

# SENIOR MANAGEMENT TEAM (SMT)

FRIDAY, 26 APRIL 2024 at 10.00 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)  
Michael Cairns, Acting Head of Communications (Items 7 and 8)  
Liz Beaton, Internal Communications Officer (Item 7)  
Frank Geddis, Clerk Assistant (Item 9)  
Trevor Allen, Senior Assistant Clerk (Item 9)  
Sinéad McDonnell, Head of HR (Items 11, 12 and 13)  
Karen Martin, Deputy Head of HR (Items 11, 12 and 13)  
Donna-Marie Clark, Data Protection and Governance Officer (Item 15)  
Melissa Sharples, Head of Procurement (Item 16)

The meeting commenced at 10.14 am.

## 1. Apologies

There were no apologies.

## 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 27 March 2024 had been published.

*Change to agenda running order.*

*Robin Ramsey joined the meeting at 10.14 am for agenda items 5 and 6.*

## 5. Political Update

SMT noted the considerable activity that was taking place throughout the organisation to support both the Assembly and the Assembly Commission, and the ongoing dedication and effort being put in by staff to deliver this.

SMT also noted the significant progress that had been made to fill vacancies, albeit that many were on a temporary basis.

## **6. Draft Assembly Commission Agenda**

Robin Ramsey advised that the next Assembly Commission meeting was scheduled for 16 May 2024.

Proposed items for the meeting included:

- Clerk/Chief Executive's Report
- Corporate Plan 2023-2028 and Annual Plan 2023-2024
- The Assembly Members (Remuneration Board) Bill
- Pay Claim 2024
- Financial Assistance for Political Parties Scheme 2024
- Personal Security and Safety of Members and their Staff at Constituency Offices, or Members' Private Dwellings
- Defects in the Roof of Parliament Buildings
- Request for the Assembly Commission to Display a Portrait of His Majesty The King

*Robin Ramsey left the meeting at 10.18 am.*

## **PARLIAMENTARY SERVICES**

*Michael Cairns joined the meeting at 10.18 am for agenda items 7 and 8.*

*Liz Beaton joined the meeting at 10.18 am for agenda item 7.*

## **7. Internal Communications Quarterly Update**

Liz Beaton provided an update on internal communications activity for the period mid-January to mid-April 2024.

Liz commented on the successful Directorate meetings and 'Let's Talk' Assembly Values sessions that had taken place over the last couple of months.

Liz referred to some upcoming activities, namely, the Interparliamentary Learning at Work Week (13 – 19 May) and the 'Let's Meet' New Colleagues event planned for 8 May.

In relation to the Hybrid Working Survey, Liz asked SMT to give consideration to when this should issue and a date of end October/early November 2024 was agreed.

Liz also noted that she was working with staff from Clerking in relation to the rolling out of 'Let's Talk' Parliamentary Culture sessions for staff.

Liz commented on delivery success in relation to Strategic Communications during the reporting period and it was suggested that the Chairperson of the Internal Communications Group (ICG) be invited to the next round of Directorate meetings, to update staff on the new joint inter-parliamentary Staff Survey, prior to its launch at the end of September 2024.

Tara Caul and Steven Baxter thanked Liz for the help and support she had provided to their teams in relation to the Directorate meetings in March and SMT congratulated her on the successes within the report.

*Liz Beaton left the meeting at 10.34 am.*

## **8. Strategic Communications Update**

Michael Cairns updated SMT on the main findings of the web analysis surveys.

On considering the findings, Steven noted that given the surprisingly low number of users landing in the homepage, it was vital that navigation around the Assembly's website was straightforward. Steven also noted that given past experiences, it was important to continue to contain the scope of the website project. Gareth McGrath highlighted the need to get better at maintaining corporate content and Tara stated that there should be a focus on what the most important material is for the public.

Michael noted SMT's comments and advised that there would be further contact with SMT to confirm requirements prior to the website re-vamp.

*Michael Cairns left the meeting at 10.51 am.*

*Frank Geddis and Trevor Allen joined the meeting at 10.51 am for agenda item 9.*

## **9. Legislative Drafting Contract – Draft Business Case**

Frank Geddis presented and sought approval of a draft Business Case for replacement legislative drafting services.

Frank noted that the existing contract is due to expire in January 2025 and he outlined the proposed model for the new contract.

Following consideration, SMT agreed with the recommended option within the business case, namely to put in place a contract for the establishment of a panel of legislative drafters from January 2025 to January 2029.

SMT thanked Frank and Trevor Allen for the comprehensive paper.

*Frank Geddis and Trevor Allen left the meeting at 11.03 am.*

*Meeting suspended at 11.03 am and resumed at 11.13 am.*

#### **4. SMT Action Points**

The outstanding action points were reviewed and progress was noted.

#### **10. Northern Ireland Assembly Commission Complaints Policy and Procedures Report for 2023-24**

Gareth McGrath presented the Assembly Commission Complaints Policy and Procedures Report for 2023-24, noting that there were no admissible complaints for the period 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024.

It was agreed that the Assembly Commission would be provided with a copy of the Complaints Policy and Procedures Report for 2023-24 at its next meeting.

#### **14. Post Project Evaluation (PPE) Report on Parliament Buildings Security System**

Steven Baxter presented a PPE on the Parliament Buildings Security System which was installed and commissioned in 2023.

Steven commented on the success of the project, noting that all four of the overarching objectives had been fully achieved and that the project was delivered inside budget. Steven also outlined that the system functionality could potentially be further enhanced to mitigate future or emerging security threats.

SMT reflected on the key elements that had led to such a successful outcome and approved the PPE for uploading onto the Assembly Commission's PPE registry.

**Action:** Head of Security/Usher Services to arrange for the PPE to be uploaded onto the Assembly Commission's PPE registry.

*Sinéad McDonnell and Karen Martin joined the meeting at 11.27 am.*

#### **11. HR Management Information**

Karen Martin presented the monthly HR Management Information as at 1 April 2024, which she stated also included the results of the recent Section 75 Survey and a summary of the Heads of Business (HoBs) discussion on the main themes arising from the AG8 Focus Group Report.

Karen advised that the Staff in Post (SIP) figure on 1 April 2024 (including agency and inward seconded staff) was 338.6 Full Time Equivalents (FTE) against a staff complement (including complement plus) of 388.5 FTE. SMT noted the temporary promotions/deputising arrangements and agency worker assignments currently in place.

Karen updated SMT on recruitment activity.

On reviewing the Recruitment Schedule, SMT agreed to bring forward the AG7 Clerical Supervisor competition; to move the AG4 Legal Adviser competition to the July to September 2024 period; and to add an AG5 Deputy Editor competition to the Schedule.

Sickness absence information was provided and it was noted that for the period April 2023 to March 2024, the average sickness absence per FTE member of staff was 14.3 days, compared with an average of 13.7 days during the period April 2022 to March 2023.

Karen provided SMT with a report on the results of the recent Section 75 Survey that had been undertaken.

Karen also referred to the AG8 Focus Group Report, highlighting the main themes that had arisen along with a summary of the resulting discussion by HoBs. It was agreed that the Head of HR would ask the Chairperson of ICG to communicate to all staff, the feedback from HoBs on the AG8 Focus Group Report.

**Action:** Head of HR to ask the Chairperson of the Internal Communications Group to issue a communication to staff on HoBs feedback to the AG8 Focus Group Report.

### **13. Proposed Amendments to the Appeal Process**

Karen presented a paper, which sought SMT approval of proposed amendments to the appeal process across a number of HR policies.

Following consideration, SMT approved the proposed amendments as outlined in the paper, subject to further minor amendments, to be agreed following the meeting.

### **12. Corporate Values in Action**

Sinéad McDonnell noted that she had met with the Clerk/Chief Executive and Directors on 14 February 2024 to consider in detail, a draft version of the 'Corporate Values in Action'.

SMT formally approved the 'Corporate Values in Action', subject to some presentational amendments, and noted the staff engagement that had taken place on the Values to date.

SMT reviewed proposals for embedding the Values throughout the Assembly Commission and provided some further suggestions. Sinéad to arrange a dedicated session with SMT and HoBs to take this matter forward.

**Action:** Sinéad to arrange a dedicated session with SMT and HoBs to discuss embedding the Values throughout the Assembly Commission.

SMT recorded its thanks to Sinéad, the HR Team and Liz Beaton for all the work that had gone into producing the 'Corporate Values in Action'.

*Sinéad McDonnell and Karen Martin left the meeting at 12.11 pm.*

## **OTHER ITEMS**

### **19. Directors' Updates**

#### **Legal, Governance and Research Services**

##### **Legal Services Office**

Tara updated SMT on ongoing litigation.

Tara advised SMT that the Legal Services Office was preparing for the Inter-Parliamentary Lawyers Conference, which will be hosted by the Legal Services Office in Parliament Buildings in May.

Tara noted that three vacancies within the Legal Services Office were being filled temporarily.

##### **Governance**

SMT noted that the next Assembly Commission Audit and Risk Committee meeting was scheduled for 16 May 2024.

##### **Information Standards**

Tara advised on the number of Freedom of Information requests that had been received since last reported, and provided an update on a complaint to the Information Commissioner's Office.

Tara noted that the Assembly Commission's revised Retention and Disposal Schedule is currently progressing through the official channels to be laid in the Assembly by the Minister for Communities.

Tara advised that the third Sensitivity Review (2002 and 2003 release) had commenced.

##### **Research and Information Service (RaISe)**

Tara noted that the Research Officer competition had successfully concluded and also that two interns had started in early April under the 2024 United Kingdom Research and Innovation PhD Policy Internship Scheme.

##### **Procurement Office**

Tara updated SMT on the ongoing procurement projects and advised that considerable work would have to be undertaken by the Procurement Office to implement the Procurement Act 2023 within the required timescale.

## **Parliamentary Services**

Gareth provided a detailed account of the work undertaken by all business areas within the Parliamentary Services Directorate, since last reported at the SMT meeting on 27 March 2024.

## **Corporate Services**

### **Support Services**

Steven highlighted some recent operational issues regarding Hospitality deliveries and advised that controls had been put in place to avoid any reoccurrence.

### **Usher Services**

Steven informed SMT of a potential increase in Estate management costs for 2024/25. Further clarification is being sought.

### **Systems Review Project**

Steven noted that the Systems Review Project Board had met last week and that further delivery options were being discussed.

### **Finance Office**

Steven advised of the year end position in relation to capital expenditure, and praised the collective efforts of the Finance Office and HoBs for the effective management of expenditure against budget.

Steven also highlighted that following discussions with Internal Audit and the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO), an external auditor, MB McGrady had been appointed to conduct the annual review of the Financial Assistance for Political Parties Scheme. Lesley expressed concern that the work had not been undertaken by Internal Audit as specified in the contract and also queried the NIAO's involvement in the process.

## **LEGAL, GOVERNANCE AND RESEARCH SERVICES**

*Donna-Marie Clark joined the meeting at 12.43 pm for agenda item 15.*

### **15. Biannual Review of Directorate Risk Registers (DRRs)**

Donna-Marie Clark presented the DRRs for Corporate Services, Legal, Governance and Research Services and Parliamentary Services and the emerging 'Risk Clusters', as at March 2024.

Following review, it was agreed that some amendments were required to the Corporate Services and Parliamentary Services DRRs and the Risk Cluster Analysis.

**Action:** Data Protection and Governance Officer to amend the DRRs and Risk Cluster Analysis, as requested.

SMT considered emerging Risk Clusters and agreed that there were no further risks that required escalation to the Corporate Risk Register (CRR) at this time, however, Steven flagged up a potential risk in relation to evacuation from Parliament Buildings in the event of a fire. Steven advised that during the recent fire drill there were an insufficient number of fire wardens on every floor (including none on the fourth floor), which he stated was mainly due to hybrid working.

SMT noted the issue and it was agreed in the first instance, that Steven would discuss the matter with the Health and Safety Team and see if it could be addressed ahead of any further discussion on escalation to the CRR.

*Donna-Marie Clark left the meeting at 1.02 pm.*

*Melissa Sharples joined the meeting at 1.02 pm for agenda item 16.*

## **16. Contract Management Guidance**

Melissa Sharples presented revised Assembly Commission Contract Management Guidance, which had been considered in detail by the Clerk/Chief Executive and Directors at a separate meeting and updated accordingly.

SMT formally approved the revised Contract Management Guidance.

Tara noted her appreciation of the work that had been carried out by Melissa to produce the revised Guidance and thanked SMT for their contributions.

**Action:** Head of Procurement to arrange for the revised Guidance to be communicated to staff as soon as possible and for the necessary training to be identified and rolled-out to HoBs and contract managers.

*Melissa Sharples left the meeting at 1.05 pm.*

## **OTHER ITEMS**

## **17. SMT Papers Cleared by Correspondence**

Business Case for the Resumption of Provision of Executive Car Service for the Speaker.

## **18. Assembly Commission Papers Cleared by Correspondence**

Review of the Financial Assistance for Political Parties Scheme ('FAPP Scheme') 2016.

The Assembly Members (Remuneration Board) Bill.

Defects in the Roof of Parliament Buildings.

Service Level Agreement Between Northern Ireland Assembly Commission and the Police Service of Northern Ireland for the Period 1 April 2024 to 31 March 2027.

Constituency Office Printer Replacement Project.

## **20. AOB**

Tara highlighted the work that RaiSe and the Library had been undertaking in the area of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and of a need to develop Guidance and a Strategy around AI, and she suggested that a Working Group be set up to consider this.

SMT agreed that this was an important issue that required consideration and it was proposed that RaiSe could chair a Working Group to include a cross cutting membership from across the organisation.

**Action:** Tara to liaise with the Head of RaiSe in relation to identifying a Chair for the AI Working Group.

## **21. Date of Next Meeting**

It was agreed that the next meeting would take place on 31 May 2024.

## **22. Proposals for Agenda Items for Next Meeting**

- Review of Fraud Prevention and Anti-Bribery Policy and Response Plan
- Draft Disability and Good Relations Action Plans 2025-2030
- Annual Learning and Development Activity Report
- Policy of Right to Work in the UK
- Annual Environmental Management Review
- Defects in the Roof of Parliament Buildings
- Review of Fraud and Bribery Self-Assessment Checklists, Bribery Risk Assessment and Action Plan
- Sensitivity Review
- Procurement Act 2023 and Social Value

- Cyber Security Review
- Review of the Events Policy
- Strategic Communications Update
- Draft Staff Survey

The meeting ended at 1.23 pm.