

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 14 August, 2015 at 10.35 am.

Present:

Employer's Representatives:

Mrs M Davidson
Mr B Fernie
Mr A Henderson
Mr D Millar

Mr A Rhind
Mrs A Sinclair (by telephone conference)
Mrs M Smith

Staff Side Representatives:

Ms L MacKay (UNISON)
Mr J Gibson (UNISON)
Mr M Haymer (GMB)
Mr R Selkirk (GMB)

Mr M Murphy (UCATT)
Mr A Wemyss (UNITE)
Ms M Macrae (RCN)

In attendance:

Mr S Barron, Chief Executive
Ms M Morris, Depute Chief Executive/Director of Corporate Development Service
Mr B Alexander, Director of Care and Learning Service
Mr D Yule, Director of Finance (item 9 only)
Mr J Batchelor, Head of People and Performance, Corporate Development Service
Mr A MacInnes, Administrative Assistant, Corporate Development Service

Mr A Rhind in the Chair

1. Apologies for Absence

There were no apologies for absence.

2. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

In accordance with Standing Order 18, with the consent of the meeting, item 9 on the agenda was taken at this point.

9. Budget Report

The Director of Finance provided a verbal update on the current budget position for the Council.

It was advised that a report submitted to the full Council meeting in June, 2015 showed a significant increase in the budget gap over the next three years. While the

figures presented to that meeting were based on a worst case scenario, this could not be guaranteed. The immediate challenge was to address the budget gap in the 2016/17 financial year which was estimated to be in the region of £21m to £22m. This was based on an estimated grant cut to the Council of 1.6% which equated to £7.3m. This figure was based on an independent study on Government budget decisions and assumptions.

In terms of the timeline for Councils to be informed of the local government grant settlement, it had been advised that the Chancellor's Autumn budget statement would not now happen until the end of November, 2015. While it was hoped that Councils would be informed of the grant settlement by the end of 2015, there was a strong possibility that Councils would not be informed until January, 2016. This would present an even greater challenge to the Council as there was a legal requirement to set the Council tax rates by 11 March.

The Council was undertaking extensive work on the budget at present and Services were looking at options for savings of 6% on their budgets. It was acknowledged that the uncertainty over the budget would create a lot of anxiety for Council staff and that this would be a difficult time for them.

The Council was open to ideas from trade unions in terms of meeting the significant budgetary challenges and would welcome the early input from unions in the budget process. In terms of Council Tax, the feeling was that the Scottish Government was mindful to continue with the freeze on Council Tax increases and it was noted that the report from the Commission on Local Tax Reform was due at the end of October.

The Staff Side advised that with this level of budget cuts there would be an impact on service delivery. It was up to Members to manage this reduction in Service and not front line staff. The public had to be told that the service would be reduced, so that there was not an expectation that there would be the same level of service, as this would not be able to be delivered and it was unfair to put such pressures on staff.

The comment was also made that all staff in the Council were front line staff, as the staff who delivered the service to the public could not do this without the staff behind them who supported them in delivering that service.

The view was expressed that getting the message across to the public that things would change required increased public relations communication. Working together with the media to get this message across was suggested.

The Staff Partnership Forum **NOTED** the current budget position.

3. Engagement and Partnership Framework

There was circulated, for information, Report No. SPF/10/15 The Highland Council Engagement and Partnership Framework, the terms of which were **NOTED**.

4. The Highland Council Staff Partnership Forum – Constitution

There was circulated, for information, Report No. SPF/11/15 The Highland Council Staff Partnership Forum Constitution, the terms of which were **NOTED**.

5. Minutes of Last Meeting

There had been circulated the Minutes of the last meeting of the Forum held on 15 May, 2015, the terms of which were **APPROVED**.

6. Matters Arising from Minutes

Arising from the minutes the following matter was raised:-

Workforce Planning – it was **NOTED** that workforce planning training for trade union representatives would take place on 23 September, 2015.

7. HR Partnership Group Constitution

There was circulated Report No. SPF/12/15 by the Head of People and Performance which provided a remit and constitution for the HR Partnership Group for approval by the Staff Partnership Forum.

It was advised that the HR Partnership Group would operate as a sub group of the Partnership Working Forum and would primarily support the Highland Council Engagement and Partnership Framework. The Group would look at a variety of issues including the development of Human Resources policies and procedures, and the development of learning and development activities. A review of the Group and its functions would be undertaken after 1 year of the first meeting of the group.

The Staff Side were supportive of the remit and constitution of the HR Partnership Group.

The Staff Partnership Forum **APPROVED** the remit and constitution of the HR Partnership Group.

8. Flexible Working Policy Update

There was circulated Report No. SPF/13/15 by the Head of People and Performance which outlined the proposed changes to the Flexible Working Policy, supporting guidance documents and to the operation of the Flexi Time Scheme.

The work involved in updating the Flexible Working Policy by officers and trade union representatives was commended.

The Staff Partnership Forum:-

- i **APPROVED** the updated and reformatted Flexible Working policy and supporting guidance as set out in Appendix 1 to the report; and
- ii **NOTED** that any further changes in the application of the Flexible Working Policy and supporting guidance documents would be reviewed through the HR Sub Group.

10. New Programme from the Administration

There was circulated Report No. SPF/14/15 which detailed a draft new Programme from the Administration. This was discussed at the Highland Council meeting on 13 August, 2015. At that meeting there were a number of proposed amendments to the Programme. These would be considered by the Administration with a final Programme being submitted to the September meeting of the Highland Council for approval. It was advised that once the Programme was agreed, this would be transferred into a corporate plan and performance monitoring reports would be produced to measure progress against the corporate plan.

The Staff Side were invited to provide their comments on the draft Programme and these were as follow:-

Paragraph 4 – Communities Delivering Social Care – clarification was sought on what this meant and what impact there would be on the workforce.

Paragraph 15 – Developing our Workforce – further detail on this was requested. It was difficult to sustain our communities by ensuring there was a strong workforce across Highland, when significant budget reductions were being considered.

In response, it was advised that these would be challenging and difficult times. The fact that Developing our Workforce was in the Programme showed how valued the workforce was and the importance of sustaining the workforce throughout the whole of the Highlands. The aim was to locate staff across the Highlands as far as possible, as it was important for rural areas to have a strong Council presence. The Staff Side's input at an early stage in the budget process showed a commitment to listening to the views of trade unions while addressing the significant challenges ahead.

Item 17 – Contracts and Procurement – clarification was sought on whether it would be the Administration's Policy when considering contracts, that there would be additional bonus points for contractors if they paid their workforce the Scottish Living Wage. This maybe something the Administration would like to include in contracts, particularly with local employers, to encourage them to pay a living wage to their staff.

In response, the Council would encourage all contractors to be paying the Scottish Living Wage. Consideration would be given to including this in Council contracts.

Item 23 – Community Works – In terms of legislation relating to Community Engagement and Empowerment, the Council needed to be mindful of the effect on the workforce. Small Community Groups were not in a position to have staff transferred to them under the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations (Tupe), as they could not match the terms and conditions of staff. There was a need to ensure that protection was in place for Council staff, if work was being transferred to a community group. In this instance Tupe conditions had to be met.

In response it was advised that all the budgets for community works were relatively small. However if they were combined, community groups could then decide their priorities for community works and where the resources should best be allocated.

Item 19 – Libraries – in terms of promoting an innovative and progressive Library Service, clarification was sought on whether the Council was considering closing libraries and introducing mobile library services.

The Staff Partnership Forum **NOTED**:-

- i the draft new Programme from the Administration, the final version of which would be submitted to the Highland Council meeting in September, 2015;
- ii that the points raised by the Staff Side at the meeting would be clarified/considered and a response would be provided; and
- iii that the Staff Side had been invited to submit any further comments they may have on the draft Programme.

11. A Job for Every Care Leaver

There was circulated Report No. SPF/15/15 by the Head of People and Performance which outlined the key issues for the development of an employment scheme for 'looked after' young people leading to a permanent offer of a job by a Community Planning Partnership partner.

The Chair advised that this was a good news story and trade unions had been very supportive of the initiative which was much appreciated.

It was queried how this scheme would fit with the Highland Council's Redeployment and Redundancy Policy. It was advised that this was one of the issues that would require to be addressed as the scheme was developed. Employees in a redundancy situation should not be disadvantaged in any way, but equally the Council wanted to try and support this initiative. Further, there was a requirement to have an agreed process with trade unions as to how the scheme was progressed.

The Staff Partnership Forum **NOTED** the report and supported the initiative to create a pathway into permanent employment for young people for whom the Highland Council is the Corporate Parent.

12. Employee Survey 2015

There was circulated Report No. SPF/16/15 by the Depute Chief Executive/Director of Corporate Development Service which provided a brief summary of the results of Highland Council's 7th Employee Survey and outlined the proposals for reporting the results and agreeing action plans.

It was advised that the results from the Employee Survey were very positive and there was continued improvement in a number of areas, such as satisfaction with job factors; views of line management/senior management, and information and communications. It was recognised that there were areas which were not as positive, and areas where there had been improvements, these were from a lower base. In particular there was a need to improve the change process within the organisation.

There was a need to continue to make improvements in some areas and this would be done in conjunction with staff and trade unions to secure future improvements. However, overall the employee survey outcomes were very positive, given the challenges that the organisation and employees faced.

The Staff Side noted the positive results and from an organisational point of view, it was good that things were improving. However, if you were not one of those who were satisfied with job factors, it might put you off completing surveys in the future, as the views you have expressed, it looks like it hasn't made any difference. In this respect, the reporting of the results should be done in a balanced way.

In response, it was advised that it was important that the results were reported and communicated in a balanced way. When the information was reported to staff, this would be done in a balanced way. It was recognised that there were still areas to be worked on. The Senior Leadership Team would be meeting to look at the outcomes of the survey and where the areas were that needed to be focused on.

In terms of the Corporate Action Plan, it would be useful for staff and the public, for the Action Plan to be tied in with the new Programme from the Administration, to show why things were being done.

It was stressed that staff who did not have access to computers, receive a paper copy instead.

The Staff Partnership Forum:-

- i **NOTED** the results of the 2015 Employee Survey;
- ii **NOTED** the plans for reporting the results; and
- iii **AGREED** to contribute to the creation of the corporate action plan.

The meeting concluded at 11.15 a.m.

Date of Next Meeting – Friday, 30 October, 2015 at 10.30 a.m.