

JOINT CONSULTATIVE FORUM

Minutes of a remote meeting held on 17th October, 2022.

Present: Councillor S. Campbell, J.E. Charles, M. Cowpe, W.A. Hennessy, S.D. Perkes and N.C. Thomas.

Representatives of Trade Unions: J. Ballantine (GMB), L. Bonni (GMB), J. Davis (Unison), C. Davies (GMB), G. Davies (Unison), M. Morris (NASUWT), G. Pappas (Unison), M. Canavan (NEU), and S. Townsend-Ryan (Unison).

Officers: V. Davidson, T. Dickinson, L. Eddins, M. Hudson, G. Jones, M. Thomas, and S. Williams

(a) Appointment of Chair –

RESOLVED – T H A T Councillor S. Campbell be appointed Chair for the duration of the current Administration.

(b) Notification from the Trade Unions of the Name of the Vice-Chair –

RESOLVED – T H A T S. Townsend-Ryan be appointed to the position of Vice-Chair for the duration of the current Administration.

(c) Apologies for Absence –

These were received from S. Alderman, C. Brown (ASCL), Councillor P. Drake, G. Hallett (NAHT), P. Ham and T. Greaves (GMB).

(d) Minutes and Matters Arising –

AGREED – T H A T the minutes of the meeting held on 4th April, 2022 be approved as a correct record.

(e) Declarations of Interest –

Councillor Cowpe declared an interest, in that they were a member of a Trade Union. As this did not represent a prejudicial interest, Councillor Cowpe remained for the duration of the meeting.

Councillor Perkes declared an interest, in that they worked for Cardiff and Vale University Health Board within the Unison Health Branch. As this did not represent a prejudicial interest, Councillor Perkes remained for the duration of the meeting.

(f) Trade Union Items –

None received at this time.

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

(i) Minutes of the Learning and Skills JCF: 7th February 2022

The Forum considered the minutes relating to Learning and Skills JCF on 7th February, 2022.

It was subsequently

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

(ii) Minutes of the Learning and Skills JCF: 8th June, 2022

The Forum considered the minutes relating to Learning and Skills JCF on 8th June, 2022.

It was subsequently

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

(iii) Minutes of the Learning and Skills JCF: 3rd October, 2022

The Forum considered the minutes relating to the Learning and Skills JCF on 3rd October, 2022.

It was subsequently

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

(iv) Social Services Health and Safety Committee: 24th March, 2022.

The Forum considered the minutes relating to Social Services Health and Safety Committee on 24th March, 2022.

It was subsequently

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

(v) Social Services Health and Safety Committee: 23rd June, 2022

The Forum considered the minutes relating to Social Services Health and Safety Committee on 2nd March, 2022.

It was subsequently

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

(vi) Visible Services and Housing Trade Union Consultative Meeting: 2nd March, 2022

The Forum considered the minutes relating to Visible Services and Housing Trade Union Consultative Meeting on 2nd March, 2022.

It was subsequently

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

(vii) Visible Services and Housing Trade Union Consultative Meeting: 4th May, 2022

The Forum considered the minutes relating to Visible Services and Housing Trade Union Consultative Meeting on 4th May, 2022.

It was subsequently

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

(viii) Visible Services and Housing Trade Union Consultative Meeting: 7th September, 2022

The Forum considered the minutes relating to Visible Services and Housing Trade Union Consultative Meeting on 7th September, 2022.

It was subsequently

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

(h) Dates of Future Directorate Consultative Groups 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 – 8th February, 2023 and 5th June, 2023.
- (ii) Visible Services and Housing JCF – 5th October, 2022.

(i) Budgetary Pressures and Medium-Term Financial Plan – Report to Cabinet: 6th October, 2022 –

The update was presented by the Operational Manager – Accountancy, who set out the following:

- The background and timetable to the strategy process and timings for the Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) and Budget, including a look at the Council's need to reset the focus for the coming 5-year period, and the engagement with the Strategic Leadership Team (SLT), Cabinet, Scrutiny, working groups, its tie-in with the Welsh Government (WG) settlement and ultimately its final proposals to be considered and approved by Cabinet and Full Council.
- The details around the Council's Financial Strategy i.e. delivering the Corporate Plan, ensuring it was robust and sustainable, the need to review the Council's reserves, the impact of the cost of living crisis, to ensure finances were transparent and the need to deliver 'value for money'.
- The cost pressures on Council services, as well as the financial impact of staff pay awards, demographic trends, investment, savings and growth, the funding 'gap', a potentially lower WG settlement, etc.
- The need to balance the Council's budget and the means to achieve this i.e. through the lobbying of WG for more grant funding, reduce costs, etc.
- The need to identify and achieve savings via a comprehensive savings strategy and framework, i.e. through the review / use of the Corporate Asset and Digital Strategies, Contract / Procurement and Service reviews, etc.
- Similarly, a refreshed Capital Strategy would be taken to Cabinet alongside the MTFP and then on for further consultation and consideration by Scrutiny and final proposals to Full Council.
- The headlines for the Capital Strategy included the updating of the 2023/24 Programme and additional bids / funding from WG and via s.106. Key pressures on this included decarbonisation of the Council estate, the implementation of the Waste Strategy, food risk, inflation and rising interest rates (which would increase the cost of borrowing).
- This would tie-in with other Strategies and Plans i.e. the Hybrid Working and Treasury Management Strategies, with borrowing dropping out over the next few years and the continued use of internal borrowing whenever possible.
- Next steps would include the Budget Strategy going to Cabinet and Scrutiny, the need to evaluate the impact of the United Kingdom Government's Medium Term Fiscal Plan, WG Settlement in December and the final proposals on the financial strategy going to Cabinet and Full Council in early 2023.

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

- Regarding Councillor Perkes' query on spending on procurement and if this entailed out goings on areas such as agency staff on an annual basis, this was confirmed as being correct.

- G. Pappas (Unison Representative) commented on how the figures quoted within the report and presentation provided 'grim reading' and that the Trade Unions and employee organisations were working with the Council's Finance Team as part of its 'remodelling' exercise. The Operational Manager – Accountancy, explained that this was being led by Human Resources (HR), in conjunction with SLT and Trade Unions / employee representatives.
- The Chair commented on the good work that was being undertaken by Finance, Trade Unions and others in this area, during turbulent economic times.

It was subsequently

AGREED – T H A T the update on the Budgetary Pressures and Medium Term Financial Plan be noted.

(j) (i) Absence:
(a) Report to Cabinet: 9th June 2022

On the Cabinet report, the Operational Manager Employee Services referred to the absence rates set out which showed an increase from 8.59 days lost per FTE (April 2020 to March 2021) to 11.35 days lost per FTE (April 2021 to March 2022). This had been a challenging year, with those members of staff self-isolating not being recorded in the first part of the period.

Approximately 80% of absence was around long-term absence / sickness (which consisted of absence of more than four weeks).

Non-work-related stress still topped the reasons for absence, followed by Musculo-skeletal and work-related stress. The impact of Covid continued to be felt, with infection rates still high and the knock-on effects for staff in terms of operations and appointments via the NHS being delayed.

Work was being done with Care First, line managers, Trade Unions and HR to provide support to employees on long term sick / absence.

(b) Report to Senior Leadership Team: July 2022

The Operational Manager Employee Services outlined the quarterly report, with sickness absence up compared to the same period in the previous year.

Members were also informed that a Council wide staff survey had been undertaken including asking staff about 'presenteeism' i.e. staff continuing to work online / remotely despite being ill, in order to analyse and address this. Staff working despite them being ill, could impact productivity and their ability to work correctly or effectively.

Following the presentation of the above reports:

- Councillor Perkes stated it was important for staff to be supported in terms of sickness / absence and asked about whether sickness, particularly around stress (work / non-work related which accounted for a significant amount of sickness / absence combined) could be broken down by further detail and specific reasons, i.e. domestic abuse, cost of living, etc. The Operational Manager Employee Services explained that a further 'deep dive' of the information could be undertaken, which potentially could end up with a significant number of individual or 'grouped' reasons, but there would need to be caution in how this was presented as this could identify individual staff.
- Councillor Thomas also referred to the need for the Council to look at stress in more depth, and although the Council provided counselling services, people could often be unwilling to seek or engage with such help until it was too late. He also outlined the potentially serious 'Australian' strain of Influenza that would be emerging locally and asked what the Council was doing about this. The Operational Manager Employee Services explained that the Council was involved in an immunisation campaign and had obtained 2,000 flu vaccinations which would be offered to staff across the Council and Schools with Occupational Health going out to Council facilities. The Head of Human Resources and Organisational Development added that the Council would provide a greater focus on anxiety and depression impacting Council staff. The relevant data on this was looked at on a regular basis, but it was not always possible to 'drill down' into this, and it had to be caveated that the reason for sickness absence recorded may not necessarily reflect what the real reason for the sickness actually was. This was the reason for closer work with Line Managers in this area and to run trauma informed courses at schools, due to the impact on staff of the events of the last few years. They added that the Vale's Welfare Team had been extremely pro-active in tackling such issues with staff, with the Council looking to mitigate any increase in sickness absence going forward. The Trade Unions, etc. were also being consulted and would challenge the Council to improve its practices around tackling sickness absence.
- The Chair asked if Occupational Health logged the names of staff accessing support. It was explained that yes, details were obtained, but such services could also be obtained anonymously.
- G. Pappas (Unison Representative) stated that stress and anxiety was increasing among staff and Trade Union members due to the cost of living crisis. Some funding had been provided around this area to the Council (such as the Wales Union Learning Fund (WULF)) and a joint roadshow would be undertaken with Trade Unions and the Vale of Glamorgan Council to help raise awareness of these issues and to help tackle these.

It was subsequently

AGREED – T H A T the reports concerning sickness absence for the Cabinet and the Senior Leadership Team be noted.

(ii) Wellbeing

The Policy and Quality Assurance Officer, Resource Management and Safeguarding presented 'Improving Wellbeing in the Workplace and the Vale of Glamorgan Wellbeing Champions' to the Forum, outlining the Wellbeing Action Plan which included:

- The need to address increasing sickness absence, scoping staff welfare and wellbeing through surveying staff, looking at improving the organisational culture to address anxiety and stress for staff.
- Look at what employees needed i.e. greater empowerment, participation and building more effective leadership and relationships between leaders and employees.
- Wellbeing Champions (formerly Mental Health Champions but renamed to be more inclusive). Their work would focus in implementing the Action Plan, to engage with staff, look at good practice and ensure dialogue and information and health promotion keeps going (i.e. connecting online) with staff over key themes (menopause, alcohol, sleep, fitness, etc.), link in with the relevant charities and organise events and awareness raising i.e. the Wellbeing Champions arranged monthly wellbeing sessions based in the local parks. These were to ensure that staff could participate in a fully interactive way and also gave something back to the community (for example litter picking, path clearing). They were able to attend anytime within a given date and timeframe.
- On Staffnet+, staff were able to access information on dedicated wellbeing pages.

On the Chair's query about volunteering activities being held during paid working days, it was explained that this was the case, however, staff had to ensure they had sought agreement from their line manager in the first instance.

It was subsequently

AGREED – T H A T the presentation on Wellbeing be noted.

(iii) Menopause at Work Procedures.

This was presented by the Head of Human Resources and Organisational Development, who explained that the excellent work around menopause and raising awareness undertaken by the Council was being driven forward by the Occupational Health Team. Key to this was breaking down taboos on this subject and to ensure inclusivity such as mixed gender meetings or 'cafés' on the topic, but where necessary also having female only sessions on this too for staff to feel supported and to be free to speak on their experiences.

There had been positive feedback on this approach from both management and staff, with M. Canavan (NEU) adding that there had been big support in

schools regarding the approach undertaken by the Council around Menopause.

The schedule on the Menopause briefings would be shared with Members.

The Chair queried some of the wording used in the work procedures i.e. 'the menopause affects all women', which was not the case, i.e. women who had had a hysterectomy or persons in the trans community or who were non-binary. Therefore, wording needed to be more 'inclusive'. It was explained that the wording used would be looked at, but the Forum was assured that the interactive sessions held on the Menopause were not pitched this way and were inclusive.

It was subsequently

AGREED – T H A T the Menopause at Work Procedures be noted.

(k) Oracle Update –

The Operational Manager, Employee Services update the Forum on the new Oracle Fusion, a cloud-based system for HR and other Council functions and services, which would replace the current aging systems used by the Vale.

They explained that the new system was currently being built, in a thorough, methodical way. There had been challenges with implementing this system, it being noted that staff working on the new system were also working on their day-to-day roles and dealing with the ongoing issues around COVID-19. This also involved the support and co-operation of the Trade Unions.

A report on the Oracle upgrade, which went to Cabinet on 29th September, would be shared with the Forum.

The 'go-live' for this new system would be sometime in November 2022, with this being 'split' between the different services or functions, i.e. HR, Payroll and Finance.

Staff would be able to access their payslips online and be able to make certain changes to their details.

The Chair asked about any potential disruption caused to services, etc. due to the transition over to the new system. It was explained that services such as Payroll would be running under both the old and new systems for now, in order to safeguard against any such disruption, until the new system was fully operational.

The Vice-Chair asked if there were any additional training requirements for staff in using this new system; this was confirmed as being the case, with the use of both face to face and online forms of training to update staff on the new system and its use.

It was subsequently

AGREED – T H A T the Oracle Update be noted.

(l) Update on the Living Wage Increase – Report to Senior Leadership Team: 27th September 2022 –

The Head of Human Resources and Organisational Development explained that the Council had previously agreed to becoming a 'Real Living Wage' employer and the living wage rate for staff had been increased to £9.90 per hour. Due to the announcement in September made by the Living Wage Foundation, a report would be going to Cabinet to suggest an increase to £10.90 per hour. The Forum was also informed on the impact to the spinal points on staff pay grades and the upcoming national pay award outcome. The Trade Unions were at various stages in accepting the pay award.

Such increases in pay would help in the recruitment and retention of staff, as well as address the gender pay gap.

Following the update, the following Members raised questions:

- Councillor Thomas asked whether the recent mini budget had impacted the Real Living Wage. It was explained that the Living Wage Foundation made one announcement each year, this being earlier in 2022 due to the cost of living crisis and the Council subsequently quickly to address this. The Council was still going through the accreditation process to become a Real Living Wage employer, but was now operating as if fully accredited, therefore it was looking to implement the uplift in staff wages as quickly as possible. Other nearby Local Authorities, although accredited, were not offering a similar uplift due to local financial constraints.
- The Vice-Chair queried whether, on the assumption that the pay award was agreed by all relevant Trade Unions, it would be necessary to hold off implementing the financial element of the new Oracle system in order for the uplift to be processed more effectively. It was explained that this had been considered but, due to the cost of living crisis starting to bite for staff, this uplift would need to be done as quickly as possible, in tandem with implementing the new finance element of Oracle, with the Finance and Payroll Teams acutely aware of the need to process this uplift as quickly as possible.
- It was also explained that there was a separate consultation with teaching unions and employee representatives about the pay uplift, with the teaching support staff being impacted by changes in the Real Living Wage.

It was subsequently

AGREED – T H A T the Update on the Living Wage Increase – Report to Senior Leadership Team: 27th September, 2022 be noted.

(m) Mileage Rates in Local Authorities in Wales –

The Forum was informed of the current position, whereby there was a joint protocol between Leaders of Local Authorities in Wales, facilitated through the WLGA Executive Board and the Trade Unions of the Joint Council for Wales, to introduce a measure that provides for a temporary increase in mileage reimbursements costs in the short term to address current market volatility in fuel rates. Put simply, these measures would have the potential of helping support those staff needing to travel as part of their work, among some of the lowest paid, to ensure that reimbursement rates kept pace with rising fuel prices, as much as possible. This was similar to measures adopted by the NHS.

The agreed sum of reimbursement was up to 45 pence per mile, with anything over (i.e. 50 pence per mile) meaning that staff would have to undertake a self-assessment for the difference.

G. Pappas (Unison Representative) stated that this was still a 'live' issue, with the main body of Joint Council for Wales supporting these measures, but no formal agreement yet from its sub-bodies, and with the political leadership agreeing to this in principle, but not necessarily all Chief Executives in agreement and with the potential of some Local Authorities rejecting the proposal. It was important that this was resolved by March 2023, when the interim protocol would expire. It was explained that the Council would be looking at this protocol, in conjunction with the Trade Unions and employees representatives, and in particular what support maybe needed for staff for claiming 50 pence per mile, which could require the need for self-assessment with HMRC.

It was subsequently

AGREED – T H A T the update on Mileage Rates in Local Authorities in Wales be noted.

(n) Proposed Timetable of Meetings of the JCF –

This was presented to the Forum by the Democratic and Scrutiny Services Officer, with future meetings of the JCF scheduled for:

- Monday, 23rd January, 2023, 10.00 a.m.
- Monday, 24th April, 2023, 10.00 a.m.

At this time, such meetings would continue to be held remotely, in line with the Vale of Glamorgan Council Multi-Location Meetings Policy.

It was subsequently

AGREED – T H A T the Joint Consultative Forum meetings for 2022/23 be held on:

- Monday, 23rd January, 2023, 10.00 a.m.
- Monday, 24th April, 2023, 10.00 a.m.

(o) Date of Next Meeting –

AGREED – T H A T the date of the next Joint Consultative Forum meeting would be Monday, 23rd January, 2023, at 10.00 a.m.