

SECRETARIAT MANAGEMENT GROUP (SMG)

FRIDAY, 29 JANUARY 2021 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
Billy Mahoney
Richard Anderson
Sinéad McDonnell
Aine Kerr
Simon Burrowes
Louise Close
Lucy McClelland
James Stewart

Opening/Review

The meeting commenced at 9.36am.

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 17 December 2020 had been published that day.

4. SMG Action Points

The outstanding action points were reviewed and progress was noted.

Gareth McGrath, Director of Parliamentary Services, updated SMG on the action from the November 2020 meeting regarding the usage of the recorded content facility under the current television system. Gareth confirmed that following consultation, that there was not a sufficient business case to maintain this facility and proposed that it be dispensed with. SMG was content to dispense with this facility.

Tara Caul, Director of Legal, Governance and Research Services, advised SMG that a new Disclosure Log in relation to FoI requests had recently been completed by the Information Standards Office. Tara confirmed that a meeting would be arranged with the Clerk/Chief Executive and Directors to consider the formatting and layout of the Disclosure Log with a view to immediate publication.

Action: Tara to arrange a meeting with the Clerk/Chief Executive and Directors to consider the formatting and layout of the Disclosure Log pending publication.

Robin Ramsey, Adviser to the Speaker/Head of Corporate Support, joined the meeting at 9.43am for agenda items 5 and 6.

5. Political Update

COVID-19

SMG noted that, in conjunction with the COVID-19 Response Group, it had reviewed all of the Assembly Commission's current health and safety arrangements and COVID-19 mitigation measures in light of the new regulations that had been made in January 2021 and that communications had issued to staff and building users regarding additional mitigations agreed by the Assembly Commission. SMG also noted that the Business Committee and the Chairpersons' Liaison Group had reviewed Plenary and Committee business in light of the current restrictions.

CORPORATE SUPPORT

6. Draft Assembly Commission Agenda

It was noted that the next Assembly Commission meeting was scheduled for 17 February 2021.

Proposed items for the meeting included:

- Clerk/Chief Executive's Report
- Assembly Members (Remuneration Board) Bill
- Feasibility Study on Additional Committee Meeting Space and Broadcasting Capacity
- Grading and Pay Benchmarking Review
- Legal Expenses Insurance Cover for Members

- Provision of Human Resource Services to Members
- Amendment to Business Case for Temporary Workers Contract
- Update on Consideration of Extending the Assembly Commission's Annual Dates for the Lighting of Parliament Buildings
- Overview of Activities and Events at Parliament Buildings in 2021
- Assembly Commission Artefacts
- Assembly Members Pension Scheme Annual Report and Accounts and Annual Funding Update

Action: Gareth to arrange a meeting with the Clerk/Chief Executive and Directors, to discuss the draft Assembly Commission paper on the 'Feasibility Study on Additional Committee Space and Broadcasting Capacity', prior to presentation at the February Assembly Commission meeting.

Robin also confirmed that a meeting between the Assembly Commission, Clerk/Chief Executive, Directors and the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman was scheduled to take place before the Assembly Commission meeting on 17 February 2021.

Tara noted that an Assembly Commission Member would be required to sit on the Secretariat Audit and Risk Committee (SARC) recruitment panel to identify a new Chair and Independent Member.

Action: Lesley to ask the Assembly Commission to identify an Assembly Commission Member to sit on the SARC recruitment panel.

Robin Ramsey left the meeting at 10.23am.

CORPORATE SERVICES

Paula McClintock, Head of Finance, joined the meeting at 10.23am for agenda items 7 and 8.

Billy Mahoney, Deputy Head of Finance, joined the meeting at 10.23am for agenda item 7.

7. Management Accounts

Paula McClintock presented the Management Accounts for December 2020, highlighting the forecast level of underspend against the final budget position, as submitted to the Department of Finance (DoF) in the January Monitoring round.

Paula advised that the outcome of the January Monitoring round had been formally agreed by DoF; that the final budget position for Resource and Capital DEL was set; and that reporting for the rest of the financial year would focus on forecasted under/overspends.

Paula provided an analysis of the current month and year to date position for all budget lines.

In relation to Secretariat Salaries, Tara advised that additional budget would be required to cover a sickness absence at AG4 in the Legal, Governance and Research Services Directorate and confirmed that formal contact would be made with Paula to discuss this requirement.

Billy Mahoney advised that a bid for an additional £1.9k capital had been received from the Communications Office in respect of the Broadcast Router Matrix project and this was agreed by SMG.

On reviewing the Capital Plan, it was noted that the current forecast was still £20k above the agreed budget envelope, even though funds had been identified to cover a £20k overspend at the December SMG meeting. Lesley stated that funds would need to be found to cover this overspend and sought clarification on expenditure in relation to the purchase of 'phase inverters' and the anticipated expenditure required regarding the items not yet approved by SMG, as recorded on the Capital Plan.

Action: Richard to obtain an update from the Head of Building Services on expenditure in relation to the purchase of 'phase inverters' and the anticipated expenditure required regarding the items on the Capital Plan not yet approved by SMG.

Paula asked that Heads of Business (HoBs) scrutinise their Capital budget requirements as a matter of urgency so that reprioritisation of projects can be undertaken if required.

Action: HoBs to scrutinise their Capital budget requirements as a matter of urgency.

Paula also asked that monthly Directorate Finance meetings be reinstated to enable more detailed scrutiny of budgets.

Action: Directors to ensure that monthly Directorate Finance meeting are reinstated.

Billy Mahoney left the meeting at 10.57am.

8. Insurance Policy Update on Legal Expenses Insurance

Paula presented an update following discussion at previous SMG meetings on potential insurance cover for employment-related disputes for Members.

Paula presented a draft Assembly Commission paper and sample insurance policy, for consideration by SMG. SMG was content that the

proposed policy provided sufficient cover for Members and approved the draft Assembly Commission paper for presentation to the Assembly Commission at its next meeting, subject to some minor amendments.

Action: Assembly Commission paper on Legal Expenses Insurance Cover for Members to be updated as discussed and presented to the Assembly Commission at its next meeting.

Paula McClintock left the meeting at 11.20am.

Richard Anderson, Health and Safety Officer, joined the meeting at 11.20am for agenda item 9.

9. Health and Safety Management Report 2020

Richard Anderson presented the Health and Safety Management Report providing SMG with a detailed account on accidents and other health and safety issues during the year ending 31 December 2020.

It was noted that since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Health and Safety Branch had been heavily involved with ensuring the safety of building users and assisting staff with home working arrangements. He also advised that regular meetings were taking place with Trade Union Side (TUS) Health and Safety Representatives.

Richard confirmed that refresher training had been provided to existing First Aiders throughout 2020 and that first aid boxes and defibrillators within the building were checked on a regular basis.

Richard also noted that the Health and Safety Branch had approached the IS Office, to assist with the development of an online DSE self-assessment questionnaire which would be completed annually by staff.

Gareth asked that Richard look into buying off the shelf software for the proposed online DSE self-assessment questionnaire, as opposed to developing in-house.

In relation to other health and safety issues, Richard advised that permanent hearing induction loops had been installed in Rooms 135 and 106 and that both Chambers and all Committee Meeting and Education rooms on the ground and first floors now had fixed hearing loops, with portable loops also available.

It was also noted that a review of the Assembly's Health and Safety Manual was nearing completion.

Richard advised that a Fire Risk Assessment of Parliament Buildings was carried out in November 2020. SMG queried progress on the creation of refuge areas for persons with disabilities on each floor, with two-way-communication. Richard stated that this remained outstanding.

Lesley requested a further progress update on the creation of the refuge areas.

Action: Richard Stewart to provide SMG with an update on the creation of refuge areas for persons with disabilities.

Lesley also requested that any medical issues that arise going forward, be recorded under a separate classification, as opposed to grouping them under the 'accident' classification.

SMG thanked Richard and the rest of the Health and Safety Branch for all their efforts over the last year, particularly in their response to the pandemic. SMG appreciated the amount of work that had been undertaken and thanked Richard for a very comprehensive report.

Richard Anderson left the meeting at 11.34am.

Meeting suspended at 11.34am and resumed at 11.45am.

Sinéad McDonnell, Head of HR, joined the meeting at 11.45am for agenda items 10, 11 and 12.

Aine Kerr, Senior HR Manager, joined the meeting at 11.45am for agenda item 10.

10. HR Management Information

Aine Kerr presented the monthly HR Management Information as at 1 January 2021.

SMG noted that the Staff in Post (SiP) figure on 1 January 2021 (including agency and inward seconded staff) was 351.3 Full Time Equivalents (FTE) against an agreed staff complement (including complement plus) of 385.8 FTE.

Aine advised SMG of the temporary promotions/deputising arrangements and agency work assignments currently in place.

In relation to agency workers, Sinéad confirmed that a variation to the business case for the temporary worker contract would be required and proposed bringing a paper seeking approval to the February 2021 Assembly Commission meeting. SMG agreed that approval would need to be sought from the Assembly Commission. SMG also asked that the SMG paper be updated to reflect further clarification regarding the temporary worker contract and reissued.

Action: Sinéad to prepare a paper seeking a variation to the temporary worker business case for presentation to the Assembly Commission at its February 2021 meeting.

Action: Sinéad to update the HR Management Information paper to reflect further clarification regarding the temporary worker contract and that it be reissued.

On reviewing the Recruitment Schedule, Aine confirmed that the competitions for AG5 Senior Assistant Assembly Clerk and AG7 Parliamentary Reporter had completed. It was also noted, that the posts of AG5 Procurement Manager and AG7 HR Team Supervisor had been advertised with a closing date of 1 February 2021.

Aine confirmed that there were currently no live merit lists for AG6 and AG7 posts and it was agreed that a meeting would be arranged with the Clerk/Chief Executive, Directors and Head of HR to address this issue and also review progress and prioritise the remaining competitions on the Recruitment Schedule.

Action: Sinéad to arrange a meeting with the Clerk/Chief Executive and Directors to address the issue of merit lists for AG6 and AG7 posts and also review progress and prioritise the remaining competitions on the Recruitment Schedule.

Sickness absence information was provided and it was noted that for the period January 2020 to December 2020, the average days lost to sickness absence per FTE member of staff was 7.2 days, compared with an average of 11.5 days during the period January 2019 to December 2019. It was noted that there continued to be a reduction in short term absences.

Aine Kerr left the meeting at 12.18pm.

11. Provision of Human Resource Services to Members

Sinéad presented a draft Assembly Commission paper on Human Resource Services to Members to support them in their role as an employer.

Sinéad outlined the proposed HR service to Members, the nature of the service to be provided, how it would be provided and the likely resources that would be required.

It was noted that the paper also referenced how the HR service could work in conjunction with a Legal Expenses Insurance policy which was also being considered by SMG and the Assembly Commission.

Following discussion, SMG approved in principle, the request within the paper for an additional post in the HR Office, subject to Assembly Commission consideration of the paper at its next meeting.

SMG requested that some amendments be made to the paper and that it be recirculated to SMG for final approval, prior to it being presented to the Assembly Commission.

Action: Sinéad to update the draft Assembly Commission paper as discussed and recirculate to SMG for final approval, prior to presentation to the Assembly Commission at its February 2021 meeting.

12. Grading and Pay Benchmarking Review

Sinéad presented a draft Assembly Commission paper and Consultancy Business Case regarding the proposed Grading and Pay Benchmarking Review.

SMG provided some initial comments and agreed to provide further comments after the meeting, as more time was required to consider the paper.

Action: Sinéad to update the paper as discussed and recirculate to SMG for final approval, prior to presentation to the Assembly Commission at its February 2021 meeting.

Sínead McDonnell left the meeting at 1.02pm.

Meeting suspended at 1.02pm and resumed at 1.30pm.

Change to agenda running order.

OTHER ITEMS

15. Directorate Updates

SMG noted the Directorate updates.

Corporate Services

Equality Unit

Richard highlighted continuing staffing shortages in the Equality Unit.

It was also noted that the Equality Commission had granted an extension to the submission of the Assembly Commission's Equality Scheme Action Plan.

Legal, Governance and Research Services

Changes to the legislative competence of the Assembly

Tara confirmed that the Legal Services Office (LSO) had completed its analysis of changes to section 6 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 relating to the legislative competence of the Assembly following expiry of the EU Exit Implementation Period.

Lesley recorded her thanks to Tara and LSO for the significant amount of work done in relation to consideration of these changes.

Examiner of Statutory Rules (ESR)

It was noted that there continued to be a heavy workload in the Office of the ESR, with a lot of complex issues to be addressed.

Internal Audit

Tara provided an update on the Internal Audit Reviews for:

- Committee for Communities
- Information Systems Infrastructure
- Mobile Phones
- Secretariat Pensions
- Hansard
- Office of the Speaker
- Accounts Payable
- Bill Office
- Planned and Reactive Maintenance
- Review of Overtime
- Procurement
- Members Expenses (2020/21)
- Secretariat Travel

RaISe

Tara advised that a number of research papers and blog articles had been published since the last SMG update on 17 December 2020.

PARLIAMENTARY SERVICES

Simon Burrowes, Head of Public Engagement, joined the meeting at 1.52pm for agenda items 13 and 14.

Louise Close, Outreach Manager, joined the meeting at 1.52pm for agenda item 13.

13. Public Engagement Activity: Biannual Report (June to December 2020)

Louise Close presented a biannual report of public engagement activity undertaken by the Engagement Unit during the period June to December 2020.

Louise stated that the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated public health restrictions in place since March 2020, meant that it had been

necessary for the Engagement Unit to redesign its services and the delivery of those services.

Louise confirmed that the staff in the Engagement Unit had been reskilled to support virtual delivery of engagement activities. She also provided details of services to support increased public engagement with the work of Assembly committees, other public engagement activity and parliamentary engagement together with details of planned future events.

SMG was impressed with the innovative methods used by the Engagement Unit to continue to deliver services during such a challenging period and congratulated Louise and her team on their positive engagement with different sectors.

Louise Close left the meeting at 2.15pm.

Lucy McClelland, Education Officer, and James Stewart, Education Officer, joined the meeting at 2.15pm for agenda item 14.

14. Update on the Development of an Assembly Commission-supported Youth Assembly

Lucy McClelland and James Stewart delivered a presentation to SMG on the development of an Assembly Commission-supported Youth Assembly.

A report of the work of the Co-design panel was also provided.

It was agreed that a detailed paper setting out the key decisions that need to be taken to progress the establishment of the Youth Assembly and a presentation would be provided to the Assembly Commission, following consideration by the Speaker's Advisory Group.

Action: Paper to be prepared for presentation to the Assembly Commission at its meeting in March 2021.

SMG thanked Simon, Lucy and James for all the work they had done with the young people and the speed with which this had been carried out.

Simon Burrowes, Lucy McClelland and James Stewart left the meeting at 2.54pm.

16. AOB

There was no other business.

17. Date of next meeting

Next meeting to take place on 26 February 2021.

18. Proposals for Agenda Items for Next Meeting

- Review of the Financial Assistance to Political Parties Scheme
- Section 75 Monitoring Survey for Secretariat Staff
- Five-Year Review of the Assembly Commission's Equality Scheme (2016-2021)
- Cycle to Work Scheme
- Variation to the Business Case for Temporary Workers Contract
- PSNI Service Level Agreement
- Assembly Members (Remuneration Board) Bill
- Review of Data Breach Management Plan
- Data Protection Policy Review
- NI Mapping Agreement and Land and Property Services Concordat
- Feasibility Study on Committee Space and Broadcasting Capacity
- Assembly Commission's Annual Dates for the Lighting of Parliament Buildings
- Overview of Activities and Events at Parliament Buildings in 2021
- Assembly Commission Artefacts

The meeting ended at 2.54pm.