

SENIOR MANAGEMENT TEAM (SMT)

**THURSDAY, 26 SEPTEMBER 2024 at 9.30 AM
ROOM 106, PARLIAMENT BUILDINGS**

APPROVED

Present:

**Lesley Hogg, Clerk/Chief Executive
Tara Caul, Director of Legal, Governance and Research Services
Gareth McGrath, Director of Parliamentary Services
Sinéad McDonnell, Head of HR – (deputising for Steven Baxter, Director of Corporate Services)**

In Attendance:

**Janet Hughes, Clerical Supervisor
Billy Mahoney, Interim Deputy Head of Finance (Item 7)
Jonathan McMillen, Head of Legal Services (Item 12)
Melissa Sharples, Head of Procurement (Item 13)
Angela Kelly, Examiner of Statutory Rules (Item 14)
Donna-Marie Clark, Data Protection and Governance Officer (Items 15, 16, and 17)
Paul Gill, Clerk Assistant (Item 18)
Stephanie Mallon, Clerk Assistant (Item 18)
Frank Geddis, Clerk Assistant (Items 18 and 19)
Liz Marsh, Assembly Clerk (Item 19)
Michael Cairns, Acting Head of Communications (Items 20 and 21)
Dan Hull, Chair of the Internal Communications Group (Item 23)**

The meeting commenced at 9.32 am.

1. Apologies

Apologies were received from Steven Baxter, Sinéad McDonnell deputised.

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 30 August 2024 had been published.

4. SMT Action Points

The outstanding action points were reviewed and progress was noted.

Robin Ramsey joined the meeting at 9.35 am for agenda items 5 and 6.

5. Political Update

Lesley Hogg noted that the Northern Ireland Executive had agreed and published the draft Programme for Government 2024-2027, which was currently out for public consultation.

Gareth McGrath noted that the Executive had indicated that 18 bills were due to be introduced before Christmas recess.

6. Draft Assembly Commission Agenda

Robin Ramsey advised that Assembly Commission meetings had been scheduled for 1 and 16 October 2024.

Proposed items for the meeting scheduled for 1 October 2024 included:

- Determination on Members Allowances and Expenses
- Application of the Terrorism (Protection of Premises) Bill for the Assembly Commission
- Annual Plan 2024-2025

Proposed items for the meeting scheduled for 16 October 2024 included:

- Clerk/Chief Executive's Report
- Defects in the Roof of Parliament Buildings
- Budget 2025-2026
- The Assembly Members (Remuneration Board) Bill
- Pay Claim 2024
- Internal Audit of Corporate Governance Arrangements
- Request for the Assembly Commission to Display a Portrait of His Majesty The King
- Public Consultation to Inform the Draft Disability Action Plan and Draft Good Relations Action Plan (2025-2030)
- Assembly Members Pension Scheme Accounts

Robin advised that Members of the North/South Inter-Parliamentary Association would be attending a plenary on 27 September 2024.

Robin Ramsey left the meeting at 9.48 am.

Change to agenda running order.

LEGAL, GOVERNANCE AND RESEARCH SERVICES

Melissa Sharples joined the meeting at 9.48 am for agenda item 13.

13. Procurement Office Resourcing

Melissa Sharples presented a paper which sought approval of additional staffing resource at Clerical Supervisor level (0.4 Full-Time Equivalent (FTE)) and also a job re-evaluation of the Procurement Support Advisor post within the Procurement Office.

Melissa advised that the additional administrative and procurement specialist staff resources were required to meet the new responsibilities of the Procurement Act 2023 and a new Northern Ireland Public Procurement Policy, due to come into effect in February 2025.

Following consideration, SMT approved the job re-evaluation of the Procurement Support Advisor post, but stated that a decision on the additional staffing resource would not be taken at the meeting, as a number of requests had been received for additional resources from a number of business areas and, therefore, a wider exercise to consider all requests, in conjunction with the available budget, would be undertaken. SMT to provide Melissa with a decision on her request in due course.

Melissa Sharples left the meeting at 9.56 am.

CORPORATE SERVICES

Billy Mahoney joined the meeting at 9.56 am for agenda item 7.

7. Management Accounts

Lesley noted that due to the late circulation of the Management Accounts, SMT had not had the opportunity to review them in detail, and it was agreed that following presentation of the Accounts, Directors would contact Billy Mahoney directly with any further queries they had once they had reviewed them fully.

Billy proceeded to present the Management Accounts for August 2024.

Billy confirmed that, as agreed at the SMT meeting on 30 August, a NIL return had been submitted for the in-year budget exercise commissioned by the Department of Finance (DoF).

Billy referred to the formal DoF 2025-26 budget setting exercise that had been commissioned and advised that, due to the internal timetable for the Assembly Commission's budget process, it would not be possible to meet the submission deadline of 4 October 2024, and that DoF would be informed accordingly.

Billy noted that the Finance Office was currently progressing a three-year budget planning exercise, and that budget managers had recently completed an exercise to re-profile budget expenditure for the period September 2024 to March 2025.

Billy advised SMT of the outturn forecasts for Resource DEL, Capital DEL and the Windsor Framework Democratic Scrutiny Committee (WFDSC) costs, against the June monitoring position.

Billy informed SMT of some inaccuracies that had been identified in relation to the coding of WFDSC staff salary costs, and confirmed that these had been corrected accordingly. Lesley noted her concern at the discrepancies, and highlighted the importance of effective monitoring going forward.

In relation to Admin costs, Billy informed SMT of surrenders from a number of business areas and sought approval from SMT on bids to cover additional Broadcasting contract costs and security costs. SMT approved the bids.

On reviewing the Capital Plan, Billy advised SMT of surrenders from a number of business areas. SMT noted the surrenders and Lesley highlighted the importance of careful monitoring of the Capital Plan, stating that business areas should not assume that funding would automatically be available next year following slippage in projects this year.

Billy Mahoney left the meeting at 10.15 am.

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

The paper on this agenda item will be circulated to SMT for consideration by correspondence.

9. HR Management Information

Sinéad McDonnell presented the monthly HR Management Information as at 1 September 2024.

Sinéad advised that the Staff in Post (SIP) figure on 1 September 2024 (including agency and inward seconded staff) was 365.4 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.

Sinéad updated SMT on recruitment activity.

On reviewing the Recruitment Schedule, Sinéad sought the views of SMT on the inclusion and priority of a number of recruitment competitions.

Following discussion, SMT agreed that recruitment competitions for two Research Officers, the Commissioner for Standards, a Legal Adviser for the Examiner of Statutory Rules (0.5 FTE) and the Head of Research and Information Services (RaISe) should be added to the Recruitment Schedule.

In relation to the competitions scheduled for the quarter October to December 2024, Lesley noted that there were five that did not have any anticipated advertisement dates. She stated that slots could not be held for business areas that did not have the necessary paperwork prepared and that other competitions should be ready to be slotted in should gaps appear in the Schedule.

It was agreed that Sinéad would review these competitions with the relevant Heads of Business (HoBs) and advise them of their responsibilities in ensuring that the competitions were progressed within their business areas in accordance with the allocated recruitment slot.

Action: Sinéad to seek updates from HoBs in relation to the timing of anticipated advertisement dates for five competitions recorded in the October to December 2024 section of the Recruitment Schedule and advise them of their responsibilities in ensuring that the competitions were progressed within their business areas in accordance with the allocated recruitment slot.

Sickness absence information was provided and it was noted that for the period September 2023 to August 2024, the average sickness absence per FTE member of staff was 11.5 days, which represented a reduction of 4.1 days when compared to 15.6 days for the period September 2022 to August 2023.

Maria Bannon joined the meeting at 10.36 am for agenda item 10.

10. Public Consultation of the Draft Disability Action Plan and Draft Good Relations Action Plan (2025-2030)

Maria Bannon presented and sought approval of draft Disability and Good Relations Action Plans for 2025-2030 for public consultation, which had been further developed in line with responses received from a pre-consultation exercise conducted with Trade Union Side and specific external groups.

Maria briefed SMT on the pre-consultation responses that had been received and noted that, subject to SMT approval and consideration by the Assembly Commission of the draft Plans, the next stage would be to go out to public consultation.

Following consideration, SMT approved the draft plans for consideration by the Assembly Commission at its meeting on 16 October 2024, subject to some minor amendments.

Maria Bannon left the meeting at 10.49 am.

Terri Quigley joined the meeting at 10.49 am for agenda item 11.

11. Specialist Cleaning – Building Façade

Terri Quigley presented a business case, which sought approval for Building Services to procure a specialist company to clean and repoint the external façade of Parliament Buildings.

Following discussion, SMT approved the business case, subject to consultation with the Assembly Commission at its meeting on 16 October 2024.

Terri Quigley left the meeting at 11.04 am.

Meeting suspended at 11.04 am and resumed at 11.14 am.

LEGAL, GOVERNANCE AND RESEARCH SERVICES CONTINUED

Jonathan McMillen joined the meeting at 11.14 am for agenda item 12.

12. Implications for the Northern Ireland Assembly of the High Court Judgment in the Case of *In re Mediahuis and Others (Justice (Sexual Offences and Trafficking Victims) Act (NI) 2022)*

Jonathan McMillen presented a paper which sought approval to increase the staff complement within the Legal, Governance and Research Directorate, by one Legal Adviser, to support the provision of legal advice on Convention rights issues to committees.

SMT noted the reasons for the additional staff resource, but stated that a decision on this would not be taken at the meeting as a number of requests had been received for additional resources from a number of business areas and, therefore, a wider exercise to consider all requests, in conjunction with the available budget, would be undertaken. SMT to provide Jonathan with a decision on his request in due course.

SMT thanked Jonathan for the excellent paper and the elegant solution proposed and advised that he would be provided with a decision on his request in due course.

Jonathan McMillen left the meeting at 11.30 am.

Angela Kelly joined the meeting at 11.31 am for agenda item 14.

14. Resourcing of the Office of the Examiner of Statutory Rules

Angela Kelly presented a paper which sought approval to increase the staff complement within the Office of the Examiner of Statutory Rules (ESR), by

one Clerical Officer post, in order to enable her to effectively discharge her functions.

Angela outlined the extent and volume of work undertaken by the Office of the ESR and the challenges faced due to limited administrative support. SMT acknowledged and was appreciative of the work done by the Office of the ESR, but stated that a decision on the additional staff resource would not be taken at the meeting as a number of requests had been received for additional resources from a number of business areas and, therefore, a wider exercise to consider all requests, in conjunction with the available budget, would be undertaken. SMT to provide Angela with a decision on her request in due course.

Angela Kelly left the meeting at 11.39 am.

Donna-Marie Clark joined the meeting at 11.39 am for agenda items 15, 16 and 17.

15. Quarterly Review of the Corporate Risk Register

Donna-Marie Clark advised that she had met with the Clerk/Chief Executive and Directors, on 13 September 2024, to discuss the Corporate Risk Register (CRR) in detail.

SMT noted and approved the CRR for September 2024, subject to some further minor amendments.

Donna-Marie advised that the CRR would be presented to the Assembly Commission Audit and Risk Committee at its meeting in October 2024.

16. Biennial Review of Fraud and Bribery Self-Assessment Checklists, Bribery Risk Assessment and Action Plan

Donna-Marie presented the Fraud and Bribery Self-Assessment Checklists, Bribery Risk Assessment and Action Plan, which she noted had last been reviewed and approved by SMG at its meeting on 26 November 2021.

SMT noted that the Fraud Prevention and Anti-Bribery Policy and Response Plan was currently being prepared and would be circulated to SMT for approval via correspondence.

Following consideration, SMT approved the updated Fraud and Bribery Self-Assessment Checklists, Bribery Risk Assessment and Action Plan, noting that the Action Plan would require further updating following approval of the Fraud Prevention and Anti-Bribery Policy.

17. Sensitivity Review 2003 Release

Donna-Marie presented a paper, which sought approval to release eight 2003 files to the Public Records Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI).

Following discussion, SMT approved the eight 2003 files for transfer to PRONI, and noted that the Assembly Commission would be notified in advance of the release.

Donna-Marie Clark left the meeting at 11.58 am.

PARLAMENTARY SERVICES

Paul Gill and Stephanie Mallon joined the meeting at 12.08 pm for agenda item 18.

Frank Geddis joined the meeting at 12.08 pm for agenda items 18 and 19.

18. Business Case for Strengthening Scrutiny Capacity and Effectiveness within Clerking

Paul Gill, Frank Geddis and Stephanie Mallon presented a business case, which sought approval of additional staff resources within Clerking of, two Clerks, nine Senior Assistant Clerks and one Clerical Officer (complement plus) from 2025-26 onwards.

Paul, Frank and Stephanie outlined in detail the reasons for the additional resources, which they advised were mainly required to respond to the deficits in Assembly scrutiny established by the Renewable Heat Incentive Inquiry and in the Mediahuis judgment, and to enable the associated objective in the Corporate Strategy to be achieved.

SMT noted the reasons for the additional staff resources and of the need to strengthen scrutiny capacity moving forward, but stated that a decision would not be taken at the meeting as a number of requests had been received for additional resources from a number of business areas and, therefore, a wider exercise to consider all requests, in conjunction with the available budget, would be undertaken.

SMT thanked Paul, Frank and Stephanie for the excellent paper and advised that they would be provided with a decision on their request in due course.

Paul Gill and Stephanie Mallon left the meeting at 12.54 pm.

Liz Marsh joined the meeting at 12.54 pm for agenda item 19.

19. Legislative Drafting Solution Project: Update and Revised Financial Forecast

Frank and Liz Marsh provided SMT with a progress update on the development of new legislative drafting software, for use by the Assembly and the Office of the Legislative Counsel.

SMT noted and approved revised estimated costings, as incorporated into an updated version of the Legislative Drafting Solution Project Business Case.

SMT acknowledged the significant progress that had been made on the project and recorded its thanks to all those involved for their efforts.

Frank Geddis and Liz Marsh left the meeting at 1.04 pm.

The meeting suspended at 1.04 pm and resumed at 1.36 pm.

Change to agenda running order.

OTHER ITEMS

Dan Hull joined the meeting at 1.36 pm for agenda item 23.

23. Update on the Work of the Internal Communications Group (ICG) April 2024 to September 2024

Dan Hull provided SMT with an update on the activities of ICG for the period April 2024 to September 2024, which he stated primarily focused on the preparation of the Staff Survey.

Dan noted that the Staff Survey had launched on 23 September 2024 with a closure date of 7 October 2024 and informed SMT of the number of responses received to date.

Dan also advised of some feedback from the recent Directorate Briefings, in relation to the presentations provided, and fact that some may be of interest to all staff and not just that specific directorate. By way of example he highlighted the presentation on the new Visitor Experience Team, and said that ICG had asked if it would be possible to share this with all staff.

SMT agreed that there did need to be more consistency across Directorate Briefings for matters of wider interest and that this would be taken into account before the next set of Briefings.

Dan Hull left the meeting at 1.45 pm.

PARLIAMENTARY SERVICES CONTINUED

Michael Cairns joined the meeting at 1.45 pm for agenda items 20 and 21.

20. Business Case for the Establishment of a Digital Production Unit to Support Delivery of Corporate Strategy 2023-28 Priorities and Objectives

Michael Cairns presented a business case which sought approval of additional staff resources within the Communications Office of, three Digital Content Editors, to support delivery of Corporate Strategy Priorities and Objectives, from 2025-26 onwards.

Michael outlined the current demands on the staff within the Communications Office, particularly since the resumption of normal Assembly business, and advised SMT of the work that would be undertaken by the proposed new Digital Production Unit.

SMT noted the reasons for the additional staff resources, but stated that a decision would not be taken at the meeting as a number of requests had been received for additional resources from a number of business areas and, therefore, a wider exercise to consider all requests, in conjunction with the available budget, would be undertaken. SMT to provide Michael with a decision on his request in due course.

21. Final Business Case (FBC) for the Refurbishment of Audio and Video Systems in Assembly Committee Rooms

Michael presented the final business case for the refurbishment of audio and video systems in Assembly Committee Rooms, which sought approval of additional capital budget above what was originally approved by the Assembly Commission in the Outline Business Case in June 2022.

Michael outlined the reasons for the additional budget requirement, and following discussion, SMT provided some comments, agreed that the scope of the project should be updated to include some further proposed works and that the revised business case should be recirculated to SMT for approval.

Action: Michael to update the Business Case and recirculate to SMT for approval via correspondence.

It was noted that the Assembly Commission would be informed of the increased budget requirement.

SMT recorded its thanks to all those involved with the smooth running of this major project.

22. Strategic Communications Update

Deferred to October SMT meeting.

Michael Cairns left the meeting at 2.16 pm.

OTHER ITEMS

24. Directors' Updates

Corporate Services

Facilities Management – Building Services

Sinéad advised that work was progressing on the installation of a barrier at the Lower East carpark.

Finance Office

Sinéad advised that a supplier had been appointed to undertake an independent review of the Finance Office structure and staffing.

HR Office

Sinéad advised that a Satisfactory Assurance rating had been achieved following a recent audit of HR arrangements.

Facilities Management – Support Services

SMT discussed the production of a Communications Plan to update all building users on the refurbishment of the Blue Flax.

Internal Audit

Tara Caul requested that, going forward, an update on the Internal Audit Schedule be provided in the Corporate Services Director's Update.

Legal, Governance and Research Services

Information Standards – Records Management

SMT noted the work undertaken by all business areas within the Legal, Governance and Research Directorate. Tara advised that an audit of the Sensitivity Review and Retention and Disposal arrangements was due to commence.

Parliamentary Services

SMT noted the work undertaken by all business areas within the Parliamentary Services Directorate, since last reported at the SMT meeting on 4 July 2024.

25. AOB

There was no other business.

26. Date of Next Meeting

It was noted that the next meeting would take place on 25 October 2024.

27. Proposals for Agenda Items for Next Meeting

- Biannual Review of Learning and Development Activities and Spend
- Draft Assembly Commission Paper on the Defects in the Roof of Parliament Buildings
- Draft Assembly Commission Paper on the Pay Claim 2024
- Draft Assembly Commission Paper on the Budget 2025-2026

- Draft Assembly Commission Paper on the Request for the Assembly Commission to Display a Portrait of His Majesty The King
- Draft Assembly Commission Paper on the Internal Audit of Corporate Governance Arrangements
- Renewal of the Concordat between Land and Property Services and the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission in relation to a Geographical Information Specialist
- Examiner of Statutory Rules Resources
- Biannual Review of Directorate Risk Registers
- Cyber Security Self-Assessment
- Review of Simultaneous Interpretation for Plenary and Committee Business
- Engagement Strategy
- Internal Communications Quarterly Update
- Strategic Communications Update

28. Papers Cleared via Correspondence

- Annual Plan 2024-2025
- Application of the Terrorism (Protection of Premises) Bill for the Assembly Commission
- Determination on Members Allowances and Expenses

The meeting ended at 2.24 pm.