

SENIOR MANAGEMENT TEAM (SMT)

**MONDAY, 15 DECEMBER 2025 at 9.30 PM
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
Paula Ewart, Interim Director of Performance and Improvement**

In Attendance:

**Janet Hughes, Clerical Supervisor
Krystal Clarke, Executive Assistant
Robin Ramsey, Adviser to the Speaker/Head of Corporate Support
(Items 5 and 6)
Karen Martin, Deputy Head of HR (Items 7, 8, 9 and 10)
Maria Bannon, Equality and Good Relations Manager (Items 7, 8 and 9)
Paula McClintock, Head of Finance (Item 11)
Christine Watts, Environmental Services and Health and Safety
Manager (Item 12)
Jonathan McMillen, Head of Legal Services (Item 14)
Adam Leitch, Legal Adviser (Item 14)
Paul Gill, Clerk Assistant (Item 15)
Feargal McGuinness, EU Affairs Manager (Item 15)
John Hart, Head of Communications (Items 16)**

The meeting commenced at 1.32 pm.

1. Apologies

None.

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 3 December 2025 were in the process of being approved.

4. SMT Action Points

The outstanding action points were reviewed and progress was noted.

Robin Ramsey joined the meeting at 1.34 pm for agenda items 5 and 6.

5. Political Update

Lesley Hogg noted that whilst recess had commenced on 13 December 2025 there was still a lot of work to be progressed before the Christmas holidays.

CORPORATE SUPPORT

6. Draft Assembly Commission Agenda

Robin Ramsey noted that he was in the process of scheduling a single agenda item meeting later that week.

Proposed agenda items for the next full meeting were noted.

Robin Ramsey left the meeting at 1.40 pm.

CORPORATE SERVICES

Karen Martin joined the meeting at 1.40 pm for agenda items 7, 8, 9 and 10.

Maria Bannon joined the meeting at 1.40 pm for agenda items 7, 8 and 9.

7. Draft Five-Year Review Report (2021-2025) on the Application of the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission Equality Scheme

Maria Bannon presented and sought approval of a draft Assembly Commission paper, which noted the progress made on the application and implementation of Equality Scheme Commitments as detailed in the draft Five-Year Review (2021-2025) of the Assembly Commission's Equality Scheme.

Maria noted that the review report had identified a number of positive examples of assessed performance and a small number of lessons learned.

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

Action: Maria to update the draft Assembly Commission paper as requested by SMT.

8. Audit of Inequalities Action Plan 2022-2026 Closure Report

Maria presented and sought approval of a draft Assembly Commission paper on the Audit of Inequalities Action Plan 2022-2026 Closure Report.

Maria advised that all eight actions within the Action Plan had been achieved.

Following consideration, SMT approved the draft Assembly Commission paper for presentation to the Assembly Commission.

9. Biannual Update on Disability Action Plan 2025-2030 and Good Relations Action Plan 2025-2030

Maria presented a paper which provided biannual updates on the Disability Action Plan 2025-2030 and the Good Relations Action Plan 2025-2030.

Maria advised that there were no overdue actions on either Action Plan.

Following consideration, SMT approved both Action Plans for publication on the Assembly website and on AsslSt, subject to some minor amendments.

SMT thanked Maria and all those involved in delivering the actions in the various equality plans and for the comprehensive reports presented.

Action: Maria to update the Action Plans as requested by SMT.

Maria Bannon left the meeting at 2.00 pm.

10. HR Management Information

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

SMT was advised that the Staff in Post (SiP) figure as at 1 December 2025 (including agency and inward seconded staff) was 395.3 Full Time Equivalents (FTE) against an agreed staff complement (including complement plus) of 409.5 FTE.

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

In relation to the Recruitment Schedule, Karen advised that following discussion at the SMT meeting on 3 December 2025, HR had consulted with relevant Heads of Business (HoBs) on the priority of some competitions and she presented an updated Schedule for consideration. SMT noted and was content with the proposed updated Schedule.

Sickness absence information was provided and it was noted that for the period December 2024 to November 2025, the average sickness absence per FTE member of staff was 10.9 days, which represented a reduction of 0.2

days when compared to 11.1 days for the period December 2023 to November 2024.

Gareth McGrath referred to the agreed absence benchmark of 7.5 per annum per employee, and queried whether this was still a reasonable benchmark and how it compared with the wider public sector. Karen agreed to undertake some research on the matter.

Steven Baxter noted that it would also be helpful if the research could include a breakdown of long/short term absence targets.

Action: Karen to arrange for research to be undertaken in relation to the current agreed absence benchmark, with findings presented at the February 2026 SMT meeting.

Karen Martin left the meeting at 2.12 pm.

Paula McClintock joined the meeting at 2.13 pm for agenda item 11.

11. Administration Arrangements for the Assembly Members Pension Scheme (Northern Ireland) 2016

Paula McClintock presented a paper on the Administration Arrangements for the Assembly Members Pension Scheme (Northern Ireland) 2016.

Paula outlined the background to the current Administration Services Agreement between the Assembly Commission and the Trustees of the Assembly Members Pension Scheme.

Paula advised that the Government Actuary's Department (GAD) had been commissioned by the Trustees to undertake a review of the current administration services provided both by the Assembly Commission and Isio, and that following its completion, the Trustees would consider if the current Administration Services Agreement or the third-party contract required revision.

Paula highlighted that the Pension Administrator post had been vacant for some time, which had led to many of the duties of the role being undertaken by herself and Suzanne Murphy (Deputy Head of Finance), which she stated was now no longer tenable.

SMT noted that there were a number of matters raised in the paper that required further discussion and agreed that a separate meeting would be set up to discuss these.

Following discussion, SMT agreed that in the interim a Pension Scheme Administrator should be secured on a short-term basis, whilst a review of pension administration services is undertaken.

SMT recorded its thanks to Paula and Suzanne for the detailed paper and the pension administration work they had undertaken.

Paula McClintock left the meeting at 2.45 pm.

Christine Watts joined the meeting at 2.45 pm for agenda item 12.

12. Disability Access Survey

Christine Watts presented the findings from the Disability Access Audit and sought SMT approval to proceed with the recommendations made.

Following consideration, SMT agreed that Building Services should progress work on those recommendations that fell within General Administrative Expenses (GAE), and that business cases for capital works should be prepared. SMT queried the estimated cost for automation of the doors and asked for a breakdown of the cost.

SMT also agreed that the Assembly Commission should be informed of the door automation costs.

Action: Christine to provide SMT with a breakdown of the costings in relation to the automation of the doors.

Action: Christine to prepare a paper for the Assembly Commission on the Disability Access Survey and its findings.

SMT noted that the recommended works could be carried out within Building Services existing funding envelope with a number being completed in the current financial year and that an indicative capital budget existed in the 2027-28 financial year for the automation of the doors.

SMT also requested that any proposed works and costs regarding kitchenette facilities be further considered prior to being undertaken.

Action: Christine to give further consideration to any proposed works and costs regarding kitchenette facilities prior to being undertaken.

Christine Watts left the meeting at 3.04 pm.

The meeting suspended at 3.04 pm and resumed at 3.16 pm.

Change to agenda running order.

LEGAL, GOVERNANCE AND RESEARCH SERVICES

Jonathan McMillen and Adam Leitch joined the meeting at 3.16 pm for agenda item 14.

14. Litigation Update for Assembly Commission

Jonathan McMillen and Adam Leitch presented and sought approval of a

draft Assembly Commission paper, which provided an update on the ongoing litigation to which the Assembly Commission is currently a named party.

SMT noted the ongoing litigation and approved the paper for presentation to the Assembly Commission, subject to some minor amendments.

Action: Jonathan and Adam to update the draft Assembly Commission paper as requested by SMT.

Jonathan McMillen and Adam Leitch left the meeting at 3.39 pm.

PARLIAMENTARY SERVICES

Paul Gill and Feargal McGuinness joined the meeting at 3.39 pm for agenda item 15.

15. Draft Paper for the Assembly Commission on the Interparliamentary and International Strategy for the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission 2026-30

Paul Gill and Feargal McGuinness presented and sought approval of a draft Assembly Commission paper on the draft Interparliamentary and International Strategy, for consultation with the Speaker prior to submission to the Assembly Commission.

Paul noted that development of the Strategy was an objective in the Assembly Commission's Corporate Strategy 2023-28 and a specific action in the Annual Plan 2025-2026.

Feargal advised that the Strategy explains the benefits to the Assembly from interparliamentary and international activity, the outcomes from this activity and how these will be achieved.

Feargal noted that the draft Strategy had been developed through a working group composed of colleagues from across the Parliamentary Services Directorate and the Speaker's Office.

Following consideration, SMT approved the draft Strategy for consultation with the Speaker prior to presentation of the paper to the Assembly Commission.

SMT thanked Paul, Feargal and the working group for all the work that had gone in to producing the draft Strategy.

Paul Gill and Feargal McGuinness left the meeting at 3.49 pm.

John Hart joined the meeting at 3.50 pm for agenda item 16.

16. Strategic Communications Update

SMT received a communications update from the Head of Communications.

John Hart left the meeting at 3.58 pm.

LEGAL, GOVERNANCE AND RESEARCH SERVICES CONTINUED

13. Quarterly Review of the Corporate Risk Register

Tara Caul advised that following a review of the contents of the Corporate Risk Register (CRR) at a meeting on 3 December 2025 with the Clerk/Chief Executive, Directors and the Data Protection and Governance Officer, Directors had submitted some further amendments by correspondence, which required consideration.

Tara subsequently outlined further proposed amendments to Corporate Risks 1, 2 and 5, which were considered and approved by SMT.

Subject to these revisions being made, SMT approved the CRR for publishing on AsslSt and presentation to the Assembly Commission and to the Assembly Commission Audit and Risk Committee.

Tara referred to the current process for updating the CRR and the need for significant improvement. She noted that updates should be provided in a more timely way, in advance of the meeting with the Clerk/Chief Executive in future.

OTHER ITEMS

17. Directors' Updates

Parliamentary Services

SMT noted the work undertaken by all business areas within the Parliamentary Services Directorate.

Legal, Governance and Research Services

SMT noted the work undertaken by all business areas within the Legal, Governance and Research Services Directorate.

Corporate Services

SMT noted the work undertaken by all business areas within the Corporate Services Directorate.

Performance and Improvement

Paula Ewart advised that a number of improvements had been made to

streamline systems over the last three months, with other work also in progress.

Paula advised that the new stationery ordering system for staff and Usher forms were ready to go live.

Lesley asked Paula Ewart to produce a schedule outlining ongoing work and milestones.

18. AOB

There was no other business.

19. Date of Next Meeting

It was noted that the next meeting would take place on 30 January 2026.

20. Proposals for Agenda Items for Next Meeting

- Proposed Revisions to Calculations Included Within the Staff Handbook
- Health and Safety Management Report 2025
- Provision of Washroom Facilities in Parliament Buildings
- Update on Remedial Works to the Roof of Parliament Buildings
- Sensitivity Review 2004 to 2005 Release
- Procurement Policy Update
- Artificial Intelligence Policy
- Security Operations Centre Service to Support the Northern Ireland Assembly Cyber Security
- Digital and Cyber Strategy 2026-2031
- Strategic Communications Update

SMT noted that there were a number of actions in the Annual Plan 2025-2026 that were due for completion by the end of the financial year and would require engagement and presentation to SMT, but which were not currently scheduled for forthcoming SMT meetings.

Action: Directors to follow-up with relevant HoBs on actions in the Annual Plan 2025-2026 that are due for completion by the end of the financial year and would require engagement and presentation to SMT.

Lesley noted that this was Paula Ewart's last SMT meeting and thanked her for her contribution over the last six months and wished her well in her future endeavours.

The meeting ended at 4.39 pm.