

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

Minutes of Meeting of The Highland Council Staff Partnership Forum held REMOTELY on **Friday 5 November, 2021** at 11.00 a.m.

**Present:**

**Employer's Representatives:**

Mr Raymond Bremner  
Mrs Margaret Davidson

Mr Tom Heggie (substitute)  
Mr Allan Henderson

**Staff Side Representatives:**

Mr John Gibson, Unison  
Mr Paul MacPherson (GMB)

Mr Rikki Selkirk (GMB)  
Ms Margaret Macrae (RCN)

**In attendance:**

Mrs D Manson, Chief Executive  
Ms S Purdie, (RCN)  
Mr A Bell, Joint Secretary, Teachers' Side  
Ms L Denovan, Executive Chief Officer – Resources and Finance  
Mrs C McDiarmid, Executive Chief Officer – Communities and Place  
Ms N Grant, Executive Chief Officer – Education & Learning  
Mr M MacLeod, Executive Chief Officer – Infrastructure, Environment & Economy  
Mrs K Lackie, Executive Chief Officer – Performance & Governance  
Mr A Gunn, Interim Executive Chief Officer – Transformation  
Mrs F Malcolm, Head of Integration Adult Social Care, Health and Social Care  
Mr B Cameron, Housing Policy & Investment Manager, Housing and Property  
Mr A MacInnes, Administrative Assistant, Performance and Governance

**Mrs M Davidson in the Chair**

**SUBJECT/DECISION**

**ACTION**

**1. Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were intimated on behalf of Mr J Finlayson, Mr J Gray, Ms L Munro, Mrs T Robertson, Mr B Thompson from the Employer's Side; Mr I Macleman, Unite/Ucatt, from the Staff Side and Mr M Rodgers, ECO Housing and Property, Ms F Duncan, ECO Health and Social Care and Ms E Barrie, Head of HR.

**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 12 August, 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 – work was ongoing to improve radio coverage and to ensure systems are resilient. An order had been placed for dual-sim phones to be used by staff working in black spot areas.
- ii. Preventative physiotherapy for staff in waste teams – there had been trial physiotherapy sessions and these had gone well. The potential for future sessions would be explored perhaps with the support of High Life Highland.
- iii. Digital Overload – an update was requested for the next meeting on the review of guidance on safeguarding from digital overload.
- iv. Staff Whistleblowing Policy – the policy was working well so far.
- v. Service Structure below tier 3 – the Heads of Service structure had been approved at Council. There were 2 remaining vacant posts to be filled and this process would be completed soon. Information on the budget for staffing was being gathered, to ensure that the wider organisational restructuring was sustainable. A peer review of the organisational structure would take place in December.
- vi. Depute Chief Executive post – a review of the recruitment process for this post was being undertaken and a meeting of the Recruitment Panel would take place on 11 November. An interim appointment to this post had been made and a communication to staff would be issued next week.
- vii. SJC pay negotiations – trade unions were balloting their members on the latest pay offer with a recommendation to accept. Work was being undertaken to implement the pay award as soon as an agreement had been reached.

**Head of  
HR**

**CEX**

### 5. Staff Side Items

***i. Recruitment of the Depute Chief Executive post*** – it was queried why Highland Council was struggling to fill the post of Depute Chief Executive. It was advised that a review of the recruitment process was

being undertaken. There was a challenge national at present in filling senior posts within Councils. The effects of Covid-19 and housing shortages in Highland were some of the factors for this.

It was highlighted that attracting people to Social Care posts was challenging and of significant concern, given the attractive rates of pay on offer within various sectors of the private sector and difficulties in finding suitable accommodation. It was highlighted that the Council and NHS Highland were well aware of these recruitment difficulties and the Government had committed money for more staff, but it was acknowledged that even with extra money recruitment would still be a challenge. Apprenticeships, grow your own talent and better employability planning were highlighted as measures to help address recruitment problems.

***ii. Recruitment of posts below Head of Service level and timescale to complete restructuring.***

A commitment was given to ensure that the Staff Side and Executive Chief Officers were informed of timelines. Dates for the peer review were being arranged at present.

**ECO R&F**

***iii. HC Pension Fund*** - The Highland Council Pension Committee took the decision to recommend that all local government pension schemes should stay on their own and not be joined as one, within Scotland. Is this still their opinion and are they actively discouraging amalgamation of pension funds? In response, it was understood that this was still the position of the Pensions Committee. It was a well run pension fund and the Committee did not wish to lose control of it.

An update on the Government's proposals and decisions at Pensions Committee in respect of the consultation on local government pension funds would be provided at a future meeting.

**ECO R&F**

It was highlighted that Councillor Ben Thompson was to leave the Council and both Elected Members and Staff Side commended his leadership and professionalism as Chair of the Investment Sub Committee.

***iv. Health and Safety additional £2.2m allocation*** - At last year's budget setting process £2.2m was set aside for Health & Safety. How much of this budget has been spent so far, what is planned for its use in the future? – A commitment was given to provide a written response to the Forum.

**ECO P&H**

***v. National Care Service – impact and implications and National Care Standards***

The Staff Side were concerned about the future impact and recommendations of the Feeley Report and the introduction of the

National Care Standard. Highland Council are in a unique position within Scotland in how we operated Adult and Child social care. What steps are Highland Council taking to make sure our unique position is not forgotten about and that staff will be consulted throughout any period of proposed change?

In reply, the Staff Side's attention was drawn to the Council's formal response to the National Care Service consultation which included that there could be significant staffing implications for the Council. The closing date for comment on the consultation had just passed and the next steps in the process would be advised by the Scottish Government.

The Forum **AGREED** that:-

- a) the Forum's concerns be raised with the Minister for Social Care along with constructive feedback on the implications for the Council of a National Care Service; and
- b) in terms of Adult Social Care transformation an action to focus on workforce planning.

**CEX/  
Head of  
Integration  
Adult  
Social  
Care/  
ECO  
Transformation**

***vi Additional Staff Side Item – Fixed Term Contracts for Pupil Support Assistants (PSAs)*** – this issue had been raised many times in the past and again there was significant recruitment of PSAs on fixed term contracts. The Staff Side had been assured that they would be consulted on the PSA allocation, but this had not happened as yet.

It was explained that the allocation model had not been issued due to the significant impact of Covid-19 on schools and instead additional hours had been issued to PSA staff up until the October holidays. Therefore there had been no further engagement with trade unions on this. The allocation model was to be revised and would be submitted to Education and Learning Committee in future for consideration. Fixed term contracts for PSAs was a result of the annual funding provided to the Council for this and to address this, it was a workforce planning issue. In terms of the annual funding issue for PSAs, the Leader undertook to lobby Government for a longer term financial settlement.

**Leader**

The Forum **AGREED** a separate meeting between Officers and trade union representatives would be convened to address the issue of fixed term contracts for PSAs and other staff groups on fixed term contracts.

**CEX/ECO  
E&L/ECO  
R&F**

## **6. Service Trade Union Liaison Meetings**

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

- i Draft Health and Social Care Service held on 5 October, 2021;

- ii Draft Education and Learning on 24 August, 2021;
- iii Draft Communities and Places held on 1 October, 2021;
- iv Draft Infrastructure, Environment & Economy held on 6 October, 2021; and
- v Housing and Property Services held on 29 September, 2021.

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

i. Health and Social Care Service -

A new Head of Social Work Services had been appointed and would commence post in January, 2021. A presentation on Service redesign had been presented at that meeting and trade unions would continue to be updated on this. The presentation slides would be circulated to trade unions in case some had not attended the meeting.

**Head of  
Integratio  
n Adult  
Social  
Care**

ii Communities and Places Service – engagement with trade unions on senior structure proposals had been held and there were no issues to report. Thanks were expressed to trade unions and health and safety representatives who attended the extended management team meeting to help develop the risk profiling of health and safety for the Service.

Property condition in relation to Depots was discussed and the Property Service had commissioned surveys that would be completed by mid December, 2021, following which a review of the findings would be undertaken.

iii Infrastructure, Environment & Economy – the health and safety policy and action plan had been agreed. Risks over the winter period had been discussed particularly with HGV driver shortage and a recruitment campaign was being undertaken along with modern apprenticeship training and ensuring that Amenity staff can be built into the winter maintenance rota.

Continuing, the Waste team were becoming less reliant on using agency staff and instead having staff on permanent contracts, particularly in relation to HGV drivers. There was work ongoing to move driver assessment in-house. There was also workforce planning in terms of HGV drivers in order to attract and retain more people into this role.

v Housing and Property – in relation to the HSE intervention into Hand-arm vibration syndrome (HAVS), the Council were continuing to update its training and guidance to staff and that staff who were identified as having HAVs were given other duties so the condition did not get worse. HAVs co-ordinators were also to be appointed in all Services.

The guidance on wearing face masks in vehicles would be shared with

**ECO R&F**

the Forum and it was noted that smoking was not allowed in the workplace including vehicles.

## **7. Budget Update**

The Executive Chief Officer Resources & Finance provided an update on the budget. It was advised that there was still a significant budget gap forecasted and the Council's budget settlement would be known early December. At the last Council meeting, £1.6m of savings had been presented. Work was ongoing to identify further savings and these would be shared with trade unions at officer/trade union weekly meetings. Work was also being carried out on the capital programme and trade unions would be consulted at the appropriate time.

There were meetings of the Corporate Resources Budget Sub Committee planned and at December Council meeting a capital strategy list of investment opportunities would be considered. There would be consultation on this with trade unions.

In terms of previously agreed savings for next year it was advised that Officers were working on the overall budget position at present and these savings would be factored into this process. Budget gap scenarios and a summary of previously agreed savings would be shared with trade unions.

The Forum **NOTED** the budget update and that budget gap scenarios and a summary of previous agreed savings would be shared with the Staff Side.

**ECO R&F**

## **8. Update on Holiday Pay**

Holiday pay had now been paid to staff with the exception of tribunal claims, which was a different process.

The Forum **NOTED** the update on holiday pay.

## **9. Redesign of The Highland Council (Project Updates)**

The next meeting of the Recovery, Improvement and Transformation Board was to be held on 29 November, 2021 and the papers would include an update on projects.

Strategic Committees were delivering the projects with the Recovery, Improvement and Transformation Board monitoring progress of projects.

The Staff Side were thanked for their support in the design of the digital transformation staff survey. UHI had been invited to undertake the analysis of the survey.

In terms of asset rationalisation and new ways of working there was ongoing work on this that would be considered at the Redesign Board on 8 November.

In relation to workforce planning, examples of this were modern apprenticeships; less use of agency staff and graduate apprenticeships.

The Staff Side expressed a concern that there may be office rationalisation before the full implications of the new ways of working were known and therefore it was requested, if possible, an update on the new ways of working project be provided at the Redesign Board on 8 November.

**ECO P&H**

The Forum **NOTED** the update on the work of the Recovery, Improvement and Transformation Board.

#### **10. Dates for Meetings 2022**

**All Forum  
Members/  
TU**

The Forum **APPROVED** the following dates for meetings of the Forum in 2022:-

Friday, 11 February  
Friday, 19 August  
Friday, 11 November

Meetings would commence at 11.00 a.m.

The meeting was concluded at 1.00 p.m.