

SENIOR MANAGEMENT TEAM (SMT)

**WEDNESDAY, 4 JUNE 2025 at 1.45 PM
ROOM 106, PARLIAMENT BUILDINGS**

APPROVED

Present:

**Lesley Hogg, Clerk/Chief Executive
Tara Caul, Director of Legal, Governance and Research Services
Gareth McGrath, Director of Parliamentary Services
Paula McClintock, Head of Finance (deputised for Steven Baxter,
Director of Corporate Services)**

In Attendance:

**Janet Hughes, Clerical Supervisor
Robin Ramsey, Adviser to the Speaker/Head of Corporate Support
(Items 5, 6 and 7)
Paul Stitt, Private Secretary to the Speaker (Item 7)
Karen Steele, Deputy Head of Finance (Items 8 and 8.1)
Karen Martin, Deputy Head of HR (Items 9 and 10)
Christine Watts, Environment and Health and Safety Manager (Items 13
and 14)
Richard Scott, Business Relationship Manager (Item 15)
Robert McCausland, IT Security Officer (Item 15)
Michael Cairns, Acting Head of Communications (Items 16 and 17)
Liz Beaton, Internal Communications Officer (Item 16)**

The meeting commenced at 1.45 pm.

1. Apologies

Apologies were received from Steven Baxter, Paula McClintock deputised.

2. Declaration of Interests

There were no declarations of interest.

3. Minutes of Previous Meeting

It was noted that the minutes from the meeting on 2 May 2025 had been published.

4. SMT Action Points

The outstanding action points were reviewed and progress was noted.

Robin Ramsey joined the meeting at 1.49 pm for agenda items 5, 6 and 7.

5. Political Update

SMT noted a number of potentially politically contentious matters that would likely require Assembly Commission consideration in due course.

CORPORATE SUPPORT

6. Draft Assembly Commission Agenda

Robin Ramsey advised that the next Assembly Commission meeting had been scheduled for 18 June 2025.

Proposed items for the meeting included:

- Clerk/Chief Executive's Report
- Progress of Remedial Works to the Roof of Parliament Buildings
- Pay Claim 2025
- Delegation of Functions
- Annual Plan 2024-2025 End of Year Performance Report
- Annual Plan 2025-2026
- Review and Amendment of the Portraits Policy
- Reports Summarising the Results of the 2024 Staff Survey and Next Steps
- Disability Action Plan Reports
- Good Relations Action Plan Reports
- Annual Equality Progress Report to the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland 2024-2025
- Northern Ireland Assembly Commission Complaints Policy and Procedures Report for 2024-2025
- Assembly Commission Audit and Risk Committee Annual Report to the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission for the Year Ended 31 March 2025

Paul Stitt joined the meeting at 1.56 pm for agenda item 7.

7. Review and Amendment of the Portraits Policy

Paul Stitt noted that the Assembly Commission had agreed a policy on the commissioning of official portraits in November 2021, and he presented a paper outlining the findings of a review that had been undertaken, in line with the policy requirements, on the budgetary limits for official portraits.

Paul also outlined some other proposed minor amendments to the policy for consideration.

SMT noted that the findings of the review in relation to budgetary limits and the other proposed amendments to the policy would need to be considered by the Assembly Commission and asked Paul to prepare a paper.

Action: Paul to prepare a paper for presentation to the Assembly Commission.

Robin Ramsey and Paul Still left the meeting at 2.04 pm.

CORPORATE SERVICES

Karen Steele joined the meeting at 2.04 pm for agenda items 8 and 8.1.

8. Management Accounts

Management Accounts March 2025

Karen Steele presented the Management Accounts for March 2025, highlighting underspends on the provisional outturn figures for Resource DEL, Capital DEL and Windsor Framework Democratic Scrutiny Committee (WFDSC) costs.

On reviewing the figures, SMT noted its concern at the level of underspend against Admin costs and agreed to discuss the importance of accurate budgeting and forecasting by Business Areas at the next Assembly Leadership Team (ALT) meeting.

8.1 Management Accounts April 2025 Including Proposal for June Monitoring to the Department of Finance

Karen presented the Management Accounts for April 2025.

SMT noted current forecast outturns for Resource DEL, Capital DEL and WFDSC costs.

Karen outlined, and sought SMT approval on, a number of internal bids brought forward by budget holders in Admin costs. Following discussion, SMT deferred consideration of the bid for the new IT Helpdesk Ticketing System pending consideration of the business case. All other bids were approved.

In relation to the bid for legal costs it was agreed that Karen and Paula McClintock would meet with the Director of Legal, Governance and Research Services and the Head of Legal Services to consider how best to budget for these costs.

Karen referred to the Department of Finance's (DoF's) June monitoring exercise and, proposed an amount for surrender of £1m in relation to roof remediation costs. Following consideration, SMT approved an increased surrender of £1.3m based on current anticipated timescales for roof remediation works.

On reviewing the Capital budget, Karen outlined and sought SMT approval for a number of internal bids brought forward by budget managers. Following consideration, SMT approved all bids, with the exception of the bids for the water tank, which was agreed in principle, subject to consideration of a business case; the Electronic Document Management System (EDRM), which SMT noted would be considered in conjunction with a business case at the next SMT meeting; and the Technical Project Coordinator, which SMT agreed would be considered later in the year.

Karen noted surrenders that had been made in relation to the Capital budget, and Lesley confirmed that the decision was taken to surrender funds for an Automatic Fire Detection system, as no issues had been raised following a fire inspection and there was, therefore, no risk in deferring installation of this system for a further year. It was agreed that no change in the Capital budget would be notified to DoF as part of the June monitoring exercise.

SMT considered and declined a proposal to surrender funds from the WFDSC budget at this early stage in the financial year.

Karen Steele left the meeting at 3.02 pm.

Karen Martin joined the meeting at 3.04 pm for agenda items 9 and 10.

9. Annual Progress Report to the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland 2024-2025

Karen Martin presented a draft Assembly Commission paper, reporting on the implementation of statutory equality, good relations and disability duties for 2024-2025.

SMT noted that good progress had been made against all targets, particularly in relation to the Youth Assembly, where targets had been exceeded.

SMT approved the paper for presentation to the Assembly Commission and recorded its thanks to the Equality Team and the relevant Business Areas for their efforts to deliver the targets throughout the reporting year.

10. HR Management Information

Karen presented the HR Management Information as at 1 May 2025.

Karen advised that the Staff in Post (SIP) figure on 1 May 2025 (including agency and inward seconded staff) was 373.2 Full Time Equivalents (FTE) against a staff complement (including complement plus) of 397 FTE.

Karen asked SMT to consider a staff Complement Change Application Form, for a permanent increase of 0.4 at AG6 within Parliamentary Services (Clerking). SMT noted that any increase in staffing was subject to budget availability, but was content to approve the request on this occasion, as the

additional cost was being funded from within the Parliamentary Services Directorate.

Tara Caul noted that she had been waiting for some time to fill an AG7 Governance post which had been agreed in principle by SMT subject to budget availability. It was agreed that Paula McClintock would incorporate the post when preparing the staff cost forecast to enable a decision to be made at the next SMT meeting.

In relation to the information provided to SMT each month on complement and staff in post, Karen proposed removing the detailed list of moves currently included in Appendix 1. However, SMT was of the view that this information was useful and that, as it was also used for budgeting purposes, it should continue to be provided.

Karen also sought SMT's views on a proposal to cease issuing Staff Movements on AsslSt, on the basis that the information was also provided via postmasters on new starts and in Staff Matters. SMT was content with the proposal.

SMT noted the temporary promotion/deputising arrangements and agency worker assignments currently in place.

Karen updated SMT on recruitment activity.

SMT reviewed and agreed an updated Recruitment Schedule.

Karen outlined the ongoing review of processes within the HR Office to improve efficiency. Within that context, she referred to the Recruitment and Selection Procedures and in particular the 'Review of Sift' stage which was resource intensive.

Karen explained that the inclusion of this stage had minimal impact on competition outcomes and that while some organisations include it, others do not. Karen therefore sought approval to remove the Review of the Sift stage from the Recruitment and Selection Procedures, subject to consultation with Trade Union Side. SMT agreed to this proposal.

Sickness absence information was provided and it was noted that for the period May 2024 to April 2025, the average sickness absence per FTE member of staff was 10.7 days, which represented a reduction of 3.3 days when compared to 14 days for the period May 2023 to April 2024.

SMT noted the annual equality information as at 1 May 2025.

SMT also noted case management activity since 1 November 2024.

Karen Martin left the meeting at 3.33 pm.

Change to agenda running order.

12. Annual Environmental Management Review 2024-2025

Paper deferred to next meeting.

Christine Watts joined the meeting at 3.33 pm for agenda items 13 and 14.

13. Progress of Remedial Works to the Roof of Parliament Buildings

Christine Watts presented a draft Assembly Commission paper, outlining the progress on remedial works to address all of the defects to the roof of Parliament Buildings.

Following consideration, SMT approved the draft paper for presentation to the Assembly Commission, subject to confirmation of costings.

Action: Christine to review and update costings in the draft Assembly Commission paper, if necessary.

14. Business Case for the Provision of Building Maintenance Work for 2025-26

Christine presented a paper, seeking approval of forecasted expenditure associated with the provision of building maintenance work in Parliament Buildings for 2025-26.

Christine provided SMT with an overview of the work to be undertaken during 2025-26 and the respective budget requirements.

Lesley highlighted the importance of having the 10-Year Life Cycle Maintenance Programme prepared by September in order to feed into the next budget cycle, and stated that she would liaise with Christine in relation to the preparation of this.

Following consideration, SMT approved the forecasted expenditure associated with the provision of building maintenance work in Parliament Buildings for 2025-26.

SMT thanked Christine for the work undertaken in the preparation of the Business Case.

Christine Watts left the meeting at 3.43 pm.

PARLIAMENTARY SERVICES

Rick Scott and Robert McCausland joined the meeting at 3.43 pm for agenda item 15.

15. Cyber Security Assurance Review – Annual Update to SMT

Rick Scott and Robert McCausland presented a paper which provided the first annual update on the Cyber Security Assurance Review findings.

Rick noted that recommendations from the Review had been categorised into three Priorities and updated SMT on the progress thus far.

Lesley proposed including a table recording the status of recommendations, in future annual updates to SMT. She also sought clarification on the status of the Priority One finding relating to defining roles and responsibilities. Robert advised that this work would be addressed through the Cyber Security Strategy that was being developed.

SMT was impressed with the progress made to date on the implementation of the recommendations and recorded its thanks to Rick, Robert and the rest of the IT Team for their efforts.

Rick Scott and Robert McCausland left the meeting at 4.03 pm.

Michael Cairns joined the meeting at 4.05 pm for agenda items 16 and 17.

Liz Beaton joined the meeting at 4.05 pm for agenda item 16.

16. Internal Communications Quarterly Update

Liz Beaton and Michael Cairns provided an update on internal communications from mid-November 2024 to mid-February 2025.

Liz highlighted staff engagement on the 2024 Staff Survey, the 2025 Hybrid Working Policy Review, and the Communications Strategy. She noted activities such as the March Directorate meetings, “Let’s Meet” and “Let’s Talk” sessions, Health and Wellbeing initiatives, and Public Engagement pilots to raise awareness of other Business Areas.

Liz also referenced the successful two-day Interparliamentary Communications Network meetings hosted at Parliament Buildings and staff participation in Learning at Work Week 2025.

SMT welcomed the comprehensive update and thanked all involved in recent staff engagement activities.

Liz Beaton left the meeting at 4.25 pm.

17. Strategic Communications Update

SMT noted a communications update produced by the Acting Head of Communications.

Michael recorded his thanks to the new digital content producer and editor within the Communications Office, for their work on the video content for the Balmoral Show.

Michael Cairns left the meeting at 4.37 pm.

Meeting suspended at 4.37 pm and resumed at 4.48 pm.

CORPORATE SERVICES CONTINUED

11. Annual Plan 2024-2025 End of Year Performance Report

Lesley presented a draft Assembly Commission paper on the Annual Plan 2024-2025 End of Year Performance Report.

Following consideration, SMT approved the draft paper for presentation to the Assembly Commission, subject to a minor amendment.

SMT commended staff and Heads of Business for the effort they had put in to delivering the activities in the Annual Plan, in what has been an extremely challenging and demanding year.

Action: Lesley to amend the draft Assembly Commission paper as requested.

OTHER ITEMS

18. Directors' Updates

Legal, Governance and Research Services

Tara provided an update on all business areas within the Legal, Governance and Research Services Directorate.

In particular, Tara noted current litigation and the ongoing procurement projects.

Tara also advised that she would be taking on the role of Chairperson of the Artificial Intelligence (AI) Working Group temporarily.

Parliamentary Services

SMT noted the work undertaken by all business areas within the Parliamentary Services Directorate, since reported at the previous SMT meeting.

In particular, Gareth highlighted the work being undertaken by the Public Accounts Committee Team and IS Office to develop and test an AI solution to analyse a large volume of responses from one of the committee's inquiries.

Corporate Services

Paula McClintock provided an update on the work undertaken by all business areas within the Corporate Services Directorate and, in particular, highlighted the three year budget exercise due to be commissioned shortly by DoF.

19. AOB

There was no other business.

20. Date of Next Meeting

It was noted that the next meeting would take place on 2 July 2025.

21. Proposals for Agenda Items for Next Meeting

- 2026-2029 Budget Exercise
- Security Review Recommendations made by PSNI
- Disability Access Audit
- Annual Environmental Management Review 2024-2025
- Quarterly Review of the Corporate Risk Register
- Business Case Options on Implementing an Electronic Document Records Management System
- Helpdesk Ticketing System Business Case
- Strategic Communications Update

The meeting ended at 5.21 pm.