

## **The Highland Council Staff Partnership Forum – Elected Members/Staff Side Group**

Minutes of Meeting of The Highland Council Staff Partnership Forum held in the Council Chamber, Council Headquarters, Glenurquhart Road, Inverness on Friday 6 February, 2015 at 10.30 am.

### **Present:**

#### **Employer's Representatives:**

Dr D Alston	Mr G Mackenzie
Mr G Farlow (substitute)	Ms M Smith

#### **Staff Side Representatives:**

Mr J Gibson (UNISON)	Mr A Wemyss (UNITE)
Mr M Haymer (GMB)	Ms M Macrae (RCN)
Mr M Murphy (UCATT)	

### **In attendance:**

Mr S Barron, Chief Executive  
Ms M Morris, Depute Chief Executive/Director of Corporate Development Service  
Mr W Gilfillan, Director of Community Services  
Mr J Batchelor, Head of People and Performance, Corporate Development Service  
Mr D Robertson, Head of Corporate Finance, Finance Service  
Mrs C McDiarmid, Head of Policy and Reform, Chief Executive's Office  
Mr A MacInnes, Administrative Assistant, Corporate Development Service

### **Dr D Alston in the Chair**

#### **1. Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were intimated on behalf of Mr A Christie, Mr D Hendry (OCB) and Mr T Prag (OCB) of the Employer's Side and Ms L MacKay, UNISON and Mr R Selkirk, GMB of the Staff Side.

#### **2. Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest.

#### **3. The Highland Council Staff Partnership Forum - Constitution**

There had been circulated for information The Highland Council Staff Partnership Forum Constitution and the Engagement and Partnership Framework, the terms of which were **NOTED**.

The Chair explained that this was a new Forum in order to facilitate a new and better way of working, with the aim of giving staff side representatives access to the senior leadership in the Council, with the Elected Members Group comprising the Leader, Depute Leader, Chairs of the Strategic Committees and the Leader of the

Opposition. The meetings would be chaired by the Leader of the Council or nominated elected member.

It was also intended that the Forum would, rather than waiting until problems arise, discuss significant issues before they became problems and try and work together to resolve these.

This was a new way of working and there would be a learning process for all involved.

#### 4. Workforce Planning

There had been circulated Report No. PF/1/15 by the Head of People and Performance which outlined the proposed corporate actions relating to workforce planning particularly in view of the budget challenges facing the Council and the required reduction in workforce over the next four years.

The Head of People and Performance advised of progress to date on the proposed corporate actions following discussions with trade unions. Staff Side representatives made the following comments on the corporate actions as shown below:-

Agency Staff – agreed to look at a number of actions to reduce spend on agency staff and were aware of the need for the Council to reduce spend in this respect. However, they did have concerns about only doing this as a cost cutting measure. There was a need to look at why Services were using agency staff, and before agency staff were used, had all other areas been looked at first i.e. could existing staff be used.

The view was expressed that it may have been the case that the use of agency staff had always been done and it was an easy solution. However, the use of existing staff to cover work should be considered by the Council going forward and this should be handled in a sensitive manner and not merely as a cost cutting measure.

Review of Terms and Conditions – agreed to have discussions on the review of terms and conditions. However it would be difficult to get the support of trade union members if the review was seen as just a cost cutting measure. It was felt the focus should be on having the right staff with the right skills and managing the budget accordingly.

Review of Early Retirement/Voluntary Severance Scheme – in principle the Staff Side were in agreement with the review, subject to consideration of the detail.

Application of Early Retirement/Voluntary Severance Scheme – agreed to the targeted use of the Early Retirement/Voluntary Severance Scheme, but only after the scheme had been reviewed and agreed.

Review of Flexible Retirement Policy – agreed the need for a review of the Flexible Retirement Policy and they recognised the difficulties with the current policy in managing the workforce in future.

Review of Top Management Structure – noted that the Chief Executive was to give

consideration to the scope of this work.

Review the Schools Workforce Formula – the staff side were in favour of reviewing the Schools Workforce Formula to see if it was still fit for purpose.

Attendance Management – the staff side were not in support of any form of incentive scheme to reward good attendance. In particular they were not in favour of any suggestion of additional paid or unpaid leave as an incentive for good attendance, mainly due to equality issues. Also the suggestion of a certificate for 100% attendance was not supported as there were employees who would not be able to attain this, for example if they had a disability.

The Staff Side felt that there was a lot more that the Council could do to prevent sickness absence. They would be in favour of an employee who was on long term sickness absence being encouraged to do voluntary work and reference was made to the Council's Staff Volunteering Policy. This would have rehabilitation benefits for the employee and would help the Highland Council promote volunteering in the community.

The Staff Partnership Forum agreed to continue having discussions on this matter.

Skills Profile – the staff side were in favour of discussion in making sure that there were the right staff with the right skills in the organisation, but this should not only be about reducing the workforce.

There was concern over what the phrase 'multi skilling' actually meant and greater clarity on this was needed, as the Council should not be seeking to take away employees who were specialists and replacing them with multi skilled staff, as by way of example when dealing with jobs such as an electrician or plumber, it was important that a properly qualified person did the job. The point was also made that with a reducing workforce, it would be difficult for employees to carry out a wider range of duties.

Employee Engagement – the staff side supported trade unions and staff being fully involved in Workforce Plans and Actions.

Workforce Data – the constraints of workforce data were recognised, but there was a need to look at Service workforce plans.

Reduction in Workforce – the staff side supported the use of a range of measures to avoid compulsory redundancies wherever possible

The Staff Partnership Forum **NOTED** the proposed Corporate actions as per Section 2 of the report to support workforce planning and the comments by the Staff Side Group detailed above.

## 5. Early Retirement/Voluntary Severance Scheme

There was circulated Report No. PF/2/15 by the Head of People and Performance which proposed a revised Early Retirement/Voluntary Severance Scheme in the light of imminent changes in pension regulations and the need to ensure that the scheme was fit for purpose, attractive and affordable in view of the significant

reductions in posts (314.2 FTE) over the next 4 years.

It was recommended that The Staff Partnership Forum supports Option B on the basis of:-

- in voluntary redundancy cases Option 1 is reduced from a maximum of 5 years to 2 years and Option 2 is reduced from a maximum of 66 weeks to 60 weeks as per the table attached as an appendix to the report;
- in efficiency cases Early Retirement Sub-Committee should have the discretion to award up to 2 years CAY's (Option 1) and up to 30 weeks (Option 2);
- this is an interim measure as Option 1 will automatically be removed from the scheme when the regulations change;
- when Option 1 is removed staff retiring on redundancy or efficiency grounds will be able to access their pensions with the Council bearing the cost of early release, subject to the staff satisfying the required qualifying age and service requirements as per the pension regulations.

The Staff Partnership Forum was also asked to consider and comment on the other considerations as per section 4 of the report, in particular whether there should be a tiered approach to voluntary and compulsory redundancies.

In discussion, the Staff Side recognised the need to review the Early Retirement/Voluntary Severance Scheme and may be willing to support the recommended Option B, but could not do so at present as they requested details of costs to show that the current scheme was unaffordable and had to change. Also information had been provided to them which showed examples of current scheme benefits compared to those proposed, but that the examples shown were based on salaries of £30k upwards. The majority of staff that trade unions represented earned less than this amount and it was requested that examples which showed the benefits of the current scheme to that proposed be provided for salaries of £15k, £20k and £25k.

The Staff Partnership Forum **AGREED** that the Head of People and Performance would provide the Staff Side with the financial information requested at the meeting and discuss it with them at a meeting to be held on 9 February, 2015.

## 6. Staff Volunteering Policy

There was circulated Report No. PF/3/15 by the Head of Policy and Reform which identified the need to review the staff volunteering policy and proposed several changes for discussion with Trade Unions through the Partnership Forum.

The report proposed changes to the current policy on staff volunteering because the current arrangements are out-dated and with no reporting on it available. Staff seem interested in a range of employer supports for volunteering that would acknowledge their high levels of volunteering and encourage more of it.

Discussion points were identified for:- the principles for employer support – paragraph 4.2 of the report; and specific measures including up to 2 days paid leave each year – paragraphs 4.3 to 4.6 of the report.

The Staff Partnership Forum were invited to discuss how employer support for volunteering can be designed and evaluated with key proposals included in the report.

The Head of Policy and Reform advised that the staff side's suggestion of linking the volunteering policy to attendance management as it may help staff who were off on sickness absence back to work was a very good suggestion and would be considered.

The staff side advised that they were in support of the idea of employees undertaking voluntary work in communities. However, they were concerned as to the cost implications of this. Currently it was proposed that all employees could get up to two days paid leave. If all employees did this, it would be a significant cost to the Council at a time when the Council was looking at budget cuts and reductions in workforce. Therefore while they agreed in principle to staff volunteering to undertake work in the community they found it difficult to support paid community service given the financial challenges facing the Council at the present time. If employees wished to take unpaid time off to undertake community service, that would be their choice, but managers would have to ensure that there was no diminution of service as a result.

It was advised that the aim of the proposal was to increase volunteering and to link this to community empowerment, community capacity building. There were a number of ways of doing this and the trade unions views on this were invited.

The view was expressed that the Council and trade unions should continue to discuss the benefits and disadvantages of the policy with a view to amending where appropriate.

The Staff Partnership Forum **AGREED** that discussions would continue with trade unions on the Staff Volunteering Policy.

## 7. Employee Survey 2015 – Survey Questionnaire

There was circulated Report No. PF/4/15 by the Head of People and Performance which outlined initial proposals for a revised Employee Survey questionnaire and ways to increase participation. The Partnership Forum was asked to consider the draft questionnaire and how staff can be supported to complete the survey, particularly those staff who do not have access to the Highland Council network.

The Staff Partnership Forum was asked to:- consider and comment on the proposals for the survey questionnaire; and identify ways of increasing staff participation particularly the support required for staff completing paper surveys.

The Staff Side advised that they were satisfied with the proposals for the staff survey and they wanted to encourage all employees of the Council to respond and were happy to participate in any way they could to achieve this.

In terms of getting the message across to staff about participating in the survey, it was felt that more discussion was needed at operational level on how best to do this.

The Staff Partnership Forum **NOTED** the:-

- i proposals for the survey questionnaire; and
- ii measure put in place to increase staff participation particularly the support required for staff completing paper surveys.

## 8. Local Government Pension Scheme (Governance) (Scotland) Regulations 2014

There was circulated Report No. PF/5/15 by the Director of Finance which provided detail on new legislation around the governance of the Local Government Pension Scheme (LGPS) which would take effect on the 1<sup>st</sup> April, 2015 and recommended a change in committee structure to meet the new obligations.

The main change for the Council was that it would require to establish a Pensions Board whose role would be to scrutinise the work of the Pensions Committee and currently it was proposed that there be 4 trade union representatives on the Board, as this was the minimum allowed in the legislation. However this number could be increased if this was felt necessary.

In terms of the Pension Board membership it was queried if there was going to be sufficient Employers' representatives on the Board. It was advised that there had been difficulty in getting a representative from the Employers onto the Pension Committee. If the trade unions wanted further members from the trade unions on the Pension Board, then additional members from the Employers would also have to be appointed as it had to be an equal number of representatives from Employers and trade unions.

The Staff Side advised that they would expect to see at least one representative from the trade unions from Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, leaving three trade union representatives to cover the Highland Council and other organisations in the pension fund. The staff side undertook to consider how many representatives they would need on the Pension Board and would report back to the Head of Corporate Finance.

The Staff Partnership Forum **NOTED** the report and that the staff side would report back to the Head of Corporate Finance on how many representatives they would wish to have on the Pension Board.

## 9. AOCB

It was queried whether it would be of benefit to have Teaching Staff trade union representatives involved in discussion on some of the items at meetings of the Staff Partnership Forum.

The staff side advised that it would be of benefit, but were of the view that they should not be involved in discussions on non teaching matters. Also issues around terms and conditions of Teachers may have an effect on support staff, and therefore non Teaching Staff trade unions would like to be involved in those discussions. In this respect, it was advised that the Local Negotiating Committee for Teaching Staff (LNCT) was a statutory body and it was understood that it was not within the Council's power to alter the membership of this body.

### Item 25iii

The staff side responded saying that they would be content with a Teaching Staff trade union representative being involved in Forum meetings as an observer, and a non Teaching Staff trade union representative being involved in LNCT meetings as an observer.

The Staff Partnership Forum **AGREED** to explore the latter suggestion.

The meeting concluded at 11.30a.m.

*Date of Next Meeting – Friday, 15 May, 2015 at 10.30 a.m.*