

SECRETARIAT MANAGEMENT GROUP (SMG)

FRIDAY, 26 FEBRUARY 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
Paula McClintock
Billy Mahoney
Christine Watts
David Lynn
Sinéad McDonnell
Maria Bannon
Ryan Fleming

Opening/Review

The meeting commenced at 9.38 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 29 January 2021 had been published that day.

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 9.41 am for agenda items 5 and 6.

5. Political Update

Hybrid Plenaries

Lesley Hogg commented on the success of the virtual participation in plenaries that had taken place for the first time during the week and thanked everyone for their efforts in making this happen.

COVID-19

SMG noted that the Executive was considering plans to move out of the current Coronavirus restrictions and that these were expected to be published the following week.

CORPORATE SUPPORT

6. Draft Assembly Commission Agenda

Robin Ramsey noted that the date of the next Assembly Commission meeting had yet to be agreed, but stated that it was likely that a few single agenda item meetings might be required in March ahead of a full meeting in April 2021.

Possible single item agenda meetings in March on the following items:

- Commencement of Part 3 of the Public Services Ombudsman Act (NI) 2016 – Complaints Standards Authority Role for the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman
- Update on the Development of an Assembly Commission-supported Youth Assembly
- Discussion with Dr Eamon Phoenix about the Assembly Commission project on Assembly artefacts
- Feasibility Study on additional committee space and broadcasting capacity (dependent on the Chairpersons' Liaison Group's consideration on 2 March 2021)

Proposed items for the April meeting included:

- Clerk/Chief Executive's Report
- Potential Rescheduling of the Assembly Members (Remuneration Board) Bill
- Legal Expenses Insurance Cover for Members
- Provision of Human Resource Services to Members
- Assembly Members' Pension Scheme Annual Report and Accounts and Annual Funding Update
- Statutory Maternity Protections for Ministers and MLAs
- Review of the Assembly Commission's 'Parliament Buildings: Special Lighting Policy (2020)'

Corporate Support Unit Update

Robin advised that he planned to issue guidance and a template for end-year reporting on the Corporate Plan to Heads of Business (HoBs) in the week commencing 15 March 2021, with a deadline for returns of 7 April 2021. He also noted that draft guidance and an accompanying template for the 2021/22 draft annual plan had been issued to the Clerk/Chief Executive and the Strategic Steering Group Chairs.

Robin thanked Julie Devlin, Governance Officer for her assistance with the production of the guidance documents and templates.

Robin Ramsey left the meeting at 10.10 am.

CORPORATE SERVICES

Paula McClintock, Head of Finance, joined the meeting at 10.10 am for agenda items 7, 8 and 9.

Billy Mahoney, Deputy Head of Finance, joined the meeting at 10.10 am for agenda item 7.

7. Management Accounts

Paula McClintock presented the Management Accounts for January 2021, highlighting the forecast level of underspend against the final budget position.

Paula advised that the forecast for Secretariat salaries had been updated to reflect the fact that some posts that were anticipated to be filled before the end of the financial year remained unfilled.

Lesley asked for a breakdown of those posts yet to be filled.

Action: Paula to liaise with HR and provide SMG with a list of those posts yet to be filled.

Paula also advised SMG of underspends against Administration Costs and Members' Costs.

On consideration of the Capital Plan, Paula advised that following the current month's review by Budget Managers, some underspends had been identified in relation to the phase inverters and the two-way fire evacuation emergency communication system, which would not now be purchased in this financial year. It was also noted that the kitchen carousel had cost less than anticipated. Paula therefore advised that the current forecast underspend was now £31k.

In light of the forecast underspend, Lesley proposed that budget managers review the Capital Plan to see if any capital requirements for

2021/22 could be brought forward and progressed before the end of the financial year.

Billy agreed to liaise with budget managers on this matter.

Action: Billy to liaise with Budget Managers to identify whether any capital requirements for 2021/22 could be brought forward and progressed before the end of the financial year.

In relation to the 2021/22 budget, Lesley requested that a meeting be arranged to review the Administration Costs and capital budgets.

Action: Paula to arrange a meeting with the Clerk/Chief Executive, Directors and Budget Managers, to review the Administration Costs and individual capital budgets for each business area.

Billy Mahoney left the meeting at 10.47 am.

8. Insurance Policy Update

Paula provided SMG with an update on the annual renewal of the Assembly Commission's insurance policies and on the insurance case history for 2020/21.

SMG was content to proceed with the renewal quotes presented.

Christine Watts, Environment Services Manager, joined the meeting at 11.00 am for agenda item 9.

David Lynn, Head of Building Services, joined the meeting at 11.00 am for agenda item 9.

9. Cycle to Work Policy

Christine Watts presented the Cycle to Work Policy which had been updated to reflect the fact that the Assembly Commission uses a third part company, to administer the Policy through an already established scheme.

Christine also proposed an increase in the spending threshold from £1,000 to £2,000, to encourage greater participation in the scheme and to reflect that it now encompassed electric bikes.

Paula advised that she had reviewed the guidance issued by HMRC, particularly in light of increased working from home due to COVID-19 and the potential impact on 'qualifying journeys'.

Following consideration of the Policy, SMG approved the changes proposed by Christine, but agreed that further consideration was required in relation to 'qualifying journeys' and the issue of a possible tax liability for staff. SMG asked Paula to investigate whether a further amendment would be required to the policy, to accurately reflect the possibility of a tax liability for staff who participate in the scheme.

Action: Paula to investigate whether a further amendment to the Cycle to Work Policy was required in relation to 'qualifying journeys' and the possibility of a tax liability for staff who participate in the scheme.

Paula McClintock, Christine Watts and David Lynn left the meeting at 11.19 am.

Meeting suspended at 11.19 am and resumed at 11.38 am.

10. Support Services Contract proposed Year 5 costs

This agenda item was deferred to the March 2021 SMG meeting.

It was also noted that a separate meeting had been arranged with the Clerk/Chief Executive, Directors, Head of Building Services and Support Services Manager for 12 March 2021, to discuss the draft paper in detail prior to presentation at the March SMG meeting.

Sinéad McDonnell, Head of HR, joined the meeting at 11.38 am for agenda items 11 and 12.

11. HR Management Information

Sinéad McDonnell presented the monthly HR Management Information as at 1 February 2021.

Sinéad advised SMG that the current month's paper included information in relation to Learning and Development and performance management, that required consideration by SMG.

SMG noted that the Staff in Post (SiP) figure on 1 February 2021 (including agency and inward seconded staff) was 352 Full Time Equivalents (FTE) against an agreed staff complement (including complement plus) of 385.8 FTE.

Sinéad referred SMG to the Complement Plus table within the paper and highlighted those posts which would soon be coming to an end. In relation to the TUS Seconded Office post, SMG agreed to extend the current arrangement until 31 March 2022. Richard noted that the two posts recorded for the Systems Review Project would be discussed later in the meeting at agenda item 14, and confirmed that he would update Sinéad following SMG consideration. Sinéad also queried an AG4 post (0.2 FTE) in Legal Services with a duration end date of 28 February

2021. Tara Caul agreed to review this requirement and to revert to SMG if any extension is sought.

Action: Tara Caul to review the Complement Plus AG4 post (0.2 FTE) and revert to SMG if any extension is sought.

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

On reviewing the Recruitment Schedule, Sinéad confirmed that the Deputy Head of IS competition had been completed and that the Procurement Manager, HR Team Supervisor and Assistant Editor competitions were progressing. She advised that a Web Content Manager had not been appointed and that the competition would be rerun. Sinéad also advised that the IS Scholarship programme would be advertised in March 2021.

Sickness absence information was provided and it was noted that for the period February 2020 to January 2021, the average days lost to sickness absence per FTE member of staff was 7 days, compared with an average of 11 days during the period February 2019 to January 2020.

In relation to Learning and Development, Sinéad referred SMG to the October 2020 meeting and the discussion on the creation of an 'Inter-Parliamentary Coaching Network'. Sinéad confirmed that following that meeting, the HR Learning and Development Team had explored the purchase of a coaching model that could be used across the various legislatures. She stated that following consideration of different coaching models, the HR Learning and Development Team along with learning and development colleagues in the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Parliament, favoured a model known as the 'OSCAR' model.

Sinéad stated that the proposed 'OSCAR' model provided good value for money but noted that the courses offered would be on a non-certified basis. She advised that in order to offer staff certified courses the Assembly would need to be a registered Institute of Leadership and Management (ILM) Centre. Sinéad proposed exploring the certified route and it was agreed that she would investigate this further.

Based on the 'OSCAR' coaching model outlined, Sinéad sought SMG approval to purchase a perpetual licence for the necessary associated resources and for monies to be spent on 'Train the Trainer' training.

SMG approved the purchase of a perpetual licence but asked that Sinéad obtain costings for a group rate for 'Train the Trainer' training, and investigate whether any exemptions were available for people who had already completed an accredited course.

Action: Sinéad to obtain costings for a group rate for 'Train the Trainer' training, and investigate whether any exemptions are available for people who have already completed an accredited course.

Lesley asked about the possibility of making this training available to MLAs and their staff. Sinéad said that she would ask the Learning and Development Manager to explore this with the Clerking and Members Support (CAMS) Office.

Action: Learning and Development Manager to contact the CAMS Office to explore the possibility of making the coaching training courses available to MLAs and their staff.

Sinéad also advised SMG that there had been a 47% response rate to the recent Learning and Development Strategy survey and that the findings were currently being analysed. It was proposed that the draft Strategy would go out to consultation at the end of March with a draft Strategy presented to SMG in mid-April.

Sinéad advised SMG that 27 days' consultancy had been approved by the Speaker for the development of a Learning and Development Strategy, however, she stated that there had been some slippage in the timeframe and the consultant had requested an additional 2 days' fees.

Lesley asked if there was any capacity to make up the time elsewhere in the programme, as approval for any increase in the business case would have to be sought from the Speaker. Sinéad agreed to speak with the consultant to see if days could be saved elsewhere and advise SMG accordingly.

In relation to the current performance management software provider, Sinéad referred SMG to a discussion at the November 2020 SMG meeting and advised that the contract was due to expire on 4 March 2021. Sinéad sought approval to commence using the new Performance Management Workflow developed by the IS Office rather than renewing the contract.

SMG agreed not to renew the contract and approved the use of the new IS Office workflow solution for performance management.

Sinéad McDonnell left the meeting at 12.35 pm.

Maria Bannon, Equality and Good Relations Manager, joined the meeting at 12:38 pm for agenda item 13.

13. Section 75 Monitoring Survey for Secretariat Staff

Maria Bannon presented a draft Section 75 Monitoring survey for Secretariat staff and sought approval from SMG to disseminate to staff.

Following consideration of the draft survey, SMG requested some additional background information in relation to one of the proposed questions. It was agreed that a separate meeting would be arranged to consider this additional information and discuss the draft survey in more detail.

Action: Maria to provide SMG with some additional background information in relation to one of the proposed questions on the draft survey.

Action: Meeting to be arranged with the Clerk/Chief Executive, Directors and the Equality and Good Relations Manager to give further consideration to the draft survey.

Maria Bannon left the meeting at 1:15 pm.

Change to agenda running order.

15. Renewal of Concordat between Land and Property Services and Northern Ireland Assembly Commission in relation to a Geographical Information Specialist

SMG considered and approved the renewal of the Concordat between Land and Property Services and the Assembly Commission for three years, to enable the continued provision of a mapping service for Members, the Assembly and the Secretariat.

Meeting suspended at 1.18 pm and resumed at 1.50 pm.

Ryan Fleming, Data Protection and Information Standards Officer, joined the meeting at 1.50 pm for agenda item 16.

16. Review of Data Breach Management Plan

Ryan Fleming presented a revised Data Breach Management Plan which he noted had been streamlined and updated to reflect recent legislative changes.

Following consideration, SMG approved the revised plan for sharing with the Information Asset Owners, subject to a minor amendment to the 'Definitions' section of the Plan.

SMG thanked Ryan for his efforts on creating a clearer, more user friendly streamlined Plan.

Ryan Fleming left the meeting at 2.04 pm.

12. Increase in the Approved Limit for the Current Temporary Workers Contract Business Case

Richard provided SMG with some additional information in relation to a request to increase the approved limit for the current Temporary Workers Contract business case which had been considered by the Assembly Commission at its meeting on 17 February 2021.

Richard advised that the total expenditure on the contract as at December 2020, reported to SMG at its meeting in January 2021 had been understated as it had been taken from Decision Authorisation System (DAS) which did not contain accruals.

SMG noted the revised total expenditure figure as at December 2020.

14. Staff Complement of the Systems Review Project

Richard presented this paper and sought approval from SMG to extend the tenure of the Project Administrators for the Systems Review Project and agree the subsequent additional staffing costs.

Richard advised that the original timeline for the project had been significantly impacted by the resumption of normal Assembly business in January 2020 and the response to the COVID-19 pandemic, which started in March 2020.

Richard stated that the original timeline had been drawn up on the basis of the process mapping being carried by individual business areas; that the resumption of normal Assembly business had impacted on the ability and availability of staff to complete this task; and that consequently all the process mapping had been undertaken by the Systems Review Project Manager. He said that the distributed time, effort and largely hidden costs that would have been expended across business areas had been concentrated within the Project Manager's role.

Richard also advised that the response to the COVID-19 pandemic had had a further impact on the completion of the process review stage and provided SMG with a revised timetable.

Tara raised a concern regarding the possible duplication of work between the Systems Review Project and the 'Review of Information Management Systems' project. Richard assured Tara that there would be no duplication of work due to the differing nature of the two systems.

Lesley noted the significant delay and extension to the original go live date and the subsequent increase in the project cost. She stated that the project would need to be very tightly managed going forward, as no further slippage could be afforded.

Lesley also stated the importance of producing a procurement specification that accurately reflected the Assembly Commission's requirements and that legal advice should be sought, if required.

Following discussion, SMG approved an extension of the tenure of the Project Administrators for the Systems Review Project until January 2023 and the associated staff costs.

OTHER ITEMS

17. Directorate Updates

SMG noted the Directorate updates.

Corporate Services

Richard reported that no governance issues had been raised during the month.

Legal, Governance and Research Services

Research and Information Services (RaISe)

Tara advised that staff from RaISe had organised a virtual Inter-Parliamentary Research and Information Network (IPRIN) conference which had been very successful.

Internal Audit

Tara provided an update on the Internal Audit Reviews for:

- Procurement
- Overtime
- Accounts Payable
- Bill Office
- Interim Review of Members Expenses (2020/21)

It was noted that the 2021/22 Audit Plan would be presented to SMG at its March 2021 meeting.

Information Standards

Tara confirmed that the Information Standards Office had been in contact with Information Asset Owners, asking that they advise staff in their business areas to review all electronic information and records, in order to reduce duplication of information stored. Tara asked that Directors also encourage their staff to review the records they hold.

Parliamentary Services

Gareth advised that proposals for recruitment to the Youth Assembly had been endorsed by the Speaker and would shortly be considered by the Youth Assembly Advisory Group and in due course by the Assembly Commission.

18. Assembly Commission papers cleared by SMG via correspondence

- Potential Rescheduling of the Assembly Members (Remuneration Board) Bill;
- Proposals for Next Steps on Work in Relation to the Display of Assembly Commission Artefacts;
- Update on Consideration of Extending the Assembly Commission's Annual Dates for the Lighting of Parliament Buildings; and
- Overview of Activities and Events at Parliament Buildings in 2021.

19. AOB

There was no other business.

20. Date of next meeting

Next meeting to take place on 26 March 2021.

21. Proposals for Agenda Items for Next Meeting

- Review of Building Maintenance
- Six-monthly update: Good Relations Action Plan 16-21
- Six-monthly update: Gender Action Plan 19-23
- Five-year Review of the Commission's Equality Scheme (2016-2021)
- Consultation on the Draft Disability Action Plan 21-26
- Parliament Buildings Roof Issues
- PSNI Service Level Agreement
- Support Services Contract Optional Year 5 Proposal
- Statutory Maternity Pay for Ministers and MLAs
- Data Protection Policy Review
- Corporate Risk Register
- Biannual Review of Directorate Risk Registers
- Internal Audit Plan
- Litigation Update
- Update on EU Exit
- Review of the Assembly Commission's 'Parliament Buildings: Special Lighting Policy (2020)'
- Update on the Development of an Assembly Commission-supported Youth Assembly

The meeting ended at 3.20 pm.