

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

Minutes of Meeting of The Highland Council Staff Partnership Forum held in Council Headquarters, Glenurquhart Road, Inverness on Wednesday 1 June, 2016 at 11.00 am.

Present:

Employer's Representatives:

Mrs M Davidson	Mrs I Campbell
Mr B Fernie	Mr A Rhind
Mr A Henderson (by tele conference)	Mr M Reiss

Staff Side Representatives:

Mr J Gibson (UNISON)	Mr D Morrison (UCATT)
Mr R Selkirk (GMB)	Mr A Wemyss (UNITE)
Mr M Haymer (GMB)	Ms M Macrae (RCN)

In attendance:

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

Mrs M Davidson in the Chair

Preliminaries

The Chair welcomed Mr Steve Walsh, the newly appointed Head of People and Transformation, Corporate Development Service to his first meeting of the Staff Partnership Forum.

1. Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were intimated on behalf of Mr D Millar, Mrs A Sinclair and Mrs M Smith from the Employer's Side and Ms L MacKay (UNISON) and Mr M Murphy (UCATT) from the Staff Side.

2. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

3. Minutes of Last Meeting

There had been circulated the Minutes of the last meeting of the Forum held on 5 February, 2016, the terms of which were **APPROVED**.

4. Matters Arising from Minutes

Trade Union Bill – it was reported that the Government had conceded a number of changes to the Trade Union Bill and it was suggested that a briefing paper be prepared updating the Staff Partnership Forum on the Bill.

The Staff Partnership Forum **AGREED** that the Parliamentary Officer provide a briefing paper on the Trade Union Bill.

5. Redesign of The Highland Council

There had been circulated Reports Nos SPF/1/16 and SPF/2/16, previously considered at the Redesign Board on 10th May, 2016. The reports explained the phases of the Redesign Board's work and the methods for involving staff in the redesign process.

It was advised that there had been two meetings of the Redesign Board to date, which had included workshops. The importance of engagement in the redesign process by all concerned was stressed. Consideration had also been given to the desired outcomes of the process and what functions of the Council were statutory and non statutory. It was accepted that change was required and there was a need to prepare for the future to take account of further reductions to its budget and Scottish Government and UK Government policies. The Highlands profile had risen nationally with the City/Region deal, so the changes had to be about Highland and strengthening what the Council was doing.

The Staff Side were encouraged to engage in the Redesign process. In this respect, two trade union representatives had been invited to be members on the Redesign Board. In this respect, the Staff Side advised that the two trade union representatives on the Board would be Mr J Gibson (UNISON) and Mr M Haymer (GMB) and they would consult with other trade unions and their members on the redesign process. It was noted that the Teachers Side of the Highland Council Local Negotiating Committee for Teachers (LNCT) would be requesting a place on the Redesign Board. This would be raised at a meeting of the LNCT.

In relation to the Staff focus groups run in localities to feed into relevant phases of the Redesign Board's work, the Staff Side explained that information about those meetings had not been relayed out to all staff, particularly those who were not on the Council's e-mail system. Therefore, there required to be more opportunities for staff to attend focus group meetings. In response, Officers would ensure that information was disseminated to all staff in future and in particular the Head of Policy and Reform would discuss with the Joint Secretary, Teachers' Side the best approach to disseminating information in Schools.

It was queried how Teachers would be engaged, as Focus Group meetings were being held during the day. It was advised that some Head Teachers had been provided with management briefings and they would cascade this information to

Teachers in their Schools. Also at a meeting on 6th June, 2016, Head Teachers would be asked for their views on the best ways of engaging with Teachers in the process. The outcome of this would inform of the best ways of engagement.

In addition to the normal ways of engaging with staff, there would be new methods of involving staff such as a Staff Panel would be created to gather staff feedback by surveys. This would consist of around 5000 employees across all Services and Areas of the Council. It was intended to refresh the Panel, so that over the course of two or three it was likely that every member of staff would have the opportunity to be on the Panel. There would also be Staff focus groups run in localities to feed into relevant phases of the redesign process and also detailed discussions with Heads of Service. Other new methods of engagement would be for Elected Members to shadow some employees in their day to day duties; the creation of a staff Facebook page and the use of digital tools to gather ideas.

A suggestion was made that if there was a corporate e-mail address, then people could forward their suggestions/comments to this. Also, in terms of staff representation on Focus Groups it was confirmed that there would be a good mix of employees on these to account of gender, pay grades and Service. In terms of work already undertaken on the redesign process, the Staff Side were invited to meet with the Head of Policy and Reform to discuss this separately.

Thereafter, the Staff Partnership Forum:-

i **NOTED** that the trade union representatives on the Redesign Board would be Mr J Gibson (UNISON) and Mr M Haymer (GMB);

ii **NOTED** that Officers would ensure that information on the redesign process was disseminated to all staff in future, particularly those staff not on the Council's e-mail system, and also the Head of Policy and Reform would discuss with the Joint Secretary, Teachers' Side the best approach to disseminating information in Schools;

iii **AGREED** that a corporate e-mail address be set up so that people could send their ideas and comments on the redesign process; and

iv **NOTED** that the Head of Policy and Reform would meet with the Staff Side separately to discuss work already undertaken on the redesign process.

6. Partnership Working

The Staff Side advised that following the introduction of the new approach to partnership working there was to be a review of the new approach in about a year's time, and they sought discussion on how the partnership approach was working and if there was anything that required to be improved.

The Staff Side had found that a number of issues that they had wanted to discuss had been raised at Service level and had been resolved, therefore there had not been a requirement to take them to Staff Partnership Forum meetings, which could be seen as a positive outcome. Further, they found that the Officials that the Staff Side dealt with in Highland Council seemed to change a lot which made it difficult to maintain a consistency of understanding.

Part of the Partnership Agreement was for minutes of Service Trade Union Liaison Meetings to be submitted to the Staff Partnership Forum in order that Elected Members could see what had been discussed at these meetings. It was requested that these minutes be submitted to future meetings of the Forum. Also, the Staff Side would like Elected Members to engage with them on staffing issues at an early stage, before decisions were made. Initially the Staff Side did not know if they would be included on the membership of the Redesign Board, and the point was made that if it was to be a proper partnership, the Staff Side would not have required to request to be part of the Board.

In terms of the Staff Side request for more engagement prior to decisions being made, the Staff Side's involvement in the Redesign Board should go some way to addressing this issue. However, it was a political Council with a minority Administration and proposals could be subject to change at short notice. Consideration would be given on how best to communicate at an early stage with the Staff Side on human resources issues, prior to decisions being made at Committee. The Staff Side advised that they did discuss matters with the various political groups on the Council, and this communication was helpful.

Reference was made to last year's budget process which had been an extremely challenging and difficult process. The Council were anticipating further challenges with its budget in the next few years. It was suggested that the budget presentation by the Director of Finance to the first meeting of the Redesign Board be submitted to the Staff Side for information.

i **AGREED** that minutes of Service Trade Union Liaison meetings would be submitted to future meetings;

ii **AGREED** that the budget presentation by the Director of Finance to the first meeting of the Redesign Board be submitted to the Staff Side;

iii **AGREED** that consideration would be given on how best to communicate at an early stage with the Staff Side on human resources issues, prior to decisions being made at Committee; and

7. Renfrewshire Council – Supporting Attendance Policy and Guidance

There was circulated Report No. SPF/3/16 detailing the Renfrewshire Council Policy on Supporting Attendance at Work and Guidance. This had been referred to at a Council meeting as a good model to follow. However, the Staff Side noted that the Highland Council's performance in attendance management was much better than that of Renfrewshire Council and therefore did not feel that this was a good model to follow.

Budget discussions had considered how to reduce sickness absence costs. The Staff Side were of the view that the Council already had proper procedures in place for managing absence and that if these were implemented fully by Managers then the Council could save money. The focus should be on avoiding sickness absence and supporting staff.

Reference was made to a report on Attendance Management submitted to the Audit and Scrutiny Committee meeting on 30 September, 2015, and a copy would be

circulated to the Staff Side for information. As a result of this, the Council was reviewing the guidance to Managers on Attendance Management and the Staff Side were being consulted on this.

It was advised that as part of budget savings, the Council had agreed savings targets for sickness absence going back to December 2014 of between £500k to £600k. The bulk of these savings had gone through the budget in the last financial year, with a residual element of around £160k to go through in the current financial year. At the Council meeting in February, 2016, the Council agreed a further £500k of savings to be made in sickness absence. Options were being looked at for converting reductions in sickness absence to financial savings.

In terms of the impact of the Voluntary Redundancy Scheme, the Staff Sided advised that a number of their members had voiced concern about the extra workload they were having to deal with. Very little of the Council's work had stopped, despite the fact that there were far fewer staff now to do the same amount of work as before. This increased pressure on staff was beginning to have an impact on the health of some staff.

The Committee **NOTED**:

i the Renfrewshire Council Policy on Supporting Attendance at Work and Guidance; and

ii that a copy of the report on Attendance Management submitted to the Audit and Scrutiny Committee on 30 September, 2015 would be submitted to the Staff Side.

8. Items for Future Agendas

In terms of future agenda items it was suggested that items on the Redesign of The Highland Council and monitoring of Sickness Absence be submitted to future meetings.

It was queried if the Council had a mechanism for monitoring stress levels in the workforce and whether there was a process for minimising workloads or reducing unnecessary procedures if workloads were too high. It was advised that there were already sickness absence reports as part of Services' Quarterly Performance Review process. The monitoring of sickness absence within the Council would improve as Services would record sickness absence online. Directors for example would now be able to monitor whether their Managers had carried out return to work interviews with staff. The new monitoring system would give better information on sickness absence trends. However, Managers still required to follow the Sickness Absence Policy and Guidance and support staff. It was suggested that the monitoring of sickness absence be discussed at Service Trade Union Liaison meetings.

Thereafter, the Staff Partnership Forum **AGREED** that items on the Redesign of The Highland Council and monitoring of Sickness Absence should be standing items on future agendas.

The meeting concluded at 12.20 p.m.