

JOINT CONSULTATIVE FORUM

Minutes of a remote meeting held on 14th February, 2022.

Present: Councillor N.C. Thomas (Chair); Councillors G. John, Dr. I.J. Johnson, A.R. Robertson and L.O. Rowlands.

Representatives of Trade Unions: N. Butler (NASUWT), C. Brown (ASCL), M. Canavan (NEU), C. Davies (GMB), S Greenslade (Unison), G. Hallett (NAHT), T. Greaves (GMB), G. Pappas (Unison) and S. Townsend-Ryan (Unison / Vice-Chair).

Officers: S. Alderman, T. Baker, J. Ballantine, L. Bonni, M. Coles, G. Davies, T. Dickinson, E. Morgan, T. Narbrough, A. Phillips, M. Thomas and S. Williams.

(a) Apologies for Absence –

These were received from Councillors P. Drake, M.J.G. Morgan and S. Newman (Unison).

(b) Minutes and Matters Arising –

AGREED – T H A T the minutes of the meeting held on 18th October, 2021 be approved as a correct record.

(c) Declarations of Interest –

No declarations were received.

(d) Trade Union Items –

None received at this time.

(e) Minutes of Directorate Consultative Groups (For Information) –

(i) Minutes of Social Services Consultative Forum: 8th September, 2021

The Forum considered the minutes relating to Social Services Consultative Forum on 8th September, 2021.

It was subsequently

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

(ii) Minutes of Social Services Health and Safety Committee: 25th August, 2021

The Forum considered the minutes relating to Social Services Health and Safety Committee on 25th August 2021.

It was subsequently

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

(iii) Minutes of the Visible Services and Housing Consultative Forum: 6th October, 2021

The Forum considered the minutes relating to the Visible Services and Housing Consultative Forum on 6th October, 2021.

It was subsequently

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

(f) 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:

- (i) Learning and Skills JCF – 7th February, 2022 and 8th June, 2022.
- (ii) Social Services JCF – 3rd February, 2022.
- (iii) Visible Services and Housing JCF – TBA.
- (iv) Social Services Health and Safety Committee – TBA.

(g) Verbal update regarding GLAM and the Ethnic Minority Staff Network (HR) –

The Forum heard firstly from Tom Narbrough, the Chairman of GLAM, the Council's staff network for LGBT+ colleagues and their allies:

- This had been a challenging time for GLAM, with the ongoing impact of the pandemic and with the GLAM Chair, Matthew Curtis, who had been instrumental in developing GLAM since its launch in 2019, leaving the Vale and Tom had been elected by the GLAM steering group as his replacement.
- As a result of the challenges outlined above, the new Chair has looked at revisiting the purpose and processes around GLAM in order to ensure that it is operating effectively and is 'fit for purpose'.
- Despite the ongoing impact of the pandemic, GLAM had continued to provide information via StaffNet and with submissions for Stonewall.

- GLAM would be undertaking a 'soft' relaunch of the network's governance structure and to reengage with staff, which would include:
 - Holding the AGM later in the year (May 2022) in order to discuss the future structure of the network as well to agree to conduct elections for the steering group
 - As part of the interim priorities set for the group, GLAM was looking to invite in both subject-specific champions (such as Bi Visibility) and service area-specific champions to reach out to wider staff including those on the frontline. It was anticipated that once the situation around COVID-19 had improved that GLAM champions would meet and present the network to work teams.
 - To regularly maintain and update the GLAM membership database as part its efforts to increase it membership and allies
 - To continue key work such as the corporate scrutiny function on policy areas concerning HR and other corporate policy functions as a consultancy body, in order that the individuals and groups represented by GLAM had their voices heard on such matters
 - Assisting other groups and networks to get established within the Council, i.e. the Diverse Network
 - Going forward, GLAM would be working closely with local business and the Council to promote the Vale as a safe and enjoyable space for LGBTQ+ persons and other groups
 - To continue promoting the importance of submissions to Stonewall and relating the efforts of individual staff and areas to any improved feedback.

The Chair wished to reiterate the importance of inclusion for LGBTQ+ groups and staff within the Council as well those with other protected characteristics and for such updates to be presented to this Forum on a regular basis.

Martine Coles, the chair of the Diverse Staff Network (formerly the Ethnic Minority Staff Network) provided their update to the Forum:

- It had been extremely challenging to set up the network, with the need to establish the key principles of the steering group and to ensure that minority groups within the Council were genuinely heard and part of the conversation around policy, etc, within the Council. Despite this, the Network had been successfully established and had trained and established the steering group.
- The Network had a 'safe space' meeting with the Strategic Leadership Team (SLT) in order to discuss greater awareness of ethnic minority groups.
- Senior management had subsequently committed to supporting the Network through actions such as greater training and awareness raising for issues such as race awareness and unconscious bias.
- The network appreciated the importance of increasing both the network's direct membership and the number of allies in order to support its aims, i.e., encouraging allies to attend meetings of the network. It was important to emphasise that all staff had a responsibility to highlight issues around diversity, not just minority groups.
- The Network were also looking to recruit members and allies from trade unions and staff associations.

- Overall, the above would help to increase representation and opportunities for the Council's staff from various ethnic groups as well as increase awareness of issues around equality and diversity among staff.

Following the update, the following comments and queries were raised by members of the Forum:

- G. Pappas (Unison Representative) and G. Hallett (NAHT Representative) both stated that trade unions and staff associations were keen to support the Diverse Network. In response, the Diverse Network Chair stated that she would send out information to the Forum regarding membership and other opportunities within the Network as well as ensuring that the Network was more accessible to front line Council staff and therefore more representative i.e., including teachers and those in waste management. These measures would help to increase understanding on issues around race and broader diversity issues and to help identify instances of prejudice and to deal with these.
- The Chair had previously attended meetings of the Diverse Network as an ally and wanted to receive further invites to meetings of this Network and GLAM in order to assist them. Both representatives from each of these groups stated they would send further invites to their meetings and events going forward.

It was subsequently

AGREED – T H A T the verbal update regarding GLAM and the Ethnic Minority Staff Network be noted.

(h) Quarter 3 Sickness Report 2021/22 (HR) -

The Operational Manager Employee Services updated the Forum on the following:

- Regarding absences due to COVID-19, such absences were not recorded for the first 10 days. Also, for those staff working from home there could be instances where those suffering only mild or no effects after testing positive for COVID-19 could be continuing to work, whereas this would not be possible for frontline staff such as those in waste management, in social care or in education.
- The overall figure of 8.33 days lost per FTE for December 2021 showed an increase in sickness absence compared to the same period in the previous year (6.12) and is also over the monthly target of 6.68 days lost per FTE. This was one of the highest figures for the Q3 period in several years, with the end of year figure expected to be 11 days lost per FTE. However, other Local Authorities were also facing a similar increase.
- As well as recording sickness and absence, collating these under various key categories, the Council were also using this data in order to manage such absences more effectively. This included the Wellbeing programme and its activities undertaken via the Council intranet and iDev and with support from the Health, Welfare and Safety team i.e., Yoga classes.

- Currently, long term absences stood at 76%, with the short-term equivalent at 24%. This was an improvement to the previous breakdowns for absences where this was 80% and 20% respectively.
- The Operational Manager Employee Services wished to add a caveat on comparing absence and sickness data with those of other Local Authorities, due to the Vale of Glamorgan Council still having managed key front-line services 'in house' and so encompassed roles with potentially high rates of sickness and absence, with other Councils outsourcing such services.

Following the update, the following comments and queries were raised by members of the Forum:

- G. Pappas (Unison Representative) stated that the figures were unsurprising due to the ongoing pandemic, such as the impact of COVID-19 on primary schools.
- G. Hallett (NAHT Representative) added that school staff absences continued due to COVID-19, with some schools being hit harder than others resulting in significant staff absences which had been exacerbated by a shortage of supply teachers to help fill these gaps. C. Brown (ASCL) added that this had been particularly acute before Christmas for some schools, but had improved slightly after this period, with less school year groups needing to be kept home due to the pandemic. Furthermore, M. Canavan (NEU) highlighted the ongoing pressures on teachers regarding holding examinations, with ongoing staff and pupil sickness, particularly in secondary schools.
- The Chair asked if the new school buildings at Pencoedtre High School with their better ventilation, etc. were also helping to limit the spread of COVID-19, to which C. Brown (ASCL) replied that he was unsure but the greater open spaces, etc. within the new school buildings could be helping.
- Councillor Robertson asked about those children not attending school and whether this was due to them simply being in contact with persons testing positive for COVID-19 or if they were diagnosed as having it themselves. Was this also leading to some children not returning to school at all? This was also echoed by the Chair, with media reports of a cohort of 'ghost children' - youngsters who dropped off school registers in lockdown. It was explained that some children had in fact not returned to school who were not sick. Pupil attendance on average was running at approximately 75%. Some parents were concerned due to the ongoing risks to their children due to the pandemic and it was difficult to challenge poor school attendance due to these concerns.

It was subsequently

AGREED – T H A T the update on Quarter 3 Sickness Report 2021/22 be noted.

(i) Health, Safety and Wellbeing Team Report – January 2022 (HR) –

The Health, Safety & Wellbeing Manager updated the Forum on the following:

- The Health, Safety and Wellbeing Team (H&SW) was still relatively new to the Council, but enthusiastic, with 3 members still completing the relevant qualifications although they did have experience of different sectors.
- The HS&W team had undertaken a number of audits over the last three quarters, including COVID-19 inspections of schools, and H&SW inspections of schools and other Council buildings taking place.
- There had been a roll out of 100 places for online IOSH managing safety training, which had not been recharged to the relevant Directorates. The team had also worked with OD & Learning to develop iDev courses in fire safety, asbestos, legionella and first aid.
- Quarterly statistics were being provided to Health and Safety Committees, highlighting 'big ticket' incidents to senior management and to move from simple recommendations to more proactive improvement plans.
- Key projects now included the completion of more HS&W procedures, hybrid working being one area for development and further training in order to promote a positive H&SW culture.

Following the update, the following comments and queries were raised by members of the Forum:

- N. Butler (NASUWT) queried the lack of secondary school input on accidents / incidents recorded as verbal abuse and highlighted its negative impact on recruitment and retention for schools. The explanation given for this was that only high-level type incidents were recorded for the purposes of the HS&W statistics, therefore not including all instances of verbal abuse, but these could be provided at future meetings of JCF, as well as looking at procedures around dealing with and recording verbal abuse.
- The Chair echoed the concerns raised about the impact of verbal abuse to education staff at primary and secondary schools, as well as the need to raise awareness of what defined verbal abuse in schools, to which the Head of Strategy, Community Learning and Resources replied that a wider discussion was needed with the Council and schools concerning verbal abuse, how they were recorded, their scope and how they can be dealt with.
- Councillor John stated that this report (and future updates) would be extremely useful to the Forum. Both he and the Chair asked for a further update on the accidents of concern contained within the report, for example, on the handyman who fell from a ladder, he had now recovered, and the incident where the Loader was in the back of a recycling lorry and the doors were closed on him, was also on the road to recovery. In addition, HS&W were working closely with trade unions to address these issues and to take preventative measures i.e., with the recycling / loading incident, a site foreman had been put in place at the waste facility and the loaders no longer went into the rear of the waste vehicle which was a breach of procedure.
- The Head of Human Resources and Organisational Development stressed the importance of the HS&W team in terms of both its work and the culture it

fostered within the Council, as well as its role in working in partnership with the Senior Leadership Team (SLT), schools and trade unions and the need for feedback from all parties regarding HS&W reporting. The chair added that the role of the HS&W team was important in ensuring that the necessary checks, balances, policies and equipment were in place to ensure a safe working environment for Council staff and its clients.

It was subsequently

AGREED – T H A T the update on Health, Safety and Wellbeing Team Report – January 2022 be noted.

(j) Cardiff and Vale Pension Scheme Update –

The Operational Manager Employee Services updated the Forum on the following in order to raise awareness around the governance and process for the Cardiff and Vale of Glamorgan Pension Fund:

- The Pension Scheme and its 'pot' was one of the largest in Wales.
- The Pension Board role was to help manage the scheme in order to ensure the effective and efficient governance and administration of the scheme.
- There were approximately 45,000 active members of the Pension Fund.
- The Fund also paid to around 12,000 pensioners and a key part of the Board's role was that this was done successfully.
- In terms of figures for those members of the Fund who had deferred their pension payments (i.e. had moved on to the private sector) or undecided (those staff who had left and not sure what they will do with their Vale pension) these numbered 13,786 and 2,579 respectively, based on the most recent figures.
- The Pension Fund would be going through another valuation shortly (by the end of March 2022).
- Pensions data would be sent off on to i-connect for Cardiff Council to manage and to ensure up to date information for employees viewing this on the Member Self Service (MSS).
- The MSS ensured that staff could access their pension information easily and at any time as well as being able to clearly understand how their pension worked, to calculate this based on multiple retirement dates, amend their personal data, etc.
- Currently 28% of Vale of Glamorgan Council staff have registered for MSS, which was similar to the numbers seen at Cardiff Council. It was therefore important to raise awareness of this service to frontline and other staff, as well as ensuring its success by making it more attractive to employees to access their pension data in this way.
- The Pension Board would also be looking at where the pension fund was invested, such as moving to low carbon and ethical investments, but this would need to be a gradual and measured process due to the ongoing and significant investment and returns from areas that may not fall into the former categories (i.e., BP).

Following the update, the following comments and queries were raised by members of the Forum:

- The Chair stated that various pressure groups regularly lobbied for the Vale and other pension funds to move to more ethical investments, and this was a trend that would hopefully continue.
- G. Pappas (Unison Representative) explained that trade unions were working closely with Human Resources (HR) and Employee Services around the pension system such as training staff on how to use MSS and would also be having a representative joining the Pension Board (as well as the recent inclusion of the Operational Manager Employee Services on the Board). He stressed that the Board helped to invest the pension wisely if not always as ethically as it hoped to do.
- The Chair stressed the importance of making staff aware that updates on pay and pensions on MSS and the electronic payslip system were on these systems now as traditionally they had been on the paper versions.
- Councillor Robertson stated that many firms considered previously as a non-ethical investment (such as energy businesses) were now investing considerably in green technologies and therefore moving away from such investments maybe premature and could impact pension returns.
- The Operational Manager Employee Services explained that the move for the Pension Fund toward more ethical forms of investment would be a long-term project and a percentage of the pension was invested in a Wales-wide fund for extra protection and investment opportunities.

It was subsequently

AGREED – T H A T the Cardiff and Vale Pension Scheme Update be noted.

(k) Oracle Cloud Upgrade –

The Operational Manager Employee Services updated the Forum on the following:

- The upgrade to the new Oracle cloud-based system had been a challenge, particularly with the need to run the current system in tandem with the new one temporarily and with large numbers of Council staff still working at home, but matters were progressing and this had been a 'learning curve' which could be used to inform future projects of this scale for the Council.
- The 'go-live' date had been moved from April to August due to the opportunity of starting the system in the summer break time which could be achieved far more easily.
- System testing was still being undertaken, by uploading 'real' data to Oracle to the test environment in order to identify what worked and what did not.
- For the HR, Payroll, procurement and other systems and processes to be housed on Oracle, each of these would have a different end user, and therefore it was important to test and assess how these various processes worked under the Oracle's 'umbrella' cloud-based system.

- The Forum were shown examples of the ‘dashboard’ and tab-based layout of the online system, that staff and / or managers could access and could update key bits of personal or team data (such as absence data) either automatically or submit for approval. Certain restricted areas of data such as National Insurance numbers would not be accessible and ‘greyed out’.

Following the update, the following comments and queries were raised by members of the Forum:

- G. Pappas (Unison Representative) stated that the Oracle Cloud based system was a good product, and trade unions had been working with the Operational Manager Employee Services in order to get front line staff up to speed on how to use the new software and where this was a challenge to help staff obtain key documents in an offline format, i.e., paper copies of payslips for staff who cannot access Epay. They were reaching out to such staff (including residential and educational workers) in order to train them in the use of digital technology although this was still challenging due to COVID-19 restrictions and the limit on how much face-to-face training could be done.
- The Chair asked about any potential cyber security issues or vulnerabilities for the new system with staff accessing it through various devices. The Operational Manager Employee Services explained that an assessment of the security of the new system was being undertaken via the ICT Team and there was ongoing testing of the security and any vulnerabilities for this cloud-based software.

It was subsequently

AGREED – T H A T the update on the Oracle Cloud Upgrade be noted.

(l) Date of Next Meeting –

AGREED – T H A T the date of the next Joint Consultative Forum meeting would be Monday, 4th April, 2022 at 10.00 a.m.