

SECRETARIAT MANAGEMENT GROUP (SMG)

FRIDAY, 30 APRIL 2021 at 9.30 AM
(VIRTUAL MEETING VIA MICROSOFT TEAMS)

APPROVED

Present: Lesley Hogg
Tara Caul
Gareth McGrath
Richard Stewart

In Attendance: Janet Hughes
Robin Ramsey
Billy Mahoney
Aine Kerr
Maria Bannon
David Lynn
Julie Devlin

The meeting commenced at 9.37 am.

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 26 March 2021 were published on 29 April 2021.

4. SMG Action Points

The outstanding action points were reviewed and progress was noted.

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

5. Political Update

SMG discussed a number of matters impacting on the business of the Assembly.

CORPORATE SUPPORT

6. Draft Assembly Commission Agenda

Robin Ramsey noted that the next Assembly Commission meeting had been scheduled for 12 May 2021.

Proposed items for the meeting included:

- Clerk/Chief Executive's Report
- Assembly Commission Corporate plan 2020-21 Year-End Performance Report
- Potential Rescheduling of the Assembly Members (Remuneration Board) Bill
- Legal Expenses Insurance Cover for Members
- Provision of Human Resource Services to Members
- Consideration of the Publication of a Revised Determination
- Update on Designated Days for Flying the Union Flag at Parliament Buildings
- Review of Parliament Buildings: Special Lighting Policy
- Good Relations Action Plan 2016-21: March 2021 Update
- Gender Action Plan: March 2021 Update
- Northern Ireland Assembly Commission Complaints Policy and Procedures Report for 2020-21

Corporate Support Unit Update

Commencement Order

Robin informed SMG that the Public Services Ombudsman Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 (Commencement) Order (Northern Ireland) 2021 would be published and laid in the Business Office the following week and thanked officials for their work in processing the Commencement Order.

Corporate Plan 2020-21 Year-End Performance Report

Robin thanked Directors for their returns in relation to the Year-End Performance Report and confirmed that once collated, a draft report would be issued for consideration, prior to it being presented to the Assembly Commission at its next meeting.

Assembly Commission Artefacts

Robin advised that he had met with Dr Eamon Phoenix on the matter of displaying Assembly Commission artefacts and that a Working Grouping would be established, with Dr Phoenix providing consultancy support. It was noted that an update on progress would be provided to the Assembly Commission at its next meeting with a detailed paper

being prepared for consideration at the subsequent Assembly Commission meeting.

Robin Ramsey left the meeting at 10.08 am.

CORPORATE SERVICES

Billy Mahoney, Acting Deputy Head of Finance, joined the meeting at 10.08 am for agenda item 7.

7. Management Accounts

Billy Mahoney presented the year-end Management Accounts for March 2021.

Billy reported on the provisional outturn figures for each category of expenditure for 2020-21. He confirmed that the figures reported would be subject to change as the period for processing accruals ran until the end of April 2021.

On reviewing the capital budget, Billy advised of a provisional underspend of £41k against the Monitoring position. It was noted that the majority of the underspend was attributed to the Office Furniture Upgrade and the Kitchen Equipment projects.

Lesley noted her disappointment in relation to the underspend, since at the previous month's meeting the indication was that capital expenditure in relation to the two projects would be incurred before the end of the financial year. Lesley sought a detailed explanation as to why expenditure on the projects had not occurred as advised.

Action: Richard to provide Lesley with a detailed explanation as to why planned expenditure in this financial year, in relation to the Office Furniture Upgrade and Kitchen Equipment projects had not occurred.

In relation to the opening capital plan for 2021-22, Billy advised that a meeting with Budget Managers was scheduled for 14 May 2021, to review capital expenditure requirements for the year.

Gareth McGrath, Director of Parliamentary Services, noted delays with Budget Managers updating the Capital Plan and asked if it would be possible for it to be uploaded onto Microsoft Teams, in order to make it more accessible for Budget Managers to update.

Lesley suggested uploading a working copy of the Capital Plan into a shared folder, for Budget Managers to update with a master copy held by Finance Office.

Billy confirmed that the Capital Plan was currently uploaded onto ShareCentre for updating, he noted the proposals from Gareth and Lesley and agreed to look into the possibility of using a more accessible system.

Action: Billy to look at options for replacing the current ShareCentre process for updating the Capital Plan, with one that is more accessible for Budget Managers.

SMG reviewed the latest Decision Authorisation System (DAS) report. Billy emphasised the need for a detailed narrative to be provided by business areas when submitting a closure request for a DAS reference, if the actual expenditure was less than what was approved and recorded.

Lesley thanked Billy for preparing and presenting the Management Accounts paper this month, in the absence of the Head of Finance and noted her appreciation for the additional workload he had undertaken.

Billy Mahoney left the meeting at 10.32 am.

8. Desirability of Publishing a Revised Determination in this Assembly Mandate

Richard Stewart, Director of Corporate Services, presented a draft Assembly Commission paper regarding the potential publication of a revised Determination.

Tara Caul, Director of Legal, Governance and Research Services, raised some governance issues in relation to the processing of a second Determination in the absence of legislative reform proceeding.

Following consideration, SMG proposed some revisions to the paper, prior to presentation to the Assembly Commission at its next meeting.

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

Aine Kerr, Senior HR Manager, joined the meeting at 11.01 am for agenda item 9.

9. HR Management Information

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

SMG noted that the Staff in Post (SiP) figure as at 1 April 2021 (including agency and inward seconded staff) was 353.8 Full Time Equivalents (FTE) against an agreed staff complement (including complement plus) of 388.5 FTE.

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

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

SMG noted that interviews for the Assistant Editor had taken place and that the competitions for Research Officer and Librarian had closed and moved to sift stage.

Due to the fact that Parliament Buildings is currently closed on Fridays, Richard asked if there would be any concerns to using the Building on Fridays for interviews and testing. SMG was content with the proposal.

Sickness absence information was provided and it was noted that for the period April 2020 to March 2021, the average days lost to sickness absence per FTE member of staff was 5.9 compared with an average of 10.7 days during the period April 2019 to March 2020.

Lesley sought confirmation that the relevant support was being provided to those staff off on long term sickness absence. Aine confirmed that this was the case and that the services of Blackwell Associates Ltd had been used as well as engagement with the Occupational Health Service, Welfare and line managers.

Aine Kerr left the meeting at 11.14 am.

Meeting suspended at 11.14 am and resumed at 11.30 am.

Maria Bannon, Equality and Good Relations Manager, joined the meeting at 11.30 am for agenda item 10.

10. Audit of Inequalities Action Plan 2016-21: April 2021 Update

Maria Bannon provided an update on the progress of actions within the Audit of Inequalities Action Plan 2016-21.

SMG noted that of the 27 actions within the Plan, 19 were completed, 5 were progressing, 2 were partially complete and 1 had been suspended. Maria advised that the COVID-19 restrictions and the closure of the building to the public had had a bearing on Assembly activity under the action plan, particularly for the Education Service and Engagement. However, it was noted that both areas had been engaging with stakeholders to explore ways of delivering some activities remotely.

Following review, SMG approved the monitoring update for publication on the Assembly's website, subject to amendments to the status of three of the actions.

Action: Maria to amend the status updates on three of the actions within the Plan and then arrange for the monitoring update to be published on the Assembly' website.

Maria Bannon left the meeting at 11.36 am.

David Lynn, Head of Building Services, joined the meeting at 11.36 am for agenda item 11.

11. Update on Creation of Refuge Areas for People with Disabilities

David Lynn provided SMG with an update on the creation of refuge areas for use by people with a disability in Parliament Buildings.

David advised SMG that the Fire Risk Assessment (FRA) for the building had called for the provision of refuge areas complete with 2-way communications to be made a priority. David confirmed that outline proposals for refuge areas and 2-way communications had been developed but that there remained some areas of concern and disagreement regarding the proposals and further work was therefore required to clarify the requirements and arrive at a workable solution for all building users.

Following detailed discussion, SMG agreed that the matter required clarification of the statutory requirements.

Action: David to seek clarification of statutory requirements and update SMG accordingly.

SMG also proposed seeking expert advice should it be required.

David Lynn left the meeting at 12.22 pm.

LEGAL, GOVERNANCE AND RESEARCH SERVICES

Julie Devlin, Governance Officer, joined the meeting at 12.22 pm for agenda item 13.

12. Annual Review of the Risk Management Strategy including Mandatory Review of Risk Appetite

Julie Devlin advised that she had met with the Clerk/Chief Executive and Directors on 14 April 2021 to discuss a number of proposed revisions to the Risk Management Strategy (RMS).

Julie presented the updated RMS incorporating the revisions discussed on 14 April 2021. SMG approved the revised RMS and confirmed that no amendments were required to the risk appetite contained within the RMS.

SMG also agreed that as the RMS was now well embedded, going forward it should be reviewed biennially, unless it warranted earlier revision by exception.

Julie Devlin left the meeting at 12.25 pm.

PARLIAMENTARY SERVICES

13. Northern Ireland Assembly Commission Complaints Policy and Procedure Report for 2020-21

Gareth presented a draft Assembly Commission paper, reporting on the complaints received during the period 1 April 2020 to 31 March 2021.

SMG noted that two complaints had been received in the reporting period.

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

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

Action: Communications Office to arrange for the Complaints Policy Report for 2020-21 to be published on the Assembly's website following consideration by the Assembly Commission.

OTHER ITEMS

14. Directorate Updates

SMG noted the Directorate updates.

Corporate Services

Usher Services

Richard confirmed that a consultant had been appointed to progress the Parliament Buildings Security System (PBSS) project.

Richard also noted that the scope of the Electronic Access Control project was being developed in light of the planned increase in the use of Room 21 as a Committee room and that this project would now be integrated with the PBBS project.

HR Office

Richard advised that work was progressing on both the Grading and Pay

Benchmarking Review and the development of a Learning and Development Strategy.

Equality Unit

Richard noted that an application for the Assembly to become a member of Diversity NI had been completed and submitted to Diversity NI for consideration.

Richard recorded his thanks to Jake Wilson, for the excellent work carried out in relation to the development of a draft Transgender Policy, during his time within the Equality Unit.

The staff complement within the Equality Unit was also discussed and it was agreed that Richard would prepare a paper for consideration at the next SMG meeting.

Action: Richard to prepare a paper on the staff complement of the Equality Unit for presentation at the next SMG meeting.

Legal, Governance and Research Services

Litigation

Tara confirmed that the Legal Services Office was continuing to liaise with the HR Office and the Industrial Tribunal to manage holiday pay claims.

Examiner of Statutory Rules

Tara noted the continuing heavy workload within the office of the Examiner of Statutory Rules.

Internal Audit

Tara provided an update on the Internal Audit Reviews for:

- Members' Expenses (2020/21);
- Accounts Payable;
- Procurement; and
- Overtime.

Research and Information Services (RaISe)

Tara advised that RaISe had published a number of research papers, blog articles and deposited papers since last reported to SMG in March 2021.

Fol

Tara asked that Directors continue to monitor carefully Fol responses within their Directorates, ensuring that clear direction on responses is provided at the outset.

Parliamentary Services

Lesley and Tara commented on the additional information provided in the Parliamentary Service's Directorate update on individual committee activity, which they found very informative.

15. AOB

There was no other business.

16. Date of next meeting

Next meeting to take place on 27 May 2021.

19. Proposals for Agenda Items for Next Meeting

- Annual Environmental Management Review
- Review of Building Maintenance
- Section 75 Monitoring Survey for Secretariat Staff
- Development of a Good Relations Action Plan 2021-26
- Draft Disability Action Plan 2021-26: Public Consultation
- Equality Staff Survey Findings Report (2018)
- Five-year review of the Assembly Commission's Equality Scheme (2016-2021)
- Review of Visitor Survey
- Support Services Contract (subject to progress on discussion with contractor)
- Update on Roof Project Issues
- Assembly Members' Pension Scheme
- Staff Complement – Equality Unit
- Quarterly Update on Internal Communications
- Report on the 2021 Members' Survey and Action Plan
- Internal Communications Group Update

Lesley commented on the need for internal policies to be regularly reviewed by business areas and SMG.

Action: Gareth to produce a schedule, detailing review dates, of Parliamentary Services policies and circulate to SMG.

Lesley noted that it would be helpful to have a schedule for all Directorates.

The meeting ended at 1.11 pm.