

MINUTES OF PROCEEDINGS
SENIOR MANAGEMENT TEAM (SMT)
FRIDAY, 2 JUNE 2023 at 9.30 AM
ROOM 106, PARLIAMENT BUILDINGS

APPROVED

Present:

Lesley Hogg, Clerk/Chief Executive
Steven Baxter, Director of Corporate Services
Tara Caul, Director of Legal, Governance and Research Services
Gareth McGrath, Director of Parliamentary Services

In Attendance:

Janet Hughes, Clerical Supervisor
Robin Ramsey, Adviser to the Speaker/Head of Corporate Support
(Items 5 and 6)
Billy Mahoney, Deputy Head of Finance – Secretariat (Item 7)
Gary Browne, Senior Accountant (Item 7)
Karen Martin, Deputy Head of HR (Item 8)
Stephanie Mallon, Clerk Assistant (Items 11 and 12)
Caroline Moore, Participation and Outreach Manager (Item 12)
Mary-Ellen Nutt, Head of IT (Item 13)

The meeting commenced at 9.32 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 from the meeting on 3 May 2023 had been published.

4. SMT Action Points

The outstanding action points were reviewed and progress was noted.

Robin Ramsey joined the meeting at 9.38 am for agenda items 5 and 6.

5. Political Update

Lesley Hogg noted that the local Government Elections had taken place in council areas across Northern Ireland on 18 May 2023 and she stated that it was important to maintain a focus on retaining readiness to support the return to normal Assembly business.

Gareth McGrath referred to an oral evidence session of the Northern Ireland Public Affairs Committee held on 25 April 2023 and the discussion in relation to the Windsor Framework and the Stormont Brake.

CORPORATE SUPPORT

6. Draft Assembly Commission Agenda

Robin Ramsey advised that the next Assembly Commission meeting was scheduled for 21 June 2023.

Proposed items for the next meeting included:

- Clerk/Chief Executive's Report
- Review of the Financial Assistance for Political Parties Scheme ('FAPP Scheme') 2016
- Defects in the Roof of Parliament Buildings
- Centenary Stone
- Grading and Pay Benchmarking Review
- 2023-24 Budget Update
- Pay Claim 2023
- Interim Review of the Pioneer Phase of the Northern Ireland Youth Assembly
- Annual Plan 2022-23 End of Year Performance Report
- Five-Year Review of the Disability Action Plan 2018-2023
- Gender Action Plan 2019-2023 Closure Report
- Northern Ireland Assembly Commission Complaints Policy and Procedure Report for 2022-23
- Assembly Commission Audit and Risk Committee Report to the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission for the Year Ended 31 March 2023

Robin Ramsey left the meeting at 9.45 am.

CORPORATE SERVICES

Billy Mahoney and Gary Browne joined the meeting at 9.48 am for agenda item 7.

7. Management Accounts

Billy Mahoney noted that the Assembly Commission's Annual Report and Accounts for the year ended 31 March 2023 had been presented at the

Assembly Commission Audit and Risk Committee meeting on 18 May 2023 and were currently being audited by the Northern Ireland Audit Office.

Billy presented the provisional outturn for 2022/23, highlighting the variances against the Main Estimate. Billy advised that the Main Estimate had anticipated a resumption of normal Assembly business from 1 February 2023 and that many of the variances were attributed to this planning assumption not coming to fruition.

As well as being impacted by a non-return to normal Assembly business, Billy advised that Staff Salaries had been impacted by a movement in the annual accrual for employee benefits. He noted that the accrual was calculated annually as at 31 March following receipt of staff returns and was therefore difficult to estimate accurately in-year. Lesley stated that as the leave year ended on 31 January, that consideration be given to reviewing unused leave at that time, in order to more accurately estimate the accrual going forward. Billy agreed to liaise with the HR Office to establish if the relevant information could be extracted earlier.

Action: Billy to liaise with the HR Office regarding calculation of the annual accrual for employee benefits as at 31 January.

In an effort to more closely monitor expenditure against Admin costs and address any underspend against budget as early as possible, it was noted that Finance Office staff would meet with Directors and Budget Holders on a monthly basis.

Gary Browne updated SMT on the provisional outturn for combined Members' costs.

On reviewing the provisional outturn for Capital for the year 2022/23, SMT noted that the expenditure for a number of the capital projects had been over estimated and Lesley stated that it was important that cost estimates were updated once contracts were awarded. Billy stated that it would be beneficial if the Finance Office could be involved earlier in the procurement process for capital projects. Steven Baxter agreed to undertake a review of the Finance Office's involvement in the procurement of Capital Projects.

Action: Steven to review Finance Office involvement in the procurement of Capital Projects.

Billy Mahoney and Gary Browne left the meeting at 10.11 am.

Karen Martin joined the meeting at 10.14 am for agenda item 8.

8. HR Management Information

Karen Martin presented the monthly HR Management Information as at 1 May 2023.

Karen advised that the Staff in Post (SIP) figure on 1 May 2023 (including agency and inward seconded staff) was 331.6 Full Time Equivalents (FTE) against a staff complement (including complement plus) of 374.4 FTE.

In relation to the complement plus AG6 HR Services to Members post and the AG5 and AG6 posts currently supporting delivery of the Assembly Commission's Systems Review Project, Karen sought SMT approval to extend the Services to Members post from 1 November 2023 until 31 December 2023, in order to facilitate the evaluation of the HR Service to Members and the two Systems Review Project posts from 1 August 2023 until 31 March 2024, to ensure continued delivery of the Project.

Following consideration, SMT approved the extensions as requested, for all three posts.

SMT noted the temporary promotions/deputising arrangements and agency worker assignments currently in place and approved extension of arrangements related specifically to the Systems Review Project, until 31 March 2024.

Karen updated SMT on the recent recruitment activity.

Following a review of the Recruitment Schedule, SMT agreed to add two competitions to the non-scheduled section of the Recruitment Schedule, i.e. two AG4 Legal Advisers and one AG5 Senior Assistant Assembly Clerk.

Sickness absence information was provided and it was noted that for the period May 2022 to April 2023, the average sickness absence per FTE member of staff was 14 days, compared with an average of 10.3 days during the period May 2021 to April 2022.

SMT reviewed the annual equality information as at 1 May 2023. Karen noted that only Census data from 2011 was available in relation to ethnicity and religion, however, she advised that further data from the 2021 Census would be available during the Summer of 2023 and that an update would be provided to SMT following release.

SMT also noted case management activity since 1 November 2022.

Karen advised that a paper on the Annual Equality Progress Report to the Equality Commission 2022/23, would be presented at the next SMT meeting and stated that this would also now include updates on the various equality and good relation action plans, with further internal updates provided each December.

SMT recorded its thanks to Karen and the HR Team for the additional information provided in relation to staff leaving the Assembly.

Karen Martin left the meeting at 10.39 am.

9. Draft Assembly Commission Paper - Grading and Pay Benchmarking Review

It was noted that this paper would be considered by SMT via correspondence and presented to the Assembly Commission at its next meeting.

10. Draft Assembly Commission Paper - Pay Claim 2023

Steven presented a draft Assembly Commission paper on the Pay Claim 2023.

SMT noted the five elements of the pay claim and approved the paper, subject to some minor amendments, for presentation to the Assembly Commission at its next meeting

Action: Steven to amend the draft paper as proposed by SMT, for presentation to the Assembly Commission at its next meeting.

Meeting suspended at 11.02 am and resumed at 11.14 am.

PARLIAMENTARY SERVICES

Stephanie Mallon joined the meeting at 11.14 am for agenda items 11 and 12.

Caroline Moore joined the meeting at 11.14 am for agenda item 11.

11. Public Engagement Activity Biannual Report (November 2022 to April 2023)

Caroline Moore presented the biannual report of public engagement activity undertaken by the Engagement Team during the period November 2022 to April 2023.

Caroline noted that the Engagement Team had provided presentations on the work of the Assembly to 102 NICS staff; delivered 14 sessions of the Assembly Connects programme to 507 participants from Community and Voluntary Groups; and hosted 37 inward visits for other Parliamentarians and Ambassadors.

Caroline also informed SMT that the Engagement Team was working with committee staff on induction plans for Members for when the Assembly resumed normal business. Lesley noted that much of the engagement advice would be relevant to Members now and requested that induction plans commence as soon as possible, rather than awaiting the resumption of normal business.

Action: Engagement Team to commence engagement with Members in relation to induction plans, as soon as possible.

Caroline Moore left the meeting at 11.30 am.

12. Draft Assembly Commission Paper – Interim Review of the Pioneer Phase of the Northern Ireland Youth Assembly

Stephanie Mallon presented a draft Assembly Commission paper on the Interim Review of the Pioneer Phase of the Youth Assembly.

Stephanie noted that the Youth Assembly was reaching the end of its Pioneer Phase, and that since its launch in July 2021, five plenaries and 32 committee meetings had taken place, with the final committee meetings and a plenary scheduled for 30 June 2023.

In relation to the estimated costs for the recruitment of Youth Assembly Members for the next mandate, Steven asked whether the success of previous advertising methods had been assessed and advised that there were a number of other networks that could be utilised.

Following consideration, SMT approved the paper for presentation to the Assembly Commission at its next meeting.

Stephane informed SMT that a legacy report was being produced by the Youth Assembly and that a comprehensive review of the Pioneer Phase would be carried out and completed 30 September 2023.

SMT praised the Youth Assembly for its achievements during its Pioneer Phase, for all of its work in spite of COVID and the current circumstances and thanked the Youth Assembly Team.

Stephanie Mallon left the meeting at 11.53 am.

13. Resources required for the Windsor Framework Democratic Scrutiny Committee

Gareth presented a paper setting out the proposed resource requirements to support the operation of the new Windsor Framework Democratic Scrutiny Committee.

Following consideration, SMT agreed to the proposed resource requirements in principle, subject to the provision of the necessary funding and a consideration of need following a period of shadow operation.

Gareth noted that Assembly officials would continue to liaise with Northern Ireland Office and UK Government officials to clarify funding and issues relating to the operation of the Committee.

Mary-Ellen Nutt joined the meeting at 12.02 pm for agenda items 14 and 15.

14. Business Case for the Procurement of an Independent Technical Security Specialist to undertake a Cyber Security Review

Following on from the discussion on cyber security at the SMT meeting on 3 May 2023, Mary-Ellen Nutt presented a business case for the procurement of an independent Technical Security Specialist to undertake a Cyber Security Review.

Following consideration, SMT approved the business case, but noted that it was important for the review report to include robust and prioritised mitigations to address any risks identified.

As the value of the business case was in excess of the Clerk/Chief Executive's delegated authority, it was noted that approval would be sought from the Speaker.

Action: Lesley to seek the Speaker's approval for the business case to procure an independent Technical Security Specialist to undertake a Cyber Security Review.

15. Business Case for Microsoft Unified Support Renewal

Mary-Ellen presented a business case for the renewal of the contract for Microsoft support.

Mary-Ellen informed SMT that the Assembly Commission's Microsoft Premier Support contract expires on 30 June 2023 and that the model currently procured is no longer available. In light of this, she presented a business case with a recommendation to proceed with Option Three, which was to procure a three-year contract with Microsoft for Unified Enterprise Support, with unlimited reactive hours and approximately 100 proactive hours (to support products already in use) and an additional 300 proactive support hours to support the implementation of new products.

Following discussion, SMT approved the recommended option, which provided an increased level of support.

Tara asked Mary Ellen to consider whether there were any products which could be utilised in relation to information management systems.

Mary-Ellen also advised SMT that a separate business case would be brought to SMT in September/October 2023, setting out the case for procuring support from a Microsoft Gold partner to support the IS Office in implementing a number of new products that are deemed critical over the next three years.

Mary-Ellen Nutt left the meeting at 12.57 pm.

OTHER ITEMS

16. Directors' Updates

Corporate Services

Usher Services

Steven advised SMT of staffing resource pressures within Usher Services.

HR Office

Steven noted that the HR Office was continuing to work alongside Investors in People (IIP) with regards to the accreditation assessment.

Finance Office

Steven acknowledged the amount of work that had been undertaken to prepare the Assembly Commission's Annual Report and Accounts for the year ended 31 March 2023 and stated that he was planning to work with Finance to plan a defined timeline for 2023/24.

New Standing Items

It was agreed that future monthly Corporate Services Directorate updates to SMT would include updates on the defects in the roof of Parliament Buildings and the Systems Review Project.

Steven provided verbal updates on both issues.

Legal, Governance and Research Services

Legal Services

Tara Caul updated SMT on ongoing litigation.

Information Standards

Tara advised SMT of two complaints that were currently with the Information Commissioners Office.

Tara noted that the annual registered file review was ongoing with a completion date of 1 August 2023 and that the Sensitivity file review was progressing well.

Research and Information Service (RaISe)

Tara noted that the Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series were progressing well.

Procurement

SMT noted the ongoing procurement projects.

Parliamentary Services

Gareth provided a detailed account of the work undertaken by Clerking, Hansard, Public Engagement, the Communications Office and the Information Systems Office, since last reported at the SMT meeting on 3 May 2023.

17. AOB

There was no other business.

18. Date of Next Meeting

It was agreed that the proposed date of 30 June 2023 would need to be reviewed.

19. Proposals for Agenda Items for Next Meeting

- 2023/24 Budget Update
- Annual Equality Progress Report to the Equality Commission 2022/23
- Review of the Hybrid Working Policy
- Learning and Development Closure Report 2022/23 Activities/Budget
- Office Resources Update
- Annual Environmental Management Review
- Corporate Strategy
- Review of the Risk Management Strategy
- RaSe Staffing
- Quarterly Review of the Corporate Risk Register
- Sensitivity Review
- Staff Complement Change Form for the Official Report
- Business Case for a Contract to Provide Support to the Legislative Work Bench System
- Terms of Reference for the Development of an IT Strategy to Support Modern Working
- Business Case for Mobile Phones

The meeting ended at 1.33 pm.