

SENIOR MANAGEMENT TEAM (SMT)

**FRIDAY, 27 MARCH 2026 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)
Paula McClintock, Head of Finance (Items 7 and 8)
Billy Mahoney, Accountant (Item 8)
Sinéad McDonnell, Head of HR (Items 10 and 11)
Terri Quigley, Head of Building Services Management (Items 12 and 13)
Christine Watts, Environmental Services and Health and Safety
Manager (Item 13)
Sebastien Mingout, Support Services Manager (Item 14)
John Hart, Head of Communications (Items 18 and 19)
Jonathan McMillen, Head of Legal Services (Item 21)
Dan Hull, Chair of Internal Communications Group (Item 22)**

The meeting commenced at 9.32 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 27 February 2026 had been published.

4. SMT Action Points

The outstanding action points were reviewed and progress was noted.

Robin Ramsey joined the meeting at 9.33 am for agenda items 5 and 6.

5. Political Update

SMT noted that the Assembly was being recalled during Easter recess for a plenary sitting on 31 March 2026.

Lesley Hogg noted that the Windsor Framework Democratic Scrutiny Committee (WFDSC) would also be meeting during Easter recess on 2 April 2026.

CORPORATE SUPPORT

6. Draft Assembly Commission Agenda

Robin Ramsey advised that dates had been identified for possible Assembly Commission meetings before the Summer recess and he stated that officials would be making contact with Assembly Commission Members to check availability.

SMT considered proposed agenda items for the next meeting.

Robin Ramsey left the meeting at 9.44 am.

Karen Steele joined the meeting at 9.45 am for agenda item 7.

CORPORATE SERVICES

7. Management Accounts February 2026

Karen Steele presented the Management Accounts for February 2026.

Karen advised of projected year-end underspends in Resource DEL, Capital DEL and the WFDSC costs against the current forecast outturns.

Karen provided details of underspends in Salaries and Admin costs and sought approval of a £11k bid for IS Office computer hardware. SMT noted the underspends and approved the bid.

In relation to the IS Technical Coordinator post that was approved until 23 February 2027, Karen noted that the previous rationale for capitalising the cost associated with this position had changed. She advised that the IS Technical Coordinator was no longer solely working on the Assembly Information Management System (AIMS) project but was also assisting with several other modernisation projects, such as website redevelopment, the Windsor Framework Legislative Tracker system and the Electronic Document Records Management System (EDRMS). In light of this, SMT agreed that it

was more appropriate to recategorise the cost as Salaries, noting there was sufficient budget cover in 2025-26 and that for 2026-27, the cost would be funded by a temporary suppression of an IS Software Developer post.

Karen highlighted that the option to value assets using Historical Cost was no longer permitted in the Government Financial Reporting Manual (FReM) 2025-26, except in very limited circumstances and that the Assembly Commission must revert to Modified Historical Cost (MHCA). In addition, Karen informed SMT of increased reporting requirements in relation to the Sustainability reporting section of the accounts regarding CO₂ emissions on Assembly Commission travel such as airfares and mileage.

In relation to the Capital Plan, SMT highlighted that a number of projects with approved business cases required movement to the correct section of the Capital Plan.

Going forward, SMT requested that the tables in the SMT report should include columns showing year-to-date expenditure and remaining spend.

Steven Baxter highlighted that the reporting of Management Accounts was one of the areas being considered under the Financial Governance Proposals, due to be considered under the next agenda item.

SMT noted that this was a busy time for the Finance Office due to year end activity and thanked Karen and the team for their efforts.

Karen Steele left the meeting at 10.17 am.

Paula McClintock and Billy Mahoney joined the meeting at 10.17 am for agenda item 8.

8. Financial Governance Proposals

Paula McClintock presented a paper which sought approval, in principle, of high level proposals aimed at reforming financial governance within the Assembly Commission.

Paula advised that the main drivers for change were the current disproportional focus on granular account level reporting and monitoring and approval of budgets. To address this, Paula advised that adoption of a three-tiered model to budget setting and monitoring was being proposed.

Paula outlined the proposed strategic direction and core principles of a reformed budgeting process, with a reformed support control and financial delegation framework. Paula noted that the whole premise was to streamline and simplify processes, with decisions being taken at the appropriate level.

Gareth McGrath left the meeting at 10.32 am.

Lesley and Tara Caul highlighted that it may have been helpful to have a meeting in advance to discuss proposals.

Lesley noted that the principles in the paper appeared to be consistent with existing policies, such as the Business Case and Business Justification Policy, but that the difficulty was automating the processes within current systems.

Following discussion, SMT approved, in principle, the change in strategic direction proposed and for work to progress on developing the framework in line with the core principles outlined in the paper, but asked that a meeting be held once the proposals were further developed to discuss them in detail, prior to presenting a further detailed paper at a future SMT meeting.

Action: Paula to arrange a meeting with SMT to discuss proposals in more detail once they have been further developed and subsequently prepare a further detailed paper on the new proposals, including how the proposals can be delivered.

SMT thanked Paula and Billy Mahoney for the comprehensive and well written paper.

Paula McClintock and Billy Mahoney left the meeting at 10.45 am.

9. Strategic Review of the Finance Office

Paper deferred to next meeting.

Gareth McGrath re-joined the meeting at 10.47 am.

Sinéad McDonnell joined the meeting at 10.47 am for agenda items 10 and 11.

10. HR Management Information

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

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

Sinéad sought approval of a complement change application for a temporary increase in Accountant complement within the Finance Office, noting it was to be offset by the temporary suppression of a Clerical Officer post also within the Finance Office. Following consideration, SMT approved the request on the basis that it was cost neutral.

On reviewing the Recruitment Schedule, Gareth McGrath referred to a request from Paul Gill, Clerk Assistant, for competitions to be added for an Assistant Editor, Parliamentary Reporter and Temporary Clerk. Sinéad noted the request and agreed to bring back proposals in relation to when they can be accommodated in the Recruitment Schedule to the next SMT meeting, following discussion with Paul.

Sinéad also sought SMT approval to include miscarriage leave in the Special Leave Policy (paid at contractual salary). SMT was content.

11. Draft Personnel Security Policy

Sinéad presented and sought approval of a draft Personnel Security Policy.

SMT noted that the draft policy had been discussed in detail at a separate meeting and, following consideration, approved the draft Personnel Security Policy for consultation with Heads of Business (HoBs) and Trade Union Side (TUS).

Sinéad McDonnell left the meeting at 10.53 am.

Terri Quigley joined the meeting at 10.53 am for agenda items 12 and 13.

12. Options for the Provision of a Visitor Centre

Terri Quigley presented a paper and sought direction from SMT on proposed possible location options for the provision of a Visitor Engagement Centre.

Following discussion, SMT asked for greater detail on the requirements; that engagement and consultation take place with business areas; that the scope of Options 1, 2, 3(a), 5 and 6 be explored and developed further; and that a further paper be prepared for consideration at the next SMT and Assembly Commission meetings. Gareth added that he saw Option 6 as, in effect, an 'extension' of Option 1, potentially suitable for additional office accommodation but not as a location for a Visitor Engagement Centre.

Action: Terri to prepare a further paper for consideration at the next SMT and Assembly Commission meetings.

Christine Watts joined the meeting at 11.14 am for agenda item 13.

13. Climate Reporting

Christine Watts presented and sought approval of the draft Climate Change Adaptation Report for submission to the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA), as required by The Climate Change (Reporting Bodies) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024 made by DAERA under the Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland) 2022.

Following discussion, SMT approved, subject to a few minor changes, the draft Climate Change Adaptation Report for submission to the DAERA.

Terri Quigley and Christine Watts left the meeting at 11.35 am.

The meeting suspended at 11.35 and resumed at 11:45 am.

Sebastien Mingout joined the meeting at 11.45 am for agenda item 14.

14. Addendum to the Support Services Contract

Sebastien Mingout presented an addendum to the business case for the refurbishment of the Blue Flax project which detailed all final costs.

SMT noted the final costs and it was agreed that a meeting would be arranged with those involved in all aspects of the project to discuss lessons learned, with a Post-Project Evaluation to be prepared for consideration at the next SMT and Assembly Commission meetings.

Action: Sebastien to prepare a Post-Project Evaluation for consideration at the next SMT and Assembly Commission meetings.

Sebastien Mingout left the meeting at 11.51 am.

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

Paper deferred to next meeting.

PARLIAMENTARY SERVICES

16. Variation to the 'Business Case for the Procurement of a Microsoft Cloud Partner and a Digital Agency'

Following further consideration it was noted that this paper was no longer required.

17. Feasibility of Opening Parliament Buildings Routinely on Saturday for Public Tours

Gareth presented a paper outlining options for opening Parliament Buildings to regularly scheduled public tours on Saturdays.

Gareth sought SMT approval, in principle, of a model of routine Saturday opening in which Parliament Buildings would be fully open to the public on approximately 48 Saturdays each year, with a structured programme of scheduled public tours and a catering offer. Gareth noted, however, that full implementation of this recommended option was not currently affordable within existing budget allocation, and proposed proceeding initially with a limited pilot of the option during summer recess 2027, stating that evidence gathered would inform SMT's future decisions on whether to move to routine, year-round Saturday public opening when funding becomes available.

Steven noted concerns with the costings within the paper particularly in terms of the Support Services costs but acknowledged that these could be potentially offset by other costs that may not be required.

Following consideration, SMT was content, in principle, to proceed with the limited pilot of the option and asked that a further detailed paper be prepared for consideration by SMT and the Assembly Commission.

Action: Gareth to arrange for a further detailed paper on the limited pilot of the option for Saturday tours during the summer recess 2027, to be prepared for consideration by SMT and the Assembly Commission.

John Hart joined the meeting at 11.51 am for agenda items 18 and 19.

18. Review of the ‘Northern Ireland Assembly Commission Filming and Photography Policy and Procedure’

John Hart presented proposals for a revised Assembly Commission Filming and Photography Policy and Procedure, to provide greater clarity on certain aspects.

Following discussion, SMT approved the revised Filming and Photography Policy and Procedure, subject to further minor amendment.

SMT noted that the Assembly Commission would be updated on the revised Policy and Procedure at its next meeting.

19. Strategic Communications Update

John provided SMT with a strategic communications update.

John Hart left the meeting at 12.12 pm.

LEGAL, GOVERNANCE AND RESEARCH SERVICES

20. Quarterly Review of the Corporate Risk Register

Tara Caul presented the Corporate Risk Register for March 2026, noting that it had been reviewed in detail at a separate meeting and updated accordingly.

SMT noted the revisions and approved the CRR for publication on AsslSt and presentation to the Assembly Commission Audit and Risk Committee at its next meeting.

Jonathan McMillen joined the meeting at 12.39 pm for agenda item 21.

21. Sensitivity Review 2004 to 2006 Release

Jonathan McMillen presented a paper, which sought approval to release seven 2004 to 2006 files to the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI).

Jonathan confirmed that of the files reviewed, no novel, contentious or politically sensitive matters requiring notification of the Assembly Commission have been identified.

Following consideration, SMT approved the seven 2004 to 2006 files for transfer to PRONI.

Jonathan McMillen left the meeting at 12.42 pm.

OTHER ITEMS

Dan Hull joined the meeting at 12.43 pm for agenda item 22.

22. Update on the Work of the Internal Communications Group Update (ICG) October 2025 to March 2026

Dan Hull updated SMT on the activities of ICG during the period October 2025 to March 2026, which included discussing progress on the procurement process for the Staff Survey contract; receiving updates on the development of the Good Ideas Forum; and providing feedback to the Internal Communications Officer on matters such as the staff webinar series and the Winter Briefing.

SMT noted, and discussed, a few issues raised by ICG about potential improvements to internal communications, namely availability of hybrid meeting rooms; provision of MS Teams training and guidance; and the quantity and range of Postmasters being issued.

In relation to the next Staff Survey, SMT approved the proposal for it to take place between 21 September and 2 October 2026, in alignment with Senedd Cymru and the Scottish Parliament.

SMT thanked Dan and ICG for the work undertaken over the last 6 months.

Dan Hull left the meeting at 1.01 pm.

23. SMT/Commission Papers Cleared via Correspondence/Meeting

Renewal of Licences for SUN Systems and INFOR Q&A.

Lesley highlighted that, as per the business cases for the two previous renewals, approval was not sought on a timely basis and that this needed to be addressed going forward.

24. Items Cleared via Correspondence

SMT Register of Interests – updated March 2026

25. 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; the work of the Information Standards Office; recruitment within the Office of the Examiner of Statutory Rules; the commencement of the Research and Information Service (RaISe) Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series (KESS) on 22 April 2026; and current procurement projects.

Lesley sought clarification on whether all contract documentation for all projects was now being recorded on the new DELTA system, installed by the Procurement Office, to ensure that a central repository of all contracts was maintained. Tara advised that she thought that Heads of Business (HoBs) should know to do this but could not confirm whether it was in fact happening.

Lesley therefore requested that the Head of Procurement, write to HoBs reminding them that a copy of all contract documentation for all projects, whether above or below the 50k threshold for delegated procurements, should be input on to the DELTA system.

Corporate Services

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

In particular, Steven updated SMT on the cleaning of Lord Craigavon's Tomb and the annual corporate insurance renewal (including claims).

Steven also referred SMT to the Performance and Improvement Operational Dashboard, which had been developed to support a more structured and transparent approach to identifying and assessing proposed efficiency and improvement activity across Finance and HR.

Parliamentary Services

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

26. AOB

Steven referred to the SMT/Assembly Commission paper submission template and suggested that an additional entry be added in relation to budget implications. Lesley noted that it was her intention to review the template and she agreed to incorporate this suggestion as part of her review.

Action: Lesley to review the SMT/Assembly Commission paper submission template.

27. Date of Next Meeting

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

28. Proposals for Agenda Items for Next Meeting

- Strategic Review of the Finance Office
- The Northern Ireland Assembly Members' Pension Scheme (2016) Annual Report and Accounts
- Annual Plan 2025-2026 End of Year Status Report
- Requirements and Options for a Visitor and Engagement Centre
- Blue Flax Refurbishment Post-Project Evaluation
- Business Case for the Provision of Building Maintenance Work for 2026-2027
- Finance and HR System Replacement (Systems Review) FUSION Project
- Biannual Review of Directorate Risk Registers
- Northern Ireland Assembly Commission Complaints Policy and Procedures Report for 2025-2026
- Delivery Against Parliamentary Services Directorate Corporate Plan Milestones 2025-26
- Resourcing of the Visitor Experience Team
- Report of the Task and Finish Group on Members' Experience of Abuse
- Review of the Media Handbook
- Strategic Communications Update
- Further Consideration of a Proposal to Display a Portrait of His Majesty The King in Parliament Buildings

The meeting ended at 1.47 pm.