments to establish if they have any Directors and Officers liability insurance cover in place.

Action: Tara to check if the NICS has any Directors and Officers liability insurance cover in place.

Richard also proposed proceeding with a suggestion by the current insurance broker to approach specialist companies in the London insurance market for a quote. SMG was content for the insurance broker to seek quotes from London markets.

Action: Richard to instruct the Assembly's insurance broker to approach specialist companies in London for quotes.

In relation to Employment Liability Practices insurance cover for Members, Richard outlined three options identified by the Assembly's insurance broker that would be available to the Assembly Commission.

On reviewing the options outlined, SMG requested some additional information and agreed to give the matter further consideration on receipt of this.

SMG agreed to discuss both elements of insurance cover again, on receipt of the additional information requested, at the next SMG meeting.

Action: Head of Finance to prepare a further paper for presentation to SMG at its next meeting.

David Lynn, Head of Building Services, joined the meeting at 12.17pm for agenda item 11.

11. Provision of Building Maintenance and Minor Capital Works Projects

David Lynn presented this paper, and sought SMG approval of the recommendation to continue to avail of the services of the Property Maintenance Pan Government Framework 2019 for the financial year 2020/21.

David informed SMG of the allocated budget for 2020/21 for repairs and maintenance, detailing the split for wages, planned preventative maintenance and reactive maintenance/materials.

On reviewing the split, Lesley requested a breakdown of the wages costs over the last five years.

David advised SMG that Building Services Branch was carrying out a review of the provision of maintenance and minor capital works, with a view to preparing a paper by the end of October 2020 and it was agreed that the breakdown of wages cost as requested would be included in this paper.

Action: David to include a breakdown of the maintenance wages costs over the last five years, as part of the Maintenance and Minor Capital Works Review paper to be prepared by the end of October 2020.

Tara requested more time to allow for a discussion of the paper with the Head of Procurement, before providing her view in relation to the recommendation in the paper.

It was also agreed that it would be helpful if David would provide SMG with a copy of the framework document.

Tara also requested a breakdown of the wages costs allocated for 2020/21.

Action: David to provide SMG with a copy of the framework document.

Action: David to provide Tara with a breakdown of the wages costs allocated for 2020/21.

Action: Tara to discuss the paper with the Head of Procurement and advise the Clerk/Chief Executive/Directors of her view in relation to the recommendation to continue to avail of the

Following consideration, SMG was content to proceed on the basis of the recommendation, subject to confirmation from Tara.

David Lynn left the meeting at 12.41pm.

PARLIAMENTARY SERVICES

12. EU Exit – Assembly Business and Associated Resourcing Issues

It was noted that Paul Gill, Clerk Assistant and Angela Kelly, Examiner of Statutory Rules, had met with Clerk/Chief Executive and Directors the previous day to discuss the paper in detail.

Following consideration of resourcing proposals to enable the Assembly to adequately respond to the increased scrutiny related to EU exit, SMG approved a number of additional posts and noted the related budget implications, as set out in the paper.

13. Methodology for progressing a peer review of the Northern Ireland Assembly against the benchmarks set out in the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association’s (CPA) ‘Recommended Benchmarks for Democratic Legislatures’

SMG noted that the Assembly Commission’s Corporate Strategy 2018-2023 included the aim of “Developing a confident legislature with a strong parliamentary culture” and that in order to support the achievement of this aim, the Assembly Commission’s Corporate Plan 2019-2023 included the high-level corporate objective “Developing the Assembly’s distinct purpose and identity by supporting its legislative, scrutiny and representative roles”.

Gareth informed SMG that in light of the objective outlined, the relevant milestone for 2020/21 was to “Conduct a peer review of the Assembly against the benchmarks set out in the CPA’s ‘Recommended Benchmarks for Democratic Legislatures’”.

SMG noted that the Peer Review would be undertaken in conjunction with the work of the Chairpersons’ Liaison Group’s (CLG) consideration of the Renewable Heat Incentive Inquiry’s report and the recommendations for strengthening the scrutiny role of Assembly committees therein.

It was further noted that the Peer Review would be overseen by the Parliamentary Culture Strategy Steering Group, with the output being a detailed assessment report, benchmarking the Northern Ireland

Assembly against the CPA's recommended benchmarks, together with recommendations, which would provide the basis for the 2021/22 Corporate Plan milestone to "Implement the agreed proposals resulting from the peer review exercise".

SMG was supportive of the review and it was agreed that Gareth's update paper for the next Assembly Commission meeting on the "New Decade, New Approach" would include an update on the Peer Review being undertaken.

Action: Gareth to include an update on the Peer Review as outlined, in the update paper presented at the next Assembly Commission meeting on "New Decade, New Approach".

OTHER ITEMS

14. Directorate Updates

SMG noted the Directorate updates.

Corporate Services

Usher Services

Richard advised that a meeting was scheduled with the Procurement Office to progress the Parliament Buildings Security Systems project.

Legal, Governance and Research Services

Internal Audit

Tara provided an update on the Internal Audit Reviews for:

- Members' Expenses (2019/20);
- Mobile Phones;
- Support Services follow-up;
- Cyber-security follow-up;
- Secretariat Pensions; and
- Procurement Cards

In relation to two outstanding management responses, it was noted that Richard had recently forwarded a draft management response on the Review of the Equality and Good Relations Unit to the Clerk/Chief Executive and other Directors for consideration and approval and that a reply would be forwarded to Internal Audit once agreed. In relation to the second outstanding management response on the Review of the Administration of Members' Expenses, Richard confirmed that he would raise this with the Head of Finance.

Action: Richard to liaise with the Head of Finance in relation to providing a management response to Internal Audit in respect of the Review of the Administration of Members' Expenses.

Tara also advised SMG that the draft report on the External Quality Assessment of Internal Audit had been received and that a response would be agreed with the Clerk/Chief Executive in due course.

Research and Information Services (RaISe)

Tara informed SMG that six new articles were published on Research Matters during July.

Freedom of Information (Fol)

Tara asked Directors to ensure that an approach was agreed by them at an early stage in each Fol request with the staff member in their business area dealing with Fol responses and the Information Standards Office. Tara also indicated that she was planning to review the Fol process with a view to obtaining an input from Directors at an earlier stage.

Parliamentary Services

Clerking

Gareth advised SMG that although no meetings of the Ad Hoc Committee on the COVID-19 response had been scheduled, it was expected that it would meet during the summer recess.

Communications Office

Gareth informed SMG that the recent launch of the Youth Assembly had received extremely positive feedback.

15. AOB – Paper on proposed changes to the structure and staffing of the Parliamentary Services Directorate

It was noted that the Clerk/Chief Executive and Directors had met the previous day to discuss the paper in detail.

Following consideration, SMG approved all the recommendations within the paper, whilst noting the related budget implications.

Richard asked that Gareth update the Head of Finance on the impact the agreed changes would have on the budget forecast and also that he advise the Head of HR on the requirements in relation to staffing posts.

Action: Gareth to update the Head of Finance on the impact that the structural and staffing changes in the Parliamentary Services Directorate will have on budget forecast and also

advise the Head of HR on the requirements in relation to staffing posts.

16. Date of next meeting

Next meeting to take place on 25 September 2020.

17. Proposals for Agenda Items for Next Meeting

- Review of Financial Reporting Processes
- Support Services Contract Cost
- COVID-19 Risk Assessment/Planning for Return
- Sustainable Development Target Outcomes for 2018/19 and 2019/20 and Proposed Targets for 2020/21
- Insurance Policy Update
- Quarterly Review of the Corporate Risk Register
- Biannual Review of Directorate Risk Register
- RaISe Digital Strategy
- EU Exit Update
- Update on 'New Decade, New Approach'
- Draft Internal Communications Plan and Draft Values Communications Plan

The meeting ended at 1.42pm.