

AGENDA ITEM 13ii.

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

Minutes of Meeting of The Highland Council Staff Partnership Forum held REMOTELY on Thursday 3 June, 2021 at 2.30 p.m.

Present:

Employer's Representatives:

Mr Raymond Bremner
Mr Alasdair Christie
Mrs Margaret Davidson
Mr John Finlayson

Mr Jimmy Gray
Ms Linda Munro
Mrs Trish Robertson
Mr Ben Thompson

Staff Side Representatives:

Mr John Gibson (UNISON)
Mr Paul MacPherson (GMB)

Mr Rikki Selkirk (GMB)
Ms M Macrae, (RCN)

In attendance:

Mrs D Manson, Chief Executive
Ms S McCready, Regional Officer, Unite the Union
Mr A Bell, Joint Secretary, Teachers' Side
Ms L Denovan, Executive Chief Officer – Resources and Finance
Ms N Grant, Interim Executive Chief Officer – Education & Learning
Ms F Duncan, Executive Chief Officer, Health and Social Care
Mr M MacLeod, Executive Chief Officer – Infrastructure & Environment
Ms K Lackie, Executive Chief Officer – Performance & Governance
Mr A Gunn, Interim Executive Chief Officer – Transformation
Ms E Barrie, Interim Head of HR, Resources and Finance
Ms G Falconer, Occupational Health, Safety and Wellbeing Manager, Resources and Finance
Mr D Goldie, Head of Housing and Building Maintenance, Housing and Property
Mr J Scott, Corporate Improvement Project Manager, Transformation Service
Mr A Yates, Environmental Health Manager, Communities and Place
Ms E Johnston, Corporate Audit & Performance Manager
Mr A MacInnes, Administrative Assistant, Performance and Governance Service

Mrs M Davidson in the Chair

SUBJECT/DECISION

ACTION

- 1. Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were intimated on behalf of Mr A Henderson from the Employer's Side and Ms L Mackay, Unison from the Staff Side.

2. Declarations of Interest

Mrs M Davidson declared a non financial interest on the items for discussion as a family member was an employee of The Highland Council but, having applied the test outlined in Paragraphs 5.2 and 5.3 of the Councillors' Code of Conduct, concluded that the interest did not preclude her from taking part in the discussion at the meeting.

3. Minutes of Last Meeting

There had been circulated the Minutes of the last meeting of the Forum held on 12 February, 2021, the terms of which were **APPROVED**.

4. Matters Arising from Minutes

Arising from the Minutes the following matters were raised:-

- i. Radio Systems Coverage – It was noted that the Airwave Radio system should have been replaced 2 years ago. It was a national system used by all the emergency services and the replacement system was not due to be completed until 2022. The Leader of the Council had undertaken to see what further lobbying of Government could be undertaken to expedite matters. This action was still outstanding and would be progressed as soon as possible.
- ii. Mechanical Aides for Street Cleaning – it was noted that there was an investment bid for 5 new mechanical street cleaners that would be considered at the next full Council meeting.

**Leader of
the
Council**

5. Service Trade Union Liaison Meetings

There had been circulated the following Service Trade Union Liaison Minutes of Meetings for information:-

- i Health and Social Care Service held on 12 February and draft minute of 10 May, 2021;
- ii Education and Learning on 1 February, 2021;
- iii Communities and Places held on 17 March, 2021;
- iv Infrastructure and Environment held on 24 February, 2021; and
- v Housing and Property Services held on 27 May, 2021.

Arising from the minutes, the following matters were raised:-

i. Health and Social Care Service

- a) In terms of the restructuring, clarity was sought on whether the

**ECO
Health &**

strategic committees were meant to be sharing information on the level below Heads of Service. It was advised that information on the restructuring would be shared with Trade Unions at a meeting to be held soon.

**Social
Care/
Interim
Head of
HR**

ii Education and Learning Service – it was noted and welcomed that staff engagement had been much improved. Also, the work and commitment of staff in Schools was acknowledged and commended over the Covid period and in particular since the return to School at Easter.

iii Communities and Places Service – preventative physiotherapy – the minutes stated that physiotherapists were still not able to attend work places due to Covid restrictions and Scottish Government guidance. It was advised that the Occupational Health Service had been delivered throughout the Covid period and most of the appointments were by phone or Microsoft Teams. Preventative physiotherapy had been requested by the Executive Chief Officer focusing on the Waste team and this was being undertaken.

iv Infrastructure and Environment – Radio coverage - 10 new handsets had been deployed for a trial period and feedback so far was positive with improvements in weaker signal areas. Following the end of the trial period a plan would be made to rollout the upgraded handsets. The aim was for the rollout to be complete before the Winter period.

v Housing and Property – Long Covid Policy – it was explained that in terms of NHS staff, the guidance was that if employees were absent from work due to Long Covid this was classed as Special Leave. Therefore the Staff Side expected the guidance on Long Covid to be the same with the Council.

It was reported that there had been national discussions on Long Covid and trade unions had been briefed on this. The Council was waiting on final guidance on this from COSLA. Efforts would be made to resolve this issue as soon as possible.

**Interim
Head of
HR**

A point was made that if there were different arrangements for staff with Long Covid in the NHS as opposed to Local Government, the Council had employees who are under NHS terms and conditions. It was advised that information from the NHS would be sought on this as there was a need to ensure the policy was applied appropriately.

**Interim
Head of
HR**

vi The following Staff Side Statement was endorsed by the Forum – “Quarterly Service Trade Union meetings are important for us all and we would remind Services that they should all be organised well in advance. and should not be cancelled or re-scheduled at very short notice. We all have busy and crowded diaries.”

**Executive
Chief
Officers**

6. Redesign of The Highland Council

An update was provided on the work of the Recovery, Improvement and Transformation Board. The Transformation programme was part of the Health and Prosperity Strategy and the Council had approved an investment of £3.6m over the next 2 years to deliver significant savings, cost avoidance and to make improvements such as in new ways of working.

Progress on Recovery, Improvement and Transformation Board projects would be submitted to future meetings of the Forum. The delivery of these projects would be the responsibility of the relevant Strategic Committee and regular updates would be provided at these Committees. The recruitment process to fill posts to help deliver projects was progressing and updates on this would be provided at future meetings.

Reference was made to a report the RIT Board had recently considered which is available for viewing on the undernoted link.

https://www.highland.gov.uk/meetings/meeting/4441/recovery_improvement_and_transformation_board (item 5 - RIT Programme 21/22 Update)

Partnership working with the Staff Side on the recovery, improvement and transformation was critical in terms of ideas and lessons learned.

The Forum **NOTED**:-

- i the update on the work of the Recovery, Improvement and Transformation Board; and
- ii that progress with Transformation programme projects would be included on future agendas.

**Interim
ECO
Transfor
mation**

7. New Ways of Working Project/Wellbeing Survey

There was a presentation on the New Ways of Working and Wellbeing Survey.

In discussion, the following main points were raised.

- The findings of the survey showed that staff with a disability or long term condition viewed home working as positive for their mental health and ability to do their job, but it was known that some staff were struggling with home working.

**OHSW
Manager/
Corporat
e
Improve
ment
Manager**

- There would be increased costs for employees working from home such as broadband, heating, while the Council had saved in heating and electricity costs during the Covid period. It was explained that the issue of costs was complex and different for each employee and Officers were looking at what other Local Authorities were doing in this respect. From responses so far, no Local Authority was paying staff for broadband, heating or electricity costs.
- The use of MS Teams had meant that some staff and Elected Members had too many meetings now as they no longer had to travel to meetings. It was suggested that policy and guidance should be developed on how staff and Members were safeguarded from digital overload.
- Homeworking provided a greater flexibility for those with a disability to do their job and it was important that this be continued. Support provided to staff with a disability or long term conditions was highlighted.
- Over 70% of staff who had responded to the Wellbeing Survey were looking for a blended model of work and the Council was investing in Office Hubs across the Council area. The Council also would be asking its clients and Managers for their views on new ways of working.
- There was a need for clear plans regarding the return to work and reference was made to a report on this to the next full Council meeting in June.

The Forum **NOTED** the presentations on New Ways of Working Project/Wellbeing Survey.

8. Revised Engagement and Partnership Agreement Document

Interim
Head of
HR

There had been circulated a revised Engagement and Partnership Agreement document. The Staff Side had been fully involved in the revision on the document and there would be involvement with Managers and staff to ensure they know how the Partnership Agreement would operate.

It was important that the engagement and partnership ethos that was embedded in the document was communicated to all staff. A point was made that many front line staff did not have Highland Council connected IT and this was an issue when communicating with staff on surveys, policies and guidance.

The Staff Side and Officers were commended for their work in revising the Engagement and Partnership Agreement document.

The Forum **NOTED** the Revised Engagement and Partnership Agreement document.

9. Staff Whistleblowing Policy

Corporate Audit & Performance Manager

There had been circulated Report by the Corporate Audit and Performance Manager which detailed engagement with staff and Trade Unions on the revised policy and processes for Whistleblowing agreed by Council on 29 October 2020. A final report on the Policy would be submitted to the Audit and Scrutiny Committee on 17 June, 2021.

The Forum **NOTED** the report.

10. Staff Side Items

i Holiday Pay - Officers were working on providing information to Elected Members and thereafter a proposal would be submitted to Trade Unions in the next few weeks.

Interim Head of HR

ii Training for Elected Members on the role of unions – this would be included in Member Induction training. It would also be checked if this training could be provided in the near future.

Interim Head of HR

iii Service Structure below tier 3 - information would be provided on this at a weekly trade union meeting

Interim Head of HR

iv Efficient use of resources and transparent – temporary or seconded posts

There had been temporary arrangements for a number of staff pending the restructuring. Now that the restructuring was underway, these temporary arrangements would be addressed. Updates would be provided to trade unions on a regular basis on this matter.

Interim Head of HR

v Update on SJC pay negotiations - there was potential for industrial action and local trade union branches has been asked by their National organisations to prepare to ballot their members for official strike action. It was hoped that strike action would not be necessary.

It was noted that the Scottish Government Finance Secretary was to meet with representatives of COSLA and it was hoped that progress could be made on pay negotiations.

The meeting was concluded at 4.10 p.m.