

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

Minutes of Meeting of The Highland Council Staff Partnership Forum held in Committee Room 1, Council Headquarters, Inverness on **Friday 11 November, 2022** at 11.10 a.m.

Present:

Employer's Representatives:

Mr Raymond Bremner	Mr David Fraser (remotely)
Mr Alasdair Christie (remotely)	Mr Derek Louden (remotely)
Mr John Finlayson (remotely)	Mr Graham Mackenzie

Staff Side Representatives:

Mr Mike Hayes, UNISON (substitute) Ms Margaret Macrae (RCN) (remotely)
Mr Paul MacPherson (GMB)

In attendance:

Mrs D Manson, Chief Executive
Mr A Bell, Joint Secretary, Teachers' Side
Mr M Jackson, Regional Officer, Unite the Union
Ms N Grant, Executive Chief Officer – Education & Learning
Mr A Gunn, Executive Chief Officer – Communities & Place
Mr M Rodgers, Executive Chief Officer – Housing & Property
Mr E Foster, Head of Corporate Finance, Resources & Finance
Mr I Kyle, Head of Performance & Improvement, Health and Social Care
Ms E Barrie, Head of People, Resources & Finance
Mr A MacInnes, Administrative Assistant, Performance and Governance

Mr R Bremner in the Chair

Preliminaries

Prior to the start of the meeting the Chair asked the Staff Side to convey to their Members that it was recognised the challenging times being faced by staff during this cost of living crises and his appreciation to staff for all their contribution and commitment to the operations of the Council during these very challenging financial times.

SUBJECT/DECISION

ACTION

1. Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were intimated on behalf of Mrs G Campbell-Sinclair, Mr K Gowans, Mr B Lobban from the Employer's Side, and Mr J Gibson, UNISON, Mr I Macleman, UNITE, Mr R Selkirk, GMB from the Staff Side.

2. **Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest.

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

**Head of
People**

There had been circulated, for approval, the Highland Council Staff Partnership Forum Constitution.

It was highlighted that discussion would be held with the Staff Side on the trade union representation on the Forum as there was currently no Teacher trade union representation on the Forum. Also, given that management and the Staff Side no longer met 2 weeks prior to the partnership forum, this sentence be deleted from the constitution.

The Forum **APPROVED** the Staff Partnership Forum Constitution, subject to the following sentence being deleted:

“The Management and Staff Side Group will meet at least 2 weeks prior to the partnership meeting.”

4. **Minutes of Last Meeting**

There had been circulated the Minutes of the last meeting of the Forum held on 11 February, 2022, the terms of which were **APPROVED**.

5. **Matters Arising from Minutes**

There were no matters arising from the Minutes.

6. **Staff Side Items**

i. New ways of working – contractual arrangements for staff

The Staff Side asked that given the new ways of working and the impact that this will have on staff working in roles that require hybrid arrangements, is there the intention to look at all contractual arrangements for staff that the implementation of this policy will affect?

In terms of hybrid working, there would continue to be a combination of office and home base for staff to work and therefore there would be no changes to contractual arrangements. Staff may be assigned to notional office workspace closer to where they live. Further, there was work ongoing in terms of asset rationalisation and as a result staff may not be based where they used to operate from. If staff did not have appropriate accommodation for working from home, Service management should be informed of this, so that it could be addressed as a matter of urgency. It was emphasised that office workspace would be provided for staff. Through Service team agreements, staff were being asked what their working environment requirements were. The Head of People undertook to contact the Hybrid working team to check on staff home working requirements as it was noted from the Staff Side that some staff did have inappropriate home working conditions.

**Head of
People**

There had been a number of injuries through staff working from home and the importance of carrying out risk assessments at home was highlighted. Also, in terms of travel expenses, there was no change to contractual arrangements so these expenses would not be based on travel from an employee's home, but if an employee was to be permanently based at home this would be looked at through the Team agreements.

ii Cost of living payments to staff

The Staff Side was aware that the Council recognise that we are currently in a financial crisis, mortgages are rising, rents are being increased, gas and electric costs are rising and fuel for transport remains high. The Council are, as part of New Ways of Working, looking to rationalise the property assets. There has been no consultation with staff, no-one knows where they are going to be expected to work from, however, we are expecting staff to work from home. At which point are we going to look to make cost of living payments to those staff who are lower paid, on benefits yet expected to pay for additional energy costs while the Council make savings on property and energy costs?

In response, the Council would make available workspace for staff to work from and there was a need to transition to having office spaces available closer to where staff live. Through the Redesign Board, there was consideration being given to using school staff rooms as a base for staff to work from closer to their homes and discussions on how to manage this and ensure protection for young people and staff would take place with Head Teachers.

It would require to be a Council decision to make any cost of living payments to staff and in terms of affordability it was unlikely that the Council could afford to subsidise energy costs of staff and Officers were not aware of any other Council making cost of living payments to staff. The Staff Side were disappointed that cost of living payments were not being considered and it was suggested that this Council should lead the way on this issue. In response, the Council recognised that food and fuel poverty was an issue and highlighted the recent issue of additional financial benefits to people most in need in Highland. For the Council to be sustainable it had to look at what it could afford and protect jobs.

Continuing, opportunities were being considered to rationalise the Council's assets which would reduce energy costs and provide new Depot provision which would be reviewed as part of the capital programme. There would be consultation with staff on the rationalisation of assets and people strategy and feedback from engagement with staff would be reported to the full Council meeting in December. The staff's resilience and commitment to progressing the redesign of the Council was acknowledged.

In terms of timescales for asset rationalisation, there were a number of buildings that had been decided through the redesign process to release as soon as possible and this was likely to happen early in the new year. Asset management required to be accelerated to free up resources and work on this was ongoing in conjunction with High Life Highland. Caithness House and Charles Kennedy Building were highlighted as exemplars of office workspace and it was suggested that videos/photos of these buildings be shown at a meeting of the Redesign Board. More key worker housing was also a priority.

**ECO
Housing/
Property**

Team agreements on hybrid working were meant to be fluid as employees circumstances change and this message would be emphasised to Service Managers.

**Head of
People**

7. Service Trade Union Liaison Meetings

There had been circulated and **NOTED** the following Service Trade Union Liaison Minutes of Meetings:-

- i Health, Social Care & Wellbeing – 30 June, 2022;
- ii Education and Learning – 16 June & 21 September, 2022;
- iii Communities and Place – 23 June & 21 October, 2022;
- iv Housing and Property Services – 1 June, 2022;
- v Infrastructure, Environment & Economy – 10 February & 1 July, 2022
- vi Resources & Finance/Performance & Governance – 3 August, 2022.

8. Budget Position

The Head of Corporate Finance provided an update on the budget. It was advised that the overspend being forecast in the current financial year was just under £10m and there was still significant financial risks such as with pay awards and utility costs. These issues fed into the next financial year 2023/24 where a budget gap of just over £40m was forecast. Assumptions behind this figure were continually reviewed and there were uncertainties for example with pay awards next year and the funding settlement from the Scottish Government. operations. The financial challenges facing the Council were significant and Budget holders would meet next week on this matter.

There would be regular updates on the budget position with trade unions.

The Forum **NOTED** the budget update.

9. Pay Award - Update

The Head of People provided an update on the current position in respect of pay negotiations.

The Scottish Joint Council non-teaching staff pay award had now been finalised and would be paid into staff salaries during November and the work of all staff involved in processing these payments quickly was recognised as was the assistance of trade union representatives in communicating the pay award to their members. As part of this agreement there would be an additional one day's annual leave and further details on the implementation of this would be communicated to staff.

The Staff Side also wished to thank those staff involved in processing the pay award quickly which was much appreciated.

The EIS and AHDS teaching trade unions had indicated they would be taking strike action in support of their pay claims. Contingency plans were being looked at in terms of the operation of schools in Highland on the day of strike action which had been notified as 24 November.

The School Leaders Scotland trade union did not make their mandate for strike action.

The RCN trade union had indicated they would take strike action and this would affect Health Visitors and School Nurses within the Council. The Health and Social Care Service were reviewing service provision as a result.

The Chartered Institute of Physiotherapists had also announced strike action.

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

10. People Strategy

The People Strategy had been agreed by Council and plans within the strategy would now be developed. The strategy did dovetail into other strategies of the Council, i.e. financial strategy, asset management and digital strategy. Key elements of the plans would be developed in consultation with trade unions.

A priority within the strategy would be vacancy management in order to reduce the number of staff within the Council and this would be aligned with how jobs were redesigned and reconfigure work of staff. This would be a significant piece of work and would be challenging and trade unions would be engaged in this work.

The Staff Side highlighted that vacancy management was supposed to have been completed by April this year and not April next year as it was part of the budget the year before to look at the head count of the Council. If vacancies were not being filled how could staff expect to continue providing the same service.

In terms of core hours, during Covid there was an understanding that core hours did not fit the working model of being able to deliver the service. It was queried what was to happen with core hours as it was unworkable. In response, there was a need for a flexible workforce in

terms of how staff were doing their job and being able to move staff around the organisation by transferring skills to another area. Core hours were relaxed during Covid for a specific period, but this no longer applied and there was a need to be smarter about approaching how we approach work that was business led and customer focused. In terms of the issue of some staff feeling pressure to be at work at defined times, the Head of People undertook to look at any information confidentially provided by the Staff Side on this.

**Head of
People**

A point was made that there would have to be some prioritisation of service provision so that staff did not feel pressured to provide the same level of service with less staff.

The Forum **NOTED** the update on the People Strategy.

11. Asset Management – including changes to HQ building

The Executive Chief Officer Housing and Property in addition to the discussion provided earlier in the meeting on asset management highlighted proposed HQ Building modernisation; Block B, HQ modern flexible workspace with the desire for design principles for office space at HQ such as achieved with Caithness House and Charles Kennedy Building. Proposals for asset management would go to Council in December and there would be communication with staff and feedback on staff views reported to Council.

The Forum **NOTED** the update on asset management.

12. Redesign of The Highland Council – Project Updates

The Head of HR gave a presentation on project updates and their workstreams on the Redesign of the Highland Council covering asset management; connected customers and digitisation; Roads redesign; Bus company; and lean and rapid reviews.

It was queried what progress had been made with the additional monies put into the roads budget funded from an increase in Council tax. It was advised that there were additional monies to be spent on roads revenue maintenance and there was capital investment money that was reflected in the current capital programme and some of that money would have been spent now. The Redesign Board would try and ensure best value for the Roads budget by looking at how the service was delivered.

In terms of the HQ Ardross street building, an initial feasibility and design work for turning this part of the HQ building into flats had been completed. Costings and the appropriate tenure mix for the flats still had to be worked on.

The Forum **NOTED** the update on Redesign of the Highland Council.

13. Dates of Meetings 2023

The Forum **APPROVED** the following dates for their meetings in 2023:-

Wednesday, 1 February – 3.00 p.m.

Thursday, 25 May – 11.00 a.m.

Wednesday, 16 August – 3.00 p.m.

Wednesday, 15 November – 3.00 p.m.

The meeting was concluded at 1.05 p.m.