

JOINT CONSULTATIVE FORUM

Minutes of a remote meeting held on 22nd February, 2021.

Present: Councillor N.C. Thomas (Chairman); Councillors G. John, Dr. I.J. Johnson and M.G.J. Morgan.

Representatives of Trade Unions: Mr. L. Bonni (GMB), Mr. C. Brown (ASCL), Mr. T. Greaves (GMB), Mrs. G. Hallett (NAHT), Mr. G. Pappas (Unison) and Ms. S. Townsend-Ryan (Unison/Vice-Chairman).

Officers: Mrs. S. Alderman, Ms. J. Ballantine, Mr. T. Bowring, Mrs. T. Dickinson, Mrs. P. Ham, Ms. E. Morgan, Ms. A. Phillips, Mr. M. Thomas and Mrs. S. Williams.

(a) Apologies for Absence –

These were received from Councillors Mrs. P. Drake, A.R. Robertson and L.O. Rowlands. Also, from S. Greenslade (Unison) and L. Lancaster (NASUWT),

(b) Minutes and Matters Arising –

AGREED – T H A T the minutes of the meeting held on 12th October, 2020 be approved as a correct record.

(c) Declarations of Interest –

No declarations were received.

(d) Trade Union Items –

None received at this time; however, Mr. Pappas (Unison) wished to add that there were several items which constituted a 'work in progress' currently and that would be brought to this Forum at a later date.

(e) Minutes of the Social Services Directorate Health and Safety Committee – 19th November, 2020 (For Information) –

The Forum considered the minutes relating to Social Services Directorate Health and Safety Committee on 19th November, 2020.

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The Chairman raised the issue of lone working devices referred to in the minutes, which could be used by social workers and other staff who were at risk of physical harm whilst working alone. This was particularly acute under the current circumstances with COVID-19, due to it being unlikely that social workers were in direct or face to face contact with managers or supervisors. The Health, Safety & Wellbeing Manager replied that she and her team had been encouraging managers to look into lone working measures in order to ensure the safety of such staff. She added that a template was currently being drafted in order to assist Managers in assessing such concerns. The Chairman asked that as part of this were lone working devices being considered. The Health, Safety & Wellbeing Manager explained that such devices were being used by staff currently, namely, 'SoloProtect', but these had not proved popular as they were found to be cumbersome.

Mr. Pappas (Unison) added that SoloProtect had been used in Building Services, but with social workers there were different policies and procedures involved and so the device may not be as suitable for them. Other measures were in place however to support Social Workers who worked alone, such as the use of a 'Buddy' system.

Ms. Townsend-Ryan (Unison/Vice-Chairman), also made Members aware of the work undertaken in Adult Services so that staff could call in at the end of the day and the use of a board charting their whereabouts, similar to the buddy system referred to by Mr. Pappas. The designated Duty Officer would also be contacted by staff in order to notify when they were starting work and when they were finishing and leaving for home. Office 365 was also used as a means of checking on the safety and whereabouts of staff too.

It was subsequently

AGREED – T H A T the minutes of the Directorate Health and Safety Committee be noted.

(f) Minutes of Learning and Skills JCF: 21st October 2020 -

The Forum considered the minutes relating to Learning and Skills JCF meeting on 21st October, 2020.

AGREED – T H A T the minutes of the Learning and Skills JCF meeting be noted.

(g) Minutes of Social Services JCF: 20th October 2020 (minutes for meeting held in January 2021 are awaiting clearance) -

The Forum considered the minutes relating to Social Services JCF on 20th October, 2020.

AGREED – T H A T the minutes of the Social Services JCF be noted.

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(h) Minutes of Visible Services and Housing Trade Union Meeting:
4th November 2020 -

The Forum considered the minutes relating to Visible Services and Housing Trade Union meeting on 4th November, 2020.

AGREED – T H A T the minutes of the Visible Services and Housing Trade Union meeting be noted.

(i) Minutes of Visible Services and Housing Trade Union Consultative Meeting:
2nd December 2020 (minutes for meeting held on 3rd February 2021 are awaiting
clearance) -

The Forum considered the minutes relating to Visible Services and Housing Trade Union Consultative meeting on 2nd December, 2020.

The Chairman referred to the ongoing vaccination roll out for COVID-19 (mentioned in the minutes) and to the current status on the vaccination of care staff. The Head of Human Resources and Organisational Development replied that all care staff within the Vale of Glamorgan had been offered the vaccination and in good time (well before the deadline for its completion of 31st January 2021). In terms of figures, as of 10th February, 66% of care workers had taken up the offer for vaccination already. In addition, those care workers who could not receive the vaccination straight away (for example, those recently vaccinated against influenza and staff who were recovering from COVID-19) had eventually boosted this percentage up to 68% of care workers vaccinated. The Chairman responded that although the figures were positive, there was still a significant number of staff who had not or did not want the vaccination which was a concern.

Mr. Pappas (Unison) stated that the trade unions had been encouraging their members to be vaccinated and it was frustrating that this message was not being heeded by everyone.

The Head of Human Resources and Organisational Development explained that a number of reasons had been cited by care workers as to why they did not want to have the vaccine ranging from general anxiety or nervousness about receiving the vaccine to concerns that it would affect their chances of starting a family and to being previously unwell with COVID-19. Such answers had been logged and would be used as part of the Council's campaign to encourage people to take up the vaccination through dispelling the myths surrounding the 'jab' (such as claims around it impacting fertility).

There being no further questions, the Forum, having considered the minutes, subsequently

AGREED – T H A T the minutes of the Visible Services and Housing Trade Union Consultative meeting be noted.

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(j) Dates of Future Directorate Consultative Group for Noting –

AGREED – T H A T the following dates for the Directorate Consultative Groups as detailed below be noted:

- Learning and Skills: 16th June 2021.
- Resources – TBA.
- Social Services: March 2021 (exact date TBA).
- Visible Services and Housing: 4th March 2021.
- Corporate Health and Safety Meeting – TBA.

(k) Verbal update on the Covid Pandemic – including progress on vaccinations and testing (HR) –

The Head of Human Resources and Organisational Development updated the Forum with the latest information on the COVID-19 situation as of 21st February 2021, with Wales seeing 2,800 cases of COVID-19 and with positive cases in the Vale of Glamorgan up by 0.7%. However, she pointed out this rise had been anticipated and it was expected that the Vale would see a slight ‘see-sawing’ in the rise and fall in such cases. It was also important to point out that such slight variations were starting from a relatively low baseline in terms of the numbers of percentage of positive cases within the Vale.

As touched upon earlier in the meeting, the Head of Human Resources and Organisational Development referred to the roll out of the vaccine for COVID-19, which continued at pace, with care workers, staff working at special schools and at Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) who provide personal or special care to clients, receiving vaccinations. This would include a ‘mopping up’ of those staff involved in intimate personal and complex needs such as the provision of tracheostomy care.

In terms of the vaccination roll out to other staff and the wider public, the 65-69 year-old age group was now being targeted in conjunction with GPs and the vaccination of the 60-64 age group was also underway at the mass immunisation centres. For those left in the 70+ age group that had not been vaccinated as yet, the Council’s Communications Team were encouraging them to get in contact with the health authorities in order to obtain their vaccine if desired. There was also a focus on other ‘hard to reach’ groups such as the Travelling Community and the homeless in order to encourage vaccination take up amongst them. Unpaid Carers vaccinations would commence shortly as part of Cohort 6.

School lateral flow tests would commence shortly (1st March 2021) and strong messages were being disseminated to schools informing parents’ behaviour.

The Director of Learning and Skills wished to add that communications would be key to informing parents’ behaviour around the reopening of schools, with the emphasis on reinforcing the ‘Hands, Face and Space’ message to help contain the spread of COVID-19.

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Regarding Schools, the Health, Safety & Wellbeing Manager wished to add that risk assessments were being undertaken around reopening and COVID-19, with the Principal HR Business Partner also referring to COVID-19 testing at schools and the use of lateral flow testing from the 1st March 2021; although supplies of these kits could be provided much earlier if schools required them.

With reference to the Mass Vaccination Centre at Barry, the Forum was informed that the centre had been fully utilised, comparing extremely favourably to other vaccination centres around the country.

Finally, the Chairman and the Forum wished to congratulate Council staff and others involved in making the vaccination roll-out in the Vale of Glamorgan such a success.

It was subsequently

AGREED – T H A T the update on the on the Covid Pandemic – including progress on vaccinations and testing be noted.

(I) Management of Attendance and Staff Wellbeing (HR) -

The report provided the management of attendance figures for the period 1st April 2020 to the 31st December 2020 and comparative data for the same period in 2019.

The Operational Manager Employee Services explained that the report was one of a number of updates which were sent regularly to Cabinet and Scrutiny Committee(s) as well as to this Forum.

He stated that overall, there had been a decrease in absences, and this would normally be good news but for the impact of COVID-19. Indeed, this had also impacted the comparison of the current data with last year's information as you would not be comparing 'like for like'. The Operational Manager Employee Services also informed the Forum that absence from work relating to self-isolation measures for Covid-19 were not counted as sickness and therefore not in the attendance/absence figures. COVID-19 had also led to the Council and staff operating differently, with emerging issues around 'presenteeism' and the need for staff to balance working remotely and childcare and home schooling.

The Operational Manager Employee Services explained that despite an overall decrease in absence figures there had still been 'peaks' such as when schools reopened in September 2020 and variances between short – and long – term levels of absences (for example, there had been some rises in short term absence compared to longer term absence).

The Operational Manager Employee Services subsequently referred to the top reasons for absence within the report and highlighted the following:

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- Operations as a reason for absence had dropped down the list (currently the 5th highest reason for staff to be absent). The Operational Manager Employee Services explained this was due to the cancellation of many regular operations resulting from COVID-19; however, it was felt that this would change once restrictions had been lifted and this factor would once again rise within the absence breakdown.
- Clearly COVID-19 had risen in the list of absence reasons – rising from 11th place to 6th over the last quarter. As part of this, any instances of staff with ‘Long-COVID’ would need to be considered, with suitable support given to them by the Council.
- The issue of stress featured high up within the list for reasons for absence, though non work-related stress remained a greater cause than the work-related variety.
- Musculoskeletal also remained a key factor in absence; in terms of working from home, it was essential that staff with such conditions were given suitable equipment in order to help mitigate these.

The Operational Manager Employee Services stated that the information provided helped the Council to understand the needs and issues of staff and therefore it could act accordingly.

Councillor Johnson wished to raise two key points in relation to the data provided. Firstly, he remained concerned about a potential culture of ‘presenteeism’ emerging – particularly for those staff working remotely from home - and sought reassurance from Human Resources and Trade Unions that staff were only doing their jobs if they were well. Was the recent drop in periods of absence due to presenteeism and childcare? Secondly, he wanted to know what the impact of the Winter months had been on staff in terms of mental health and general wellbeing.

Mr. Pappas (Unison) added that, from the Trade Union perspective, there had been several cases relayed to them whereby working from home for staff had proved difficult, with limited or cramped space causing issues or due to the noises or even smells from nearby neighbours’ houses. Therefore, it may be better for such staff to work 1-2 days in the office in order to mitigate the pressures of working from home. He also felt that staff with minor illness or effects from COVID-19 were more likely to carry on working when at home and for staff working remotely to work for longer than their contracted hours.

The Head of Human Resources and Organisational Development responded to the queries and comments raised by Councillor Johnson and Mr. Pappas by saying that Human Resources (HR) and line managers were delivering strong messages to staff in order to deter people from working if ill and to take time out when working remotely, such as by doing physical activity in order to boost wellbeing. This was being proactively encouraged to support staff wellbeing.

Furthermore, by reviewing the management of attendance figures, key issues could be identified, such as musculoskeletal and mental health/stress and programmes had been put in place to support those whose mental health had been impacted by the pandemic. Certainly, mental health issues had been

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exacerbated by the Winter period and by feelings of isolation for staff, as such the support the Council was offering would continue to be reviewed.

As part of counteracting the issues raised by the Elected Members and Trade Unions, the Head of Human Resources and Organisational Development explained that HR were asking staff where they wished to work once 'normality' had returned, with the majority stating that they wanted a mix of working from home and coming to work in their usual office/workplace environment. She also referred to the work undertaken with the Communications, Occupational Health, Exercise Referral Teams and Wellbeing Champions, with the creation of a site on Staffnet+ relating to health and wellbeing advice. This focused on key areas such as Physical Health, Mental Health and Financial Wellbeing and live/recorded sessions for staff to engage in activities such as Yoga and Tai Chi as well as exercise that could do be done from a chair or workstation.

Also, links had been established with groups such as MIND and staff could book virtual 'mindfulness' classes via iDev (offered via the Samye Centre in Cardiff). Financial advice and support were also available to staff (including one to one sessions with a financial advisor) which had proved to be popular – particularly for staff with partners who may have been made redundant or furloughed due to COVID-19. The Head of Human Resources and Organisational Development also stated that trade union representatives could add additional content or advice to Staffnet+ if they required. She also referred to the Council's Wellbeing Champions who were available to provide support to staff and disseminate what help and advice was available.

The Vice Chairman (Unison) also wished to make members aware of the Mental Health Champions who were available to staff if needed. As stated previously, she informed the Forum that unions were seeing several welfare applications coming through from staff due to their partners being furloughed or losing their jobs or their pay being impacted by sickness.

The Chairman also pointed to the potential increase in domestic violence and/or marital breakdown due to COVID-19 and the lockdown. The Head of Human Resources and Organisational Development replied that she would provide the Forum with the latest statistics on domestic incidents, adding that due to COVID-19 not all instances of domestic abuse were necessarily being reported at this time.

It was subsequently

AGREED – T H A T the report on the Management of Attendance and Staff Wellbeing be noted.

(m) Oracle HR / Payroll / Finance Upgrade (HR) –

The Operational Manager Employee Services updated the Forum on the new system, explaining this would replace the current Oracle software being used which was now 14 years old and therefore required upgrading. This would involve

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moving to a cloud-based system for payroll, finance and procurement. Currently the upgrade was on week two of the process or upgrade plan, with the Council looking at what worked well and what did not regarding the new system, as well as what essential information needed to be transferred over from Oracle such as legacy pensions data.

Subsequently, the upgrade process would go through a 16-week design phase, with a further 4 weeks of testing and refinement and then an 8-week final build phase. The Operational Manager Employee Services stated that the new system should go live by the end of 2021.

It was subsequently

AGREED – T H A T the update on the Oracle HR / Payroll / Finance Upgrade be noted.

(n) Verbal Update on Health and Safety Policy (HR) -

The new Health, Safety & Wellbeing Manager was introduced to the Forum, who subsequently outlined to them the key challenges around Health and Safety within the Council at this time:

- The current Health and Safety system and policy required updating;
- The current Health and Safety policy was out of date; ideally this policy should be reviewed annually which had not been done. This had now been rectified and the updated draft policy was currently with the Trade Unions for review, with the policy then going to the Strategic Leadership Team;
- The current Oracle system is not able to provide accident statistics in the way the Directorates need them, so these were being collated using an Excel spreadsheet. The updated Oracle system for accident/incident/near miss recording was being investigated;
- The need for greater collaboration with other teams and departments within the Council in order to ensure compliance with Health and Safety legislation;
- Work had started on a project to update the Council's Fire Risk Assessment schedule. Post-Grenfell there had been a change in emphasis on fire safety for buildings. It would take some time to review the schedule to ensure that all fire risk assessments have been completed by a competent person.

Councillor Johnson asked about the Council's Corporate Risk Register (which was reviewed at the Audit and Corporate Performance and Resources Committees) and whether the risks just outlined by the Health, Safety & Wellbeing Manager were reflected within the Register. The Health, Safety & Wellbeing Manager replied that the Corporate Risk Register would benefit from considering the risks above to ensure they were adequately reflected at Corporate or Service Risk levels.

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The Head of Policy & Business Transformation suggested that the risks outlined by Health and Safety could be reviewed with a view to incorporating any detail within the Corporate Risk Register which in turn was reviewed by Audit and Corporate Performance and Resources Committees.

The Chairman stressed the importance of effective Health and Safety measures to the functioning of the Council and indeed to the wider community it supports. Mr. Pappas (Unison) echoed those comments by stating that the Trade Unions fully supported the work and new approach undertaken around Health and Safety.

The Health, Safety & Wellbeing Manager wished to add that as well as the ongoing risks and challenges faced by the Council in dealing with Health and Safety, there had also been positive work undertaken in this field such as with the home work station assessments successfully carried out for Council staff.

It was subsequently

AGREED – T H A T the update on the Health and Safety Policy be noted.

(o) Presentation on Reshaping Services (PBT) –

The Head of Policy & Business Transformation updated the Forum on Reshaping Services, stating that this was the Council's programme for transformation since 2015. The aim was to reshape the Council in order to meet the future needs of the local community whilst addressing and mitigating ongoing financial challenges, for example, the need to make ongoing efficiency savings. Also, to provide services differently and develop partners, as well as the Council, in order to meet future challenges. This had resulted in significant change for the Council and its partners, with new ways of working for Council staff, internal changes, such as building a new workforce relationship via the Staff Charter and greater community empowerment with Town and Community Councils taking over community libraries and other services.

There had been clear successes with this transformation work (significant financial savings, new models, new Corporate Plans and values and so on) but there remained key areas for improvement or consideration around reshaping:

- Had it become too finance driven?
- Too governance heavy?
- Too inward looking?
- Too slow?
- Lacking ambition and risk?
- Not innovative enough?

As part of these considerations it was important to look now at what should be driving the priorities for transforming the way the Council works in conjunction with learning from the previous Reshaping Services work, delivering the Vale's Coronavirus Recovery Strategy and progressing the Corporate Plan:

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- Opportunities to take action on 'big community' issues. To look anew at how the Council worked with the community, partners and the third sector, to take action on challenges such as progressing community empowerment (by creating a legacy for 'Vale Heroes'), tackling Climate Change, food poverty, preventing homelessness and encouraging healthy lifestyles and integrating healthcare.
- Opportunities to change the way the Council works. Through the use of digital solutions (such as remote working) and adapting where and how staff worked, the Council would be 'future – proofing' the way the Council delivered services in the future, but balancing this with staff needs such as the ongoing need for 'collision space' in order for staff to still collaborate directly and effectively.
- Opportunities to use resources differently by reviewing how the Council used its financial, physical and human resources in order to deliver efficient and sustainable services.

The Head of Policy & Business Transformation also outlined the 'enablers' for this work, for example, through using digital technology, supporting the Council workforce and partners to develop and learn, developing the Council's culture and management/governance arrangements.

He added that the priorities identified as part of this review of the transformation programme, in conjunction with the Strategic Leadership Team (SLT), would be taken to the Cabinet in March 2021 to seek endorsement to develop a more outward focused, multi-faceted transformational change programme.

Mr. Pappas (Unison) referred to the financial savings made through Reshaping Services and how COVID-19 showed the impact of such deep cuts on key services. It was also crucial that the ongoing transformation of services factored in an aging workforce and the need for upskilling such staff in order to utilise digital technology. He cited the example of Council drivers who needed to complete the Driver Certificate of Professional Competence (CPC) online but who did not have the necessary digital skills in order to do this effectively. The Head of Policy & Business Transformation responded that this was a good example of where key enablers could be used to help staff and such issues could be considered as part of the review of the HR Strategy which included consultation with staff.

Mr. Pappas (Unison) also raised the issue of the Big Fresh Catering Company, which, due to COVID-19, had seen most of its staff furloughed due to its core business (schools) being closed and asked how long this could be sustained. Such staff were on low incomes and he questioned how long they could sustain this. The Director of Learning and Skills replied that with the gradual reopening of schools (and the move from free school vouchers to meals), staff from Big Fresh would be gradually taken off furlough, adding that staff would receive support through Covid Hardship Funding. Also, Big Fresh had continued to operate outside its core business and had generated a profit as a result. The Head of Policy & Business Transformation stated that with a phased return of schools, staff coming off furlough would be subsequently re-skilled in order to return to their roles within the core business of providing catering to schools.

No.

It was subsequently

AGREED – T H A T the Presentation on Reshaping Services be noted.

(p) Presentation on Climate Change (PBT) -

The Head of Policy & Business Transformation presented to the Forum the Council's response to Climate Change which would align with the Council's values: ambitious, open, together and proud and required changes to how the Council did things as well as working closely with partners and the wider community.

The Climate Emergency was declared by the Council in 2019, with work ongoing to address this, but more was needed to be done. Such work included:

- Improvements to street lighting;
- The implementation of the 21st Century Schools and Colleges Programme;
- Ongoing improvement to the housing stock;
- Running consultations with staff and gathering feedback from partners and the wider public; and
- Work with partner bodies such as the Public Services Boards (PSBs) who also had signed up to the Climate Emergency Charter (on the 5th February 2021).

The Head of Policy & Business Transformation emphasised that moving to a single framework was key, and there were challenges in three areas:

- The need for strong leadership;
- Fulfilling Council responsibilities to current and future services; and
- Making a difference in improvements via 21st Century Schools and Colleges Programme and Council housing stock as well as digital transformation.

A plan setting out the actions that will be taken within these three areas was reported to be currently under development. The draft plan, once approved by Cabinet, would then be consulted upon. The Council's Insight Board would monitor progress made on dealing with the climate emergency in conjunction with the Reshaping Board, SLT, external expertise, Council staff, other stakeholders and the Council's Scrutiny Committees. Progress would also be reported back to the Full Council later on in the year.

Both the Chairman and Councillor Johnson queried on how the Local – and Strategic – Development Plans would impact on the Council's climate change response and vice versa. The Head of Policy & Business Transformation replied that he would speak to colleagues in Planning and obtain a detailed response to these queries.

It was subsequently

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AGREED – T H A T the Presentation on Climate Change be noted.

(q) Verbal Update on Staff Accommodation (PBT) -

The Head of Policy & Business Transformation updated the Forum on this topic, stating that due to the current level of restrictions in place by the Welsh Government, it remained essential for Council staff to work from home in order to minimise the numbers of workers coming into Council offices and sharing workspaces, unless there was an essential and permitted need for them to be there.

In conjunction with this, work was being undertaken to review accommodation and the way colleagues could work in the future, such as home or remote working and ensuring that the relevant assessments were made to ensure this could be done by staff safely and successfully. In tandem with such assessments, managers would need to check in with their staff in order to check on their wellbeing. Inevitably, the challenges and issues around new ways of working would also change in time, such as a decrease in home-schooling demands on staff from their children once schools reopened.

Following the Head of Policy & Business Transformation's update, the Chairman referred to what the Head of Human Resources and Organisational Development had said earlier about staff wanting to have a mix of working from home and working in an office environment in order to have the opportunity to interact face to face with staff once restrictions started to be relaxed.

It was subsequently

AGREED – T H A T the verbal update on Staff Accommodation be noted.

(r) Verbal Update on the Annual Delivery Plan (PBT) -

The Head of Policy & Business Transformation updated the Forum on the Annual Delivery Plan, with the latest version drafted around the Council's four Wellbeing Objectives to be reported to Cabinet in March and then on to Full Council in April. This would, as previously done in the other annual plans, incorporate the service plans from each service line into a single, overarching plan to be implemented from April 2021.

The Head of Policy & Business Transformation also wished to thank the Trade Unions and Associations for their input into the Plan, as well as through the ongoing interaction with Council staff.

It was subsequently

AGREED – T H A T the verbal update on the Annual Delivery Plan be noted.

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(s) Date of Next Meeting –

AGREED – T H A T the next Joint Consultative Forum meeting would be held on 19th April, 2021.