

SENIOR MANAGEMENT TEAM (SMT)

**FRIDAY, 28 FEBRUARY 2025 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)
Karen Steele, Deputy Head of Finance (Item 7)
Karen Martin, Deputy Head of HR (Item 8)
Melissa Sharples, Head of Procurement (Item 10)
Liz Beaton, Internal Communications Officer (Item 11)**

The meeting commenced at 9.34 am.

1. Apologies

There were no apologies.

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 31 January 2025 had been published.

4. SMT Action Points

The outstanding action points were reviewed and progress was noted.

Robin Ramsey joined the meeting at 9.36 am.

5. Political Update

Lesley Hogg noted that two meetings of the Ad Hoc committee on the Assembly Members (Remuneration Board) Bill had taken place, with Assembly Commission Members and officials attending on 20 February 2025.

SMT noted the remarks made by the Speaker in relation to Parliamentary Culture.

6. Draft Assembly Commission Agenda

Robin Ramsey advised that Corporate Support staff would shortly be engaging with Assembly Commission Members, with a view to agreeing a date for the next Assembly Commission meeting.

Proposed items for the meeting included:

- Clerk/Chief Executive's Report
- Repairs to Roof of Parliament Buildings
- Review of the Financial Implications for Parties with Increased Employers' National Insurance Contributions Effective from 1 April 2025
- Request for the Assembly Commission to Display a Portrait of His Majesty The King
- 2024 Staff Survey and Actions
- Recommendations from the Review of the Use of Certain Allowances Under the Assembly Members Salaries and Expenses) Determination (Northern Ireland) 2016
- Annual Plan 2024-2025 Status at 31 December 2024
- Appointment of a Northern Ireland Commissioner for Standards

Robin Ramsey left the meeting at 9.44 am.

CORPORATE SERVICES

Karen Steele joined the meeting at 9.44 am for agenda item 7.

7. Management Accounts January 2025

Karen Steele presented the Management Accounts for January 2025, highlighting the forecasted year end level of underspend for Resource DEL, Capital DEL and Windsor Framework Democratic Scrutiny Committee costs.

SMT noted the underspends against Administration Costs and Members' Costs.

Karen advised that the Finance Office was currently working with the IS Office to assess, in accordance with the current Prepayment policy, if a number of purchase orders should have been treated as prepayments.

Lesley queried the use of the £500 prepayment threshold, given that she had previously asked for this to be reviewed to a more appropriate level. SMT asked for this figure to be reviewed.

Action: Karen to review the prepayment threshold and propose a more appropriate level to SMT.

On reviewing the Capital Plan, Karen referred to a bid for the Network Refresh project and a number of surrenders from other capital projects. Gareth McGrath confirmed that the bid remained within the quantum of the business case. SMT considered and approved the bid.

Karen Steele left the meeting at 10.07 am.

Karen Martin joined the meeting at 10.07 am for agenda item 8.

8. HR Management Information

Karen Martin presented the monthly HR Management Information as at 1 February 2025.

Karen advised that the Staff in Post (SIP) figure on 1 February 2025 (including agency and inward seconded staff) was 370.3 Full Time Equivalents (FTE) against a staff complement (including complement plus) of 393.3 FTE.

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

Karen updated SMT on recruitment activity.

On reviewing the Recruitment Schedule, Karen advised that the annual recruitment competition for IS Scholarship would not proceed this year, as the Head of IT intended to review the current approach in order to ensure that it is meeting the needs of the business area and the students.

SMT noted that the recruitment competition for Commissioner for Standards was likely to take place during the next quarter.

Tara Caul recorded her thanks to the Recruitment team for the excellent help provided in relation to two recruitment competitions she was currently involved in.

Sickness absence information was provided and it was noted that for the period February 2024 to January 2025, the average sickness absence per FTE member of staff was 11.4 days, which represented a reduction of 4

days when compared to 15.4 days for the period February 2023 to January 2024.

SMT noted its concern at the number of short-term absences that were moving to long-term. Karen advised that all absences continued to be closely monitored and managed.

Karen Martin left the meeting at 10.17 am.

9. Annual Plan 2024-2025 Status at 31 December 2024

Steven Baxter presented a draft Assembly Commission paper on the Annual Plan 2024-2025 status update at 31 December 2024.

Lesley apologised for the late circulation of the paper and asked that Directors review with Heads of Business (HoBs), those actions forecast for partial achievement at year end, to assess whether any of them could be achieved in full by 31 March 2025.

SMT agreed that the progress of actions within the Annual Plan should become a standing item on the agenda for the monthly Directorate Management Team meetings, and also discussed during performance conversations with HoBs.

Following consideration, SMT approved the draft paper for presentation to the Assembly Commission at its next meeting, subject to some further minor updates.

SMT recorded its thanks to HoBs for their efforts in taking the Plan forward and progressing the actions.

LEGAL, GOVERNANCE AND RESEARCH SERVICES

Melissa Sharples joined the meeting at 10.30 am for agenda item 10.

10. Implementation of New Procurement Legislation

Melissa Sharples updated SMT on the Assembly Commission's readiness for the regulatory and procedural changes to public sector procurement, arising from the Procurement Act 2023 and the associated Procurement Regulations 2024 which came into effect on 24 February 2025.

Melissa outlined the revised approach to the Assembly Commission Procurement Policy, processes and procedures, and sought approval of a proposed revised Assembly Commission Procurement Policy.

SMT considered and approved the revised Procurement Policy, subject to a minor amendment to the proposed procurement pathways document for contracts up to £5k.

Action: Melissa to arrange for the revised Procurement Policy to be updated and published on the Assembly website and AsslSt.

SMT noted that it would review the threshold for delegated procurement following completion of the Internal Audit of this area and consideration of any findings.

SMT thanked Melissa and the Procurement team for all the hard work that had gone in to preparing the Assembly Commission for the implementation of the new procurement legislation.

Melissa Sharples left the meeting at 10.48 am.

PARLIAMENTARY SERVICES

Liz Beaton joined the meeting at 10.49 am for agenda item 11.

11. Internal Communications Quarterly Update

Liz Beaton provided an update on internal communications activity for the period mid-November 2024 to mid-February 2025.

Liz noted that since the last update in November, there had been consultation and engagement with staff on a number of issues, namely, the 2024 Staff Survey; the Hybrid Working Policy Review 2025; sessions to gather ideas for the All Staff Event taking place on 4 July 2025; the Public Engagement Strategy; the Communications Strategy; and the Winter Briefing.

Liz referred to a number of “Let’s Meet” / “Let’s Learn” / “Let’s Talk” activities that had taken place in relation to the Health and Wellbeing Group, smartphone photography, and sessions on ‘Parliamentary Matters - the Democratic Consent Process’, and ‘What is the Study of Parliament Group’.

Liz also provided an update on events and initiatives of the Charity Fundraising Group.

SMT noted the comprehensive update and thanked Liz and all those involved in organising and supporting the numerous engagement events over the last quarter.

Liz Beaton left the meeting at 11.11 am.

Meeting suspended at 11.11 am and resumed at 3.30 pm.

Steven Baxter was not in attendance for agenda items 12 to 17.

OTHER ITEMS

12. SMT Papers(s) Cleared via Correspondence

Review of Fraud Prevention and Anti-Bribery Policy and Response Plan.

13. Directors' Updates

Corporate Services

SMT noted the work undertaken by all business areas within the Corporate Services Directorate, since last reported at the SMT meeting on 31 January 2025.

Lesley raised concerns in relation to the level of progress on the Long Gallery refurbishment project and the remedial works to the roof of Parliament Buildings and it was agreed that a meeting would be arranged to obtain an update on the current position of these projects.

Legal, Governance and Research Services

Tara provided an update on all business areas within the Legal, Governance and Research Services Directorate, since last reported at the SMT meeting on 31 January 2025.

Tara referred to Freedom of Information (FOI) requests and asked Directors to highlight the need for HoBs to urgently prioritise the provision of responses to the Information Standards Office.

Action: Directors to advise HoBs to prioritise FOI responses to the Information Standards Office, to ensure the Assembly Commission complies with its statutory requirements.

Parliamentary Services

SMT noted the work undertaken by all business areas within the Parliamentary Services Directorate, since last reported at the SMT meeting on 31 January 2025.

In particular, Gareth highlighted the good progress being made in relation to Lawmaker, the new legislative drafting software; Private Members Bills; and the roll out of new IT devices to staff.

14. AOB

There was no other business.

15. Date of Next Meeting

It was noted that the next meeting would take place on 28 March 2025.

16. Proposals for Agenda Items for Next Meeting

- Proposed Revisions to Ancillary Payroll Calculations
- Annual Insurance Policy Renewal and Update
- People and Culture Strategy: Update on Work Undertaken Since July 2024 and the Planned Programme of Work for the 2025/26 Year
- Draft Assembly Commission Paper on Repairs to the Roof of Parliament Buildings
- Draft Assembly Commission Paper on Recommendations from the Review of the Use of Certain Allowances Under the Assembly Members (Salaries and Expenses) Determination (Northern Ireland) 2016
- Draft Assembly Commission Paper on the Appointment of a Northern Ireland Assembly Commissioner for Standards
- Litigation Update
- Governance Office Staffing
- Quarterly Review of the Corporate Risk Register
- Review of Data Breach Management Plan
- Electronic Document Records Management System (EDRMS)
- Strategic Communications Update
- Update on the Work of the Internal Communications Group (ICG) October 2024 – March 2025

17. Strategic Communications Update

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

The meeting ended at 4.05 pm.