

SENIOR MANAGEMENT TEAM (SMT)

**FRIDAY, 27 FEBRUARY 2026 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**

In Attendance:

**Janet Hughes, Clerical Supervisor
Krystal Clarke, Executive Assistant
Robin Ramsey, Adviser to the Speaker/Head of Corporate Support
(Items 5 and 6)
Paula McClintock, Head of Finance (Items 7 and 8)
Suzanne Murphy, Deputy Head of HR (Item 7)
Sinéad McDonnell, Head of HR (Items 8, 9, 10 and 11)
Billy Mahoney, Accountant (Items 8 and 22)
Victoria Withers, HR Services Manager (Item 8)
Maria Bannon, Equality and Good Relations Manager (Item 9)
Diane Lamont, Senior HR Manager (Item 10)
Jonathan McMillen, Head of Legal Services (Item 13)
Nathan Lynch, Clerical Supervisor (Item 13)
Darren McKinstry, Head of Research and Information Service (Item 14)
John Hart, Head of Communications (Items 15 and 16)
Mary-Ellen Nutt, Head of IT (Items 18 and 19)
Stephanie Mallon, Clerk Assistant (Item 20)
Clare Maguire, Public Engagement Manager (Item 20)
Liz Beaton, Internal Communications Officer (Item 21)**

The meeting commenced at 9.33 am.

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 30 January 2026 had been published.

4. SMT Action Points

The outstanding action points were reviewed and progress was noted.

Lesley Hogg asked that a closed action from the SMT meeting on 3 December 2025 regarding Building Surveys, be reinstated as information remained outstanding.

In relation to the action from the 30 January 2026 regarding use of the Remedial Works Framework for the goods lifts replacement, SMT noted the email from Construction and Procurement Delivery (CPD) advising that there was no upper limit on the value of remedial Service Orders but had some residual concerns. It was agreed that Steven Baxter would arrange for SMT to meet with CPD to clarify the position.

Action: Steven to arrange for SMT to meet with CPD to clarify the position in relation to using the remedial works framework for the replacement goods lift.

Robin Ramsey joined the meeting at 9.37 am for agenda items 5 and 6.

5. Political Update

Lesley noted that the Independent Remuneration Board had released a draft Assembly Members (Salaries) Determination (Northern Ireland) 2026 for consultation with the Assembly Commission, amongst other bodies.

CORPORATE SUPPORT

6. Draft Assembly Commission Agenda

Robin Ramsey noted that the next Assembly Commission meeting was scheduled for 4 March 2026 and proposed agenda items were considered.

Robin noted that governance training for Assembly Commission Members, the Assembly Commission Audit and Risk Committee (ACARC) and SMT would also be taking place on 4 March 2026.

Robin Ramsey left the meeting at 9.46 am.

Paula McClintock joined the meeting at 9.47 am for agenda items 7 and 8.

Suzanne Murphy joined the meeting at 9.47 am for agenda item 7.

CORPORATE SERVICES

7. Business Case Review - Travel Management Services 2026/27 to 2035/36

Suzanne Murphy presented and sought approval of a business case, recommending the adoption of the collaborative Travel Management Service (TMS) administered by CPD for arranging and recording official Assembly travel.

Suzanne advised that an assessment of the current arrangements had been undertaken and highlighted a number of limitations, including the manual nature of the processes and support for travellers outside of core working hours.

Following consideration, SMT approved the business case, and agreed that there should also be provision for limited and controlled Government Procurement Card use by exception.

Suzanne advised that the new contract would commence in May 2026.

Suzanne Murphy left the meeting at 9.58 am

Sinéad McDonnell joined the meeting at 9.59 am for agenda items 8, 9, 10 and 11.

Billy Mahoney and Victoria Withers joined the meeting at 9.59 am for agenda item 8.

8. Business Case for the Proposed Additional Modules Included in the MidlandHR (MHR) Contract 2025 to 2028

Billy Mahoney presented and sought approval of a business case recommending the inclusion of additional modules within the current MHR contract which runs until July 2028.

Billy outlined three potential options within the business case, highlighting a potential profiling issue with the recommended option in relation to expenditure against budget.

Following discussion, SMT approved the business case along with a small amount of contingency up to the limit of the existing contract value. SMT also agreed that due to the anticipated benefits it was important that the modules were implemented as quickly as possible and that if sufficient budget wasn't available, consideration be given to deprioritising other expenditure.

SMT thanked Billy and Victoria Withers for their comprehensive paper.

Billy Mahoney and Victoria Withers left the meeting at 10.15 am.

SMT then discussed the request from the Director of Corporate Services to extend the current Performance and Improvement team until 31 December 2026, with a review scheduled thereafter. Sinead McDonnell and Paula McClintock advised that it was not possible to absorb the work on this project within existing workloads.

SMT was advised that budget was available in 2026-27 as part of the corporate systems replacement project but that the posts would be reconsidered by the Director of Corporate Services when the project got underway. SMT was content with this approach.

Paula McClintock left the meeting at 10.18 am.

Maria Bannon joined the meeting at 10.19 am for agenda item 9.

9. Approval of Equality Scheme Review 2026-2031 and the Draft Audit of Inequalities Report and Action Plan 2026-2031 for Public Consultation

Maria Bannon presented and sought approval of a draft Assembly Commission paper on the Equality Scheme Review 2026-2031 and the draft Audit of Inequalities Report and Action Plan 2026-2031 for public consultation.

Following consideration, SMT, with the exception of Tara Caul who requested additional time to review, approved the paper for presentation to the Assembly Commission, subject to some minor amendments to the cover paper and draft Audit of Inequalities Report and Action Plan 2026-2031. It was agreed that Tara would feed back any additional comments to Maria directly.

Action: Maria to update the draft Assembly Commission paper as agreed by SMT, taking account of any additional comments from Tara.

SMT thanked Maria for the comprehensive paper.

Maria Bannon left the meeting at 10.38 am.

Diane Lamont joined the meeting at 10.39 am for agenda item 10.

10. Performance and Wellbeing Framework – Supporting Policy and Guidance

Diane Lamont presented and sought approval, of a draft policy and guidance documents to support the implementation of the Performance and Wellbeing Framework approved by SMT at its meeting in October 2025.

Following consideration, SMT approved the draft policy and guidance documents, subject to some minor amendments. SMT asked that HR

engage with the Assembly Leadership Team (ALT) on the updated documents prior to launch and implementation.

SMT thanked Diane for all the work that had gone into developing the policy and guidance.

Diane Lamont left the meeting at 10.49 am.

11. HR Management Information

Sinéad presented the monthly HR Management Information as at 1 February 2026.

SMT noted the Staff in Post (SIP) figure and temporary promotion/deputising arrangements and agency worker assignments currently in place.

Sinéad provided an update on recruitment activity, and SMT considered and agreed the priority of a number of competitions on the Recruitment Schedule.

Sinéad sought approval of a complement change application for a temporary (complement plus) full time Clerical Officer within the HR Office. SMT noted the limitations of the existing staffing budget but agreed the request on the basis it could be funded from the HR Office GAE budget.

SMT also considered and approved an additional complement change application submitted by the Director of Parliamentary Services, for a temporary incremental increase to Clerical Officer complement within the Committee and Member Support Office (CAMS).

Steven noted it was his intention to bring forward a paper regarding financial governance, including financial delegations, at a later stage.

In relation to sickness absence reporting, Sinéad presented the findings of research undertaken in relation to the current agreed absence benchmark, as requested by SMT at its meeting on 15 December 2025.

Sinéad outlined two proposed approaches and, following consideration, SMT agreed to replace the current absence benchmark with an annual comparison of absence rates with other organisations such as other parliaments, the NICS, as well as the wider public sector.

Sinéad McDonnell left the meeting at 11.13 am.

LEGAL, GOVERNANCE AND RESEARCH SERVICES

12. Sensitivity Review 2004 to 2006 Release

This paper was deferred to the March 2026 SMT meeting.

Jonathan McMillen and Nathan Lynch joined the meeting at 11.13 am for agenda item 13.

13. Review of Records Management Policy and Guidance

Jonathan McMillen and Nathan Lynch presented a revised draft Records Management Policy and Guidance, which had been updated in line with applicable guidance and responses to recent consultation on the Policy.

Steven asked that Annex A of the policy be updated in line with the Managing Attendance Policy.

SMT noted the slight changes proposed and approved the revised Policy and Guidance, subject to this further minor amendment.

Action: Nathan to update the Records Management Policy and Guidance as agreed by SMT and arrange for it to be issued to staff and uploaded to the Information Standards Office AsslSt page.

Jonathan McMillen and Nathan Lynch left the meeting at 11.16 am.

Darren McKinstry joined the meeting at 11.17 am for agenda item 14.

14. Members' Survey 2026

Darren McKinstry sought approval to issue a Members' survey, noting that the last one was carried out in 2021.

Darren proposed that the 2026 survey would seek to maintain consistency with the themes adopted for previous years surveys, but take account of responses to the 2021 survey and the key actions that were prioritised from it.

SMT considered some proposed elements of the survey and approved, subject to some minor amendments, the questions and timeline for issue.

Action: Darren to incorporate the changes to the survey as proposed by SMT.

Darren McKinstry left the meeting at 11.34 am.

The meeting suspended at 11.34 am and resumed at 11.44 am.

PARLIAMENTARY SERVICES

John Hart joined the meeting at 11.44 am for agenda items 15 and 16.

15. Draft Communications Strategy for the Northern Ireland Assembly 2026-28

John Hart presented and sought approval of the draft Communications Strategy for the Northern Ireland Assembly 2026-28.

John advised that the key areas of focus for the Communications Strategy would be to build the necessary foundations for its delivery internally; to deliver the Assembly's own message; and to influence through others.

John also outlined how the Communications Strategy would be monitored following implementation.

Following discussion, SMT approved the draft Communications Strategy, subject to it reflecting the new branding messages and a clear focus on outcomes.

Action: John to update the draft Communications Strategy to reflect the new branding message and a clear focus on outcomes.

16. Strategic Communications Update

John provided SMT with a strategic communications update.

John Hart left the meeting at 12.13 pm.

17. Finance and HR System Replacement (Systems Review) FUSION Project

This paper was deferred to the March 2026 SMT meeting.

Mary-Ellen Nutt joined the meeting at 12.14 pm for agenda items 18 and 19.

18. Third Level HP and Palo Support Contracts

Mary-Ellen Nutt sought approval to procure two third-level supplier support contracts, which she advised would provide in depth technical expertise and complement IS Office capability.

Mary-Ellen outlined the costs for the proposed contracts, noting that she had sufficient budget to cover the whole life costs of the contracts and that procurement would be via the Public Sector Shared Network Contract (PSSN).

Following consideration, SMT approved the procurement of the proposed two third-level supplier support contracts.

SMT acknowledged that Mary-Ellen and the IS Office team had been working extremely hard to make changes and improvements to systems and recorded its appreciation and thanks to all involved for their efforts.

19. Draft Digital, AI and Cyber Strategy 2026-2031

SMT noted that, at its meeting on 30 January 2026, it had reviewed and provided initial comments on the draft Digital, AI and Cyber Strategy 2026-2031 and agreed to forward any further comments directly to Mary-Ellen for incorporation into a paper for consideration by SMT.

Mary-Ellen subsequently presented a paper attaching the revised draft Digital, AI and Cyber Strategy 2026-2031 for approval.

SMT approved the draft Digital, AI and Cyber Strategy 2026-2031 as presented. SMT also agreed to provide support to Mary-Ellen to lead and coordinate its delivery across the Assembly Commission.

Mary-Ellen Nutt left the meeting at 12.23 pm.

Stephanie Mallon and Clare Maguire joined the meeting 12:24 pm for agenda item 20.

20. Public Engagement Branding

Stephanie Mallon and Clare Maguire presented and sought approval of the Public Engagement Brand Strategy.

Clare thanked SMT for attending a meeting with the branding agency, where the proposed Brand Strategy for Public Engagement was presented.

Clare noted that development of the Brand Strategy formed a key component of delivering the Assembly's Public Engagement Strategy (2025–2027) and directly supported the Assembly Commission's Corporate Strategy 2023–2028.

SMT was delighted with the proposed Brand Strategy and, following consideration, approved the Public Engagement Brand Strategy, including the adoption of the revised brand principles, messaging framework and visual identity, and endorsed its phased implementation across the Public Engagement business area.

SMT noted that the Brand Strategy would also apply to internal use and asked that Stephanie engage with the Head of Communications to facilitate roll out across the organisation.

Stephanie Mallon and Clare Maguire left at the meeting at 12.38 pm.

Liz Beaton joined the meeting at 12.38 pm for agenda item 21.

21. Internal Communications Quarterly Update

Liz Beaton provided an update on internal communications activity for the period mid-November 2025 to mid-February 2026.

Liz noted that since the last update in November, there had been consultation and engagement with staff on the Men's Health and Women's Health Networks; sessions on Website Redevelopment Project User Engagement and that the Internal Communications Group had provided feedback on the Winter Staff Briefing and the recent Staff Webinars.

Liz referred to a number of opportunities that had been made available to staff to meet and connect with each other both formally and informally to create opportunities to build networks and teams and support operational and organisational improvement.

Liz noted that the Charity Fundraising Group had delivered the final fundraising activities for Air Ambulance NI with a total of £31,967.43 being raised and that the new Assembly Charity of the Year, Macmillan Cancer Support, commenced on 1 January 2026.

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

Liz Beaton left the meeting at 12.58 pm.

The meeting suspended at 12.58 pm and resumed at 1.31 pm.

CORPORATE SERVICES CONTINUED

Billy Mahoney joined the meeting at 1.31 pm for agenda item 22.

22. Management Accounts January 2026

Lesley Hogg noted that the Management Accounts had only been provided to SMT the previous afternoon and that Directors may not have had time to review them in detail.

Billy presented the Management Accounts for January 2026, highlighting the final budget position for 2025-26 following the December Monitoring exercise for Resource DEL, Capital DEL and the Windsor Framework Democratic Scrutiny Committee costs, against the current forecast outturns.

Billy advised that a full review of figures had been undertaken with the focus on confirming the robustness of year-end projections and identifying any emerging pressures or underspends.

SMT noted the underspends against Staff Salaries and Administration Costs.

In relation to Staff Salaries, Lesley queried the quantum anticipated for the two remaining months of the year given that this seemed considerably in excess of recent monthly expenditure. Billy agreed to review the salary forecast in detail and advise SMT accordingly.

Action: Billy to review the salary forecast in detail and advise SMT accordingly.

On reviewing the Capital Plan, Billy advised of underspends in four projects. SMT noted that the majority of the Electronic Access Control (EAC) project implementation would now fall in 2026-27 and that this would require

prioritisation and reallocation of capital budget in 2026-27. SMT agreed to give the matter further consideration.

Billy referred to a request from the Head of IS received after the Management Accounts paper had been prepared, to bring forward £59k expenditure from 2026-27 into the current financial year on the Microsoft Cloud Partner contract, to utilise part of the capital underspend. SMT was content for the expenditure to be brought forward, on the basis that it was a phasing issue and that total expenditure remained within the overall value of the business case, and asked that this be documented in the February 2026 Management Accounts.

Lesley referred to a difference in the timings of some projects on the Capital Plan provided by business areas and the information provided by the Procurement Office and asked that Directors follow up on this with their Heads of Business (HoBs).

Action: Directors to ask HoBs to ensure that the timings of projects recorded on the Capital Plan and those recorded by the Procurement Office were consistent.

SMT thanked Billy for his work on preparing the accounts.

Billy Mahoney left at the meeting at 2.03 pm.

Change to agenda running order.

27. Annual Plan 2025-26 Status at 31 December 2025

Steven presented and sought approval of a draft Assembly Commission paper on the Annual Plan 2025-26 Status at 31 December 2025.

SMT noted the Annual Plan status at 31 December 2025 and approved the paper for presentation to the Assembly Commission.

Steven advised of a tight deadline for the provision of the year-end status updates and noted that HoBs would be advised of this.

28. Provision of Restroom Facilities in Parliament Buildings

Steven presented and sought approval of a draft Assembly Commission paper on the provision of restroom facilities in Parliament Buildings.

Steven noted that the paper had been prepared following a request from the Assembly Commission at its meeting on 10 September 2025.

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

Action: Steven to update the paper as proposed by SMT for presentation to the Assembly Commission.

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

Paper to be considered via correspondence.

OTHER ITEMS

23. Directors' Updates

Legal, Governance and Research Services

Tara provided an update on the work undertaken by all business areas within the Legal, Governance and Research Services Directorate and, in particular, highlighted the ongoing litigation cases; recruitment within the Examiner of Statutory Rules (ESR) and Research and Information Services (RaISe); and the current procurement projects.

Tara noted that the next ACARC meeting was scheduled for 13 May 2026.

Corporate Services

Steven provided an update on all business areas within the Corporate Services Directorate.

Steven advised that his next monthly update to SMT would include detail on the range of work carried out under the continuous improvement programme.

Parliamentary Services

Gareth provided an update on the work undertaken by all business areas within the Parliamentary Services Directorate.

24. AOB

There was no other business.

25. Date of Next Meeting

It was noted that the next meeting would take place on 25 March 2026.

26. Proposals for Agenda Items for Next Meeting

- Strategic Review of the Finance Office
- Renewal of Licences for SUN Systems and INFOR Q&A
- Personnel Security Policy
- Visitor Experience Centre Requirements and Options
- Climate Change Adaption Report
- Blue Flax Lessons Learned Post Project Evaluation
- Finance and HR System Replacement (Systems Review) FUSION Project

- Quarterly Review of the Corporate Risk Register
- Sensitivity Review 2004 to 2006 Release
- Review of Decision Making Protocols
- Visitor Experience Team Update
- Review of Photography and Filming Policy
- Strategic Communications Update
- Internal Communications Group Update

The meeting ended at 2.43 pm.