

Minutes

Employee Partnership Forum

Date: 4 February 2021

Time: 10.00 am

Present: Councillors D Mayer (Chair)

In Attendance: Rachael Davies (HR Manager), Beth Burns (Health and Safety Manager) Owen James (Assistant Head of Finance), Cerys Caswell (HR & OD Officer), Jade Davies (Health & Safety Business Partner), Kevin Howells (Senior HR & OD Business Partner), Kirsty Plant (HR & OD Business Partner), Howard Mason (Senior HR & OD Business Partner), Richard Hughes (Headteacher of Alway Primary School), Peter Garland (UNISON), Gareth Hawksworth (NASUWT), Andy McDowall (UNITE), Rowena Hayward (GMB), Greig Churcher (Inspector), Debbie Scott (NEU), Craig Jenkins (NASUWT) Pamela Tasker (Governance Support Officer)

1. Apologies

Andy McDowall-Unite Wales, Rhys Cornwall-Head of People & Business Change.

2. Declarations of Interest

None

3. Minutes of the Last Meeting

The GMB representative stated that on page 4 on the Minutes in relation to RIDDOR, that they were receiving emails from members in relation to disparity on pay and that some members were being reduced to zero pay. They were concerned that after 6 months members were on half pay, which reduced to zero pay after 12 months. The GMB representative expressed their concern that there were financial penalties on people with an injury and that a person with an injury sustained was still treated the same as a person off with another illness such as a cold etc.

The Senior HR & OD Business Partner confirmed that Green Book conditions covered every authority and not just Newport.

Agreed: The minutes of the last meeting of the 15th October 2020 were accepted as a true and accurate record.

4. Health & Safety Update

The Health & Safety Manager confirmed for the forum that Jade Davies had been appointed as the new Health & Safety manager who will be in post from the end of February 2021.

The Health & Safety Manager stated that the Health and Safety Report still had the same format and the team was still leading on Covid responses, continuing to support schools with Covid risk assessment, operational management and case management.

The proactive review of policies and procedures was being considered and a timetable being drawn up to ensure all policies and guidance documents were up to date, starting with the Corporate Health and Safety Policy.

It was commented on the issue of staff contracting Covid. The Health and Safety Manager stated that these cases were reported to the Health & Safety Team and every case known was sent to a manager to be reported.

The GMB representative asked about information on how cases were mapped as this was not in the report, which would be useful for the Council. The GMB representative stated that when staff have had positive cases, they had been told to isolate as they had been wearing PPE but this was only the case if it was medical PPE. It was confirmed that the reports received stated which area the person worked in and this was then analysed for evidence of an outbreak and a couple of these cases were being investigated at present.

It was discussed that in care homes PPE could be considered a mitigating factor. The Health and Safety Manager stated that care homes were leading on issues and they were speaking to the team about any issues so they could go back to them about this as this was concerning as it was not being reported to the Health and Safety Team.

The NEU representative questioned as to whether there were any statistics on the numbers of classes who have had to isolate and whether there were any statistics up to Christmas 2020 on the effect on the staff and children in schools.

The Health and Safety Manager confirmed that the keeping of those records was led by Environmental Health, e.g. numbers of cases etc. It was discussed that at present schools were not at full capacity as only key workers children were attending and that it would be useful to have information on the community spread of Covid and looking at disruption as children could be in school and off again.

The Senior HR & OD Business Partner confirmed that they were currently working on this data and the information once complete, would be shared as soon as possible.

5. Probationary Period Policy

The Probationary Period Policy was a revision of policy and included was a list of comments from Unions who had responded.

The GMB representative stated that the GMB Union welcomed anything that clarified what was required in the role.

It was commented on the point “A probationary period will apply to all new employees of the Council, including those who have joined from another local authority area’ that it was felt by GMB that this was a clarification and not a new provision.

It was confirmed by the HR & OD Manager that as roles were very different in different authorities. The employee’s competency and performance in the role had to be assessed in the probationary period.

The UNISON representative questioned whether the person would be aware that they were on a trial period.

The HR & OD Manager confirmed that this would be in their offer letter, so the employee would know of the expectation.

6. Budget Proposals

The Assistant Head of Finance stated that the medium term financial plan (MTFP) included within the Council’s 2020/21 budget report identified a potential budget gap of £5 million (m) in 2021/22 and £9.9m over the period 2021/22 to 2022/23. The report provided an update to the planning assumptions made over the medium term, which included a further two years to 2024/25.

It was explained that there was no certainty on the level of funding from Welsh Government that the Council would receive over the medium term, and for the following year the Council did not receive its draft ‘Revenue Support Grant’ (RSG) until the 22nd Dec 2020 and this created uncertainty and challenges in financial planning.

The budget report was presented to Cabinet on the 8th January 2021. Overall, the draft RSG was positive compared to previously modelled assumptions, and confirmed that the Council would receive £240,796k for 2021/22. After allowing for new specific grant transfers into the RSG, this is a cash increase of £12.5m (+5.48%) from current funding, compared to a Welsh average of +3.8%.

The Assistant Head of Finance referred to Appendix 1 in particular the Budget Pressures with assumptions of a £16.2 million in Total Budget Pressures with an MTFP budget gap of £9.2 million.

New Budget Savings could be viewed within Appendix 2 and consultation results were to be reported back to Cabinet in February 2021, when Cabinet

Appendix 1 – Minutes from Employee Partnership Forum

would agree a final budget and recommend the required / corresponding council tax level to full Council in March 2021.

Discussion:

The UNISON representative commented on the use of language in relation to the term savings. They stated that savings meant cuts to services and it was appreciated the position Newport City Council was in, but they were concerned due to the impacts from the cuts to services.

The Assistant Head of Finance stated that the proposals in the report were positive to the Council.

The Chair commented that although the Council were making services more efficient but that the public will see that we were making savings as we were not efficient.

The GMB representative stated it was interesting that Welsh Government have done a rebasing of the population. The GMB representative also questioned whether there would be a look at services that had an impact such as refuse collection and recycling, as these haven't had an investment and whether Cabinet would be looking at this.

The Chair stated a lot of money had been spent that was not anticipated, so a balance was needed.

The GMB representative stated that resources had not increased, and now there was an acknowledgement that the population had increased would investment go back into these services.

The Chair commented that this depended on the needs of service and that half of the vehicles have been sought for recycling so there had been a lot of investment. Wastesavers reported that since March the collection total had been the same as the Christmas collection.

The GMB representative stated that they were aware from members that there was a high level of agency workers with permanent posts not being filled. There was also reports of staff losses in children's and adults services.

It was hoped that this would be on a voluntary basis, and those who wished to remain would be redeployed in the interim before taking on new roles.

The Assistant Head of Finance stated that they could not comment on Children's services but that the Budget was formed from pressures and needs provided by Heads of Service but that the comments from the GMB representative would be taken forward as part of the minutes.

It was confirmed that there was to be no investment in vehicles in this budget but that the Head of City Services had invested in electric vehicles.

Appendix 1 – Minutes from Employee Partnership Forum

The UNISON representative requested for the agenda item on *Deletion of Posts* to be discussed under this agenda item as they wanted this fed back into the consultation process.

The UNISON representative stated it was hoped that there would be no compulsory redundancies and that the lack of empty posts had an impact on staff left behind. It was commented that services could not continue as they were if posts were deleted. The UNISON representative felt that the wellbeing of staff needed to be considered and they wanted this acknowledged.

It was commented that 50% of council workers completed work in their own time on their own good will and this was not taken into consideration.

The GMB representative confirmed that they totally supported this comment and was seeing across unions, mental health issues due to lack of resources. The GMB representative stated that staff were off for a few weeks and then back at work again due to lack of resources as they didn't want to let other staff members down. It was questioned as to what the statistics were on this and what the trigger points were.

It was pointed out that case work had really increased which lead to work related stress due to a lack of resources and posts left vacant. Work had to then be picked up by someone else. This occurred at all levels of the organisation and it was questioned whether there were any statistics around work related stress.

The Health and Safety Manager stated that statistics could be provided on stress related illnesses and well-being referrals to the Health and Safety team. However the referrals would not confirm whether it was a personal issue. There was further work to be done on this issue.

The UNISON representative stated that the deletion of a post would have a far greater impact than it did a few years ago. Staff could do it for a short period but it affected people mentally and physically.

The Chair stated that lessons could be learned from this and it was a very tough situation. Flexible working was a great option but not being stuck inside.

The GMB representative stated that they agreed with flexible working but enforced working was different. The third lockdown was very hard on people. In relation to stress risk assessments meetings were being completed but stress was not relieved. The employee was desolate as the employer could not do anything and the employees stress and mental health elevate. So they must either stay in work or go off sick and this was not a healthy workforce.

7. GMB Thinking Differently at Work

The GMB representative stated that they had raised neurodiversity at the last meeting. The guide explained different ways of working with people with mental health issues. Policies and procedures needed to be amended for people so it was accessible and the person could participate so they were not outside of the process. It also looked at ways that information could be brought into the working of the council. Every trade union has a similar item.

The HR manager confirmed that the team had started to look at long-term sickness in the future and were moving away from sanction based towards a more collaborative approach and to engage with the employee.

The Senior HR & OD Business Partner stated this was in the early stages of development with a plan to engage with employees early on to be developed further and unions would be contacted on this.

The HR manager confirmed that a more proactive approach was favoured to work things closely with unions to engage.

The NEU representative requested an update on employee casework disputes.

The HR manager confirmed that the policy was in draft at the moment and agreed that a more mature way of looking at issues was required.

8. GMB/TUC Reasonable Adjustment Passport

The GMB representative explained that this reasonable adjustment passport would enable an individual to not go through the process over and over. Adjustments could go with the individual. Adjustments made 5 years ago may not always be relevant so they could be changed. If an employee started a new job their adjustments came with the person so there was no delay. This would enable the individual to feel they could do their job. It was hoped that Newport City Council to adopt this.

The Chair commented that it was comparable to a SEN document.

The HR manager stated that it was a topic to investigate and explore further and it was topic that could be given to the Inclusive Access Network so they would be a voice and it was a good topic for them.

The Chair agreed that it was a useful document for an employee moving from one local authority to another so starting all over again should be avoided.

The GMB representative stated that the passport took into account not just a physical disability but also invisible disabilities. It needed to be looked at across policies and how they were applied.

9. GMB Domestic Abuse Charter

The GMB representative explained that during the pandemic statistics of domestic abuse increased significantly. It was hoped the Council would consider that many workers may experience domestic abuse and their partners may want to contact them at work. Unfortunately, people may leave their partner and this partner could try to intimidate a person through their workplace. This may involve the partner phoning the workplace asking for the person so it was important to not give their number out or if the person was waiting for them, they were able to go out somewhere else. The practical side was important.

The HR Manager stated that on a previous agenda it was discussed how all staff must complete Violence Against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (VAWDASV) training which all staff must complete. The training was reviewed in November 2020. The HR manager agreed to send a copy of this over to the GMB representative.

10. GMB Taking Care - A Charter for Home Care

It was explained that colleagues of sister unions already have similar documents. The GMB representative stated that they felt this was important and local authorities should sign up. It contained clear criteria to ensure staff within the private care sector were paid correctly. It was hoped that Newport City Council would adopt it.

The HR manager stated that the charter needed to be referred to Chris Humphrey-Head of Adult and Community Services to receive comments from them. The GMB representative stated that they would be willing to have a meeting with the Head of Adult and Community Services.

The GMB representative mentioned fair pay and a briefing paper recognising that NHS staff were heavily relied on and it was important that they were paid a proper living wage. It was important to have a pay scale within job evaluation and this salary was not always in public domain.

It was discussed that although this was not listed on the agenda, HR would have a look at this.

11. Deletion of Empty Posts

Already discussed under item 6 .

12. Mental Health & WellBeing of Staff

The UNISON representative asked how the Council were going to plan support for staff after Covid restrictions eased as on the other side people would need further support.

Appendix 1 – Minutes from Employee Partnership Forum

The HR manager stated that the team report on what was currently happening and options for the future. The HR team were to get together to think about the working week and what practical things that could be done. There was a report to go to Scrutiny and Cabinet on this.

The Staff newsletter has staff well-being support to provide support on a wide range such as childcare, finances etc. The Occupational health team were still operating but on a phone call basis.

The Chair requested for the Unions to provide any other issues that needed to be discussed as Unions have fuller pictures on issues that members were experiencing as Covid had moved the focus.

The UNISON representative felt that there was a resistance from middle managers regarding flexible working but process now worked well and it was felt that staff should not be drawn back into the civic centre if it was not needed.

The HR Manager stated that the Leader had already signed up to the Healthy Travel Charter and had signed up to Environmental Charters as well.

Date of next meeting to be agreed and circulated.