

## 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, Inverness on Thursday 8 February, 2024 at 3.00 p.m.

### Present:

#### Employer's Representatives:

Mr A Christie (remote)	Mr K Gowans
Mr J Finlayson (remote)	Mr D Louden
Mr D Fraser (remote)	Mr G Mackenzie (remote)

#### Staff Side Representatives:

Mr J Gibson, UNISON	Mr I Macleman,(UNITE/UCATT) (remote)
Ms M Macrae, RCN (remote)	Ms L A MacAskill, GMB

### In attendance:

Ms K Lackie (**KL**), Interim Depute Chief Executive  
 Mr A Gunn, Executive Chief Officer, Communities & Place  
 Mr M MacLeod, Executive Chief Officer, Infrastructure, Environment & Economy  
 Mr M Rodgers (**MR**), Executive Chief Officer, Housing & Property  
 Ms F Duncan, Executive Chief Officer, Health & Social Care  
 Mr P Nevin, Interim ECO Performance & Governance  
 Ms E Barrie (**EB**), Interim Head of People, Resources & Finance  
 Mr L Mackenzie, EIS, Teachers' Side  
 Mr A MacInnes, Senior Committee Officer, Performance and Governance

### Mr K Gowans in the Chair

<u>SUBJECT/DECISION</u>	<u>ACTION</u>
<p><b>1. Apologies for Absence</b></p> <p>Apologies for absence were intimated on behalf of Mr R Bremner, Mr B Lobban, Mrs G Campbell-Sinclair from the Employer's Side, and Ms L Mackay from the Staff Side.</p>	
<p><b>2. Declarations of Interest/Transparency Statement</b></p> <p>There were no declarations of interest/transparency statements.</p>	
<p><b>3. Minutes of Last Meeting</b></p> <p>There had been circulated the minutes of the last meeting of the Forum held on 15 November, 2023, the terms of which were approved.</p>	

#### **4. Matters Arising from Minutes**

Arising from the Minutes the following matters were raised:-

i Core Hours – this related to the flexible working policy that was being drafted and would align with the asset rationalisation project.

ii Access to Wage Slips - there was a need to ensure that staff had access to their wage slips. Therefore, all staff who were not office based were to have a Council login so that they could access the Corporate systems. Logins could be provided to staff fairly easily, but staff needed to know how to go through the process of login and therefore it was important to understand what support they required to assist them with this. This would be discussed further with trade unions to understand the support staff required with the login process.

**EB**

#### **5. Staff Side Items**

i update on supply of all council staff with their own e-mail accounts – this item was covered at item 4(ii) above;

ii update on property rationalisation project – it was highlighted that a report had been submitted to the Council meeting in December on proposals setting out the steps to be taken to review the Council's property assets. The report covered areas in relation to the condition of property assets, back log of maintenance challenges, how assets could be managed better going forward such as the school estate and depots. All buildings would be considered in the review of property assets and Services and users of buildings would be engaged in this process to understand what their property needs were to deliver services.

The staff side referred to the dochfour huts, Inverness, which were not fit for purpose and it was pointed out that there had been a plan on what to do with these huts and this had been paused and a new plan was proposed. However, health and social care staff were not aware of what was happening. Communication was required with staff on the current status of this project. It was advised that there was regular discussion with services whose staff would be relocated from these huts and that staff in the resources and finance service had been kept up to date with progress. An undertaking was given to give an update on this project to the staff side and staff located in these huts as soon as possible.

**MR**

The staff side also referred to a similar communication problem with proposals for the drummuie offices, Golspie, as staff were not aware what was happening. Arising from this, a point was made that there was a need for a more collective and regular form of communication on building projects affecting staff.

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

There had been circulated and noted the following Service Trade Union Liaison minutes of meetings:-

- i Health, Social Care and Wellbeing – 19 January, 2024;
- ii Communities and Place – 15 December, 2023
- iii Performance & Governance/Resources & Finance/Depute CEX Services – 19 December, 2023.

Arising from the minutes, the staff side queried if there had been any progress with alcohol and drug testing, as the new occupational health provider was not providing this service. It was advised that there had been no progress in terms of obtaining a substitute provision. There was a need to determine the service required. The Council did have a policy to support staff where there was a known substance misuse and there was a need to be proactive in increased checking of substance misuse of staff when driving vehicles, where there was good cause for this. One of the reasons for requesting this service was the Traffic Commissioner expectations of good practice for drug and alcohol testing in the organisation.

## **7. Budget update**

It was advised that there had been a very good response from the public and staff engagement on the budget survey. Around 2100 public budget survey responses had been received and around 200 responses from staff. The second phase of the engagement had commenced to get feedback on some of the suggestions from the first survey.

In terms of filling the budget gap of £113m over the next 3 years, it was highlighted that there were a number of ways of reducing this gap, for example, fiscal flexibilities (council tax, non domestic rate relief, PPP accounting flexibility), employer pension contributions reductions, reserves, before looking at service specific reductions or income generating opportunities. In particular, there would be a significant budget gap in the 2024/25 financial year.

Areas where savings may be required had still to be determined and a variety of options as to how the budget gap could be filled were being considered. An impact assessment of saving proposals was being worked on. A meeting would be held next week with trade unions to advise of the staffing impacts of saving proposals.

There had been extensive meetings of the Administration Group on budget proposals, a lot of them having come from the public. The next step would be to prioritise budget options. The final proposals on the

budget would be considered at the full Council meeting on 29 February, 2024. The staff side welcomed that there was to be a meeting next week on the budget proposals.

The Forum noted the position.

## **8. People and Finance System Overview**

It was advised good progress was being made to implement the revised finance system. The current system would cease to operate on 1 April, and therefore Officers were working hard with the external provider Tech 1 on this project and good progress was being made. The project was now at the user acceptance testing stage. Risks and issues with the project were highlighted and were being worked through. It was a remarkable effort by the team working on this very important project. The team members wellbeing would continue to be monitored. There had been staff communication on the project and there was good awareness amongst the teams who would use the system across the Council. Trade unions were asked to let Officers know of any instances where staff did not know or understand the changes to the finance system, had concerns about the system or had concerns about workload. Go live for the project was 1 April.

The staff side noted and welcomed the concerns for the wellbeing of the Officers working on the project, but there had been no negative feedback as yet and the new system seemed to be more user friendly than the current system. However, the majority of users of the system were not finance staff and the importance of training and support for staff was stressed. An undertaking was given to share the project's communication and training plan with the staff side.

**KL**

The Forum noted the position on the new People and Finance system.

## **9. Trauma Informed Workforce**

It was advised that the Council had committed to being a trauma informed organisation. It was important to recognise when someone may be affected by trauma. This applied to staff and service users and adjusting ways of working to take account of this and modifying service delivery and putting support measures in place for those affected by trauma.

In terms of economic development, trauma was costly in terms of loss of productivity, loss of employment and the effect on mental wellbeing. The Council did have a mental health and wellbeing toolkit as one of the support measures for staff. Following further commentary on this topic, which was an evolving area of work, it was highlighted that a trauma informed summit would be held in the next few months and trade unions would be invited to attend.

Continuing, there would be different levels of training on this subject from introductory to intensive level training. Training would be undertaken in collaboration with partner organisations and would be regularly adapted. If there was training available for trade union representatives, this would be helpful when representing their members. There was a need to re-emphasise to managers and staff of the support available for mental health wellbeing.

The Forum welcomed the presentation on a trauma informed workforce.

The meeting was concluded at 4.15 pm.