

JOINT CONSULTATIVE FORUM

Minutes of a remote meeting held on 12th October, 2020.

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

Representatives of Trade Unions: Mr. C. Brown (ASCL), M. Canavan (NEU), Mr. C. Davies (GMB), S. Greenslade (Unison), Mrs. G. Hallett (NAHT), L. Lancaster (NASUWT), Mr. G. Pappas (Unison) and Ms. S. Townsend-Ryan (Unison/Vice-Chairman).

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

(a) Apologies for Absence –

These were received from Councillors Mrs. P. Drake, Mr. T. Greaves (GMB) and Mr. S. Robertson (Unite).

(b) Minutes and Matters Arising –

AGREED – T H A T the minutes of the meeting held on 10th February, 2020 be approved as a correct record.

(c) Declarations of Interest –

No declarations were received.

(d) Trade Union Items –

No items had been received.

However, Mr. Pappas (Unison) wished to take this opportunity to raise the issue of appeals and stated he would be speaking to the Principal Human Resources Business Partner and the Operational Manager Employee Services about this separately.

Mr. Pappas (Unison) also raised the issue around the current working from home arrangements (due to COVID-19) and if staff were covered by their home insurance in relation to this. The Principal Human Resources Business Partner replied that she had reviewed two such home insurance policies and they covered administrative work carried out in the home. However, she suggested that staff

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working from home check with their insurer to ensure they were fully covered. The Chairman raised the point that, if possible, Human Resources look into this matter in greater depth as potentially staff could be left exposed by working from home. The Principal Human Resources Business Partner replied by saying that she would look into this issue further, in conjunction with the Insurance Team, and its impact on a broader range of insurance and mortgages that staff may use.

Mr. Pappas (Unison) finally queried the current status on the Homebase Policy. This affected key staff within the Council, such as those working in Social Services, and their ability to claim mileage and home working expenses. At the moment the Policy was only a temporary arrangement, lasting 4-5 years. The Head of Human Resources and Organisational Development replied that she would be working with the Head of Adult Services in order to get an updated policy drafted and circulated to all stakeholders.

(e) Minutes of Directorate Consultative Groups (for information) –

The Forum considered the minutes relating to Learning and Social Services on 14th July, 2020.

AGREED – T H A T the minutes of the Directorate Consultative Group be noted.

(f) Minutes of the Visible Services and Housing Trade Union Meeting: 1st July 2020 (For Information) –

The Forum considered the minutes relating to the Visible Services and Housing Trade Union meeting on 1st July, 2020.

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

(g) 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: 21st October 2020
- Resources – TBA
- Social Services – TBA
- Visible Services – Meetings scheduled for first Wednesday of every month.
- Corporate Health and Safety Meeting: 19th October 2020.

It was also noted that separate to the meetings listed above and this Forum, there was ongoing, regular, contact between the various service areas and Trade Union representatives. For example, the Head of Adult Services cited the meeting held between Social Service and Trade Union representatives on the 8th September,

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with further ones being held on the 20th October and 24th November. The Director of Learning and Skills also referred to the fortnightly meetings held by this service with Trade Union representatives.

(h) Implementation - £500 Payment for Care Workers –

The Operational Manager for Employee Services presented this to the Forum and explained that on 1st May, 2020 the First Minister announced a £500 payment for care workers.

This payment would be made to the relevant staff (250 council employees in areas such as Day Care and Residential Services) in their payslips for October 2020.

The Operational Manager for Employee Services added that the original grant offered by Welsh Government (WG) had been significantly lower than the payments the Council had intended to make. He stated that the Council had both the responsibility to pay care staff within the Local Authority and those utilised via private care providers. Subsequently, the Council had gone back to WG and were in the process of issuing a revised grant letter from WG to cover the payments required.

However, HMRC had confirmed that these payments made to employees were regarded as earnings and would be liable for tax, national insurance contributions and student loan repayments, where appropriate. They would also be included in benefits calculations.

The large number of claims this process had generated involved substantial, additional, work for Human Resources and Social Services, who were involved in gathering individual claimant data in order to submit to the HMRC.

Mr. Pappas (Unison) raised the issue around the taxation of this payment, which could leave recipients with only £250 in additional pay after tax, which given the makeup of the majority of workers involved female workers on low pay, would have a negative impact on their livelihoods. The Operational Manager for Employee Services replied that an additional 10% payment handed out by the Council to front line workers, such as those in the Care and Refuse sectors over the last few months would help to ameliorate this loss to some degree.

An Elected Member stated that it was disappointing that the UK Government and HMRC had insisted that this payment would be tax-deductible. He also referred to the 10% uplift provided by the Council, which he felt was beneficial and asked whether this could continue into the Autumn. He appreciated that Cabinet had originally declined to continue the uplift any further but wondered if this could be reconsidered.

Mr. Pappas (Unison) added that the Council had been criticised over the 10% uplift by other local authorities (with only Ceredigion offering the same).

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The Chairman replied by stating that a further uplift would have a negative effect on the Council's reserves, as this money could not be obtained from WG.

Another Elected Member agreed with the Chairman's comments and that the uplift already provided by the Council showed that it cared for and was supporting its frontline staff. The taxation of the £500 payment was extremely disappointing but outside the Council's control.

The Head of Adult Services added that a number of redeployed staff had also benefitted from the 10% uplift and £500 payment, which had been appreciated by this workforce. Some staff were disappointed not to have received the 10% payment, but it had been explained that unfortunately a line had had to be drawn which meant that some staff had missed out on these payments, but overall the measures had demonstrated that the Council valued its Social Care staff. The £500 Social Care Workforce Special Payment was a Welsh Government policy with clear eligibility criteria.

Finally, the Chairman wanted to offer his and the Forum's thanks to all the staff involved in this effort (including those redeployed) who helped to cover frontline services in social care and other areas during the pandemic.

It was

AGREED – T H A T the update on the implementation of the £500 Payment for Care Workers be noted.

(i) Management of Attendance Update –

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

This report was presented by the Operational Manager for Employee Services, who stated that this was an unusual report in that the figures showed a significant decrease in absence which could in part be linked to the Covid-19 situation. Therefore, the three months covered related to unprecedented times which could not be easily compared with the figures from the same time last year.

The Operational Manager for Employee Services referred to the data used within the report, which highlighted anomalies such as in Waste Management which had seen some peaks in terms of absence and was in the process of being looked at separately.

Due to the Covid-19 situation, there had been a need to not just look at sickness but also more broadly at mental health, morale and the wellbeing of staff working in the workplace or at home. The Operational Manager for Employee Services stated that home working did seem to have an impact on lowering absences and that it gave staff greater flexibility with their home/life balance, such as the ability

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to start or finish earlier or to work later if childcare support/home schooling was required in the day.

The Operational Manager for Employee Services stated that it was important to review the data in light of further potential lockdowns.

An Elected Member referred to the data in the report and how the current unusual circumstances meant that any comparisons with the data from the same period last year would be 'comparing apples with oranges' and therefore not useful or appropriate. Instead, he suggested benchmarking the data in the report against similar data provided by other Local Authorities. There was also a danger that the drop in the absence or sickness figures could be the result of unwell staff continuing to work, also known as 'Presenteeism', where those who would normally take time off sick felt, due to the current pressures around services and Covid-19, they needed to carry on working at home and on the frontline. Finally, he wished to highlight that under the current set of restrictions or a further lockdown the impact of the Winter period could have a detrimental effect on the mental health of staff, as well as external, non-work pressures, which could result in absence/sickness levels rising again.

The Operational Manager for Employee Services replied that it was essential to keep monitoring the data and to look at the deeper aspects of these statistics, in terms of health and wellbeing and in conjunction with Occupational Health. He stated that the new Health, Safety and Wellbeing Manager would be offering new ideas on supporting staff going forward and would look at offering a more 'blended' approach in providing this support in light of the mixture of home and office working going on.

The Chairman referred to the ongoing pressures on Council staff. They had worked extremely hard during this Pandemic and its resurgence would be extremely dispiriting to them.

The Head of Human Resources and Organisational Development added that there were a number of concerns going forward, for example, the impact on absence/sickness figures when staff, who previously had operations cancelled due to Covid-19, would need to take time off once these resumed. She also highlighted the 'Wellbeing' page on StaffNet+ which covered various aspects of health and wellbeing and was in the process of being refreshed as well as additional wellbeing measures and proposals being implemented to support staff in all areas of wellbeing, physical, mental and financial. The Head of Human Resources and Organisational Development went on to say that she had approached the Trade Unions about sharing their wellbeing strategies in order to help bolster the Council's strategy. A wellbeing survey, in order to help build an effective strategy, had been undertaken. This had been completed primarily by staff working from home, but the aim was to undertake a further survey in order to broaden the range or type of Council workers who completed this.

Mr. Pappas (Unison) raised the issue of 'Long Covid' and its impact on staff who suffered from it. He asked how staff concerns could be addressed around this. The Head of Human Resources and Organisational Development replied that she

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would arrange to meet with Mr. Pappas (Unison) regarding 'Long Covid' and bring back the outcomes from this to the next Joint Consultative Forum.

The Health, Safety and Wellbeing Manager highlighted the re-launch of 'Care First' for all staff. This had many benefits that colleagues needed to re-refresh on; the Head of Human Resources and Organisational Development added this was also accessible to those working within the independent care sector.

Finally, the Head of Adult Services raised the issue with regard to frontline staff not making the marked improvement there may be in other areas in relation to reduced absence figures. This was due to the nature of their work, such as with vulnerable adults, because if they were unwell they would not be permitted to come to work due to the risk of spreading their illness to vulnerable others and could not work from home in the way that other colleagues may be able to do so. This may be reflected in the sickness figures, in that office-based staff absence may improve because people felt able to continue to work in their own homes if unwell but would have phoned in sick if they had been in the office in pre-Covid times. Similarly, those staff that were now working from home were taking less leave during the lockdown due to them being unable to go on holiday etc. but it was still important that front line and back office staff took regular breaks in order to ensure they rested adequately.

It was

AGREED – T H A T the Management of Attendance Update be noted.

(j) Matrix Agency Contract –

The Operational Manager for Employee Services stated that the previous contract with Randstad ended in November 2019, when the Council moved to a 'vendor neutral' provider Matrix. This meant the provider did not employ agency workers directly, but rather acted as a 'middleman' that would go to Agencies that signed up to Matrix in order to recruit workers.

The benefit was that the agency mark-up fees had been reduced and during the last 10 months the Council had saved over £170,000.

As a result, the Council would continue with this contract and the initial 'teething' issues with Matrix had now been resolved.

Also, there was an ever-increasing number of agencies signing up with Matrix. At the beginning of the contract approximately 40 agencies were signed up in providing agency workers to the Vale of Glamorgan Council. Currently, this figure was 109.

The Operational Manager for Employee Services highlighted that the main sources of usage for these agency staff were within Environment and Housing and Social Services, those areas that required frontline staff and had a high turnover of these.

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The Head of Adult Services stated that although there had been an improvement in recruitment using Matrix, it was still a struggle to recruit for certain key posts, for example, Approved Mental Health Practitioners (AMHP) and Mental Health Social Workers, with high costs incurred when the Council did manage to secure these workers due to them being in high demand across this sector and covering a statutory role.

It was

AGREED – T H A T the Matrix Agency Contract update be noted.

(k) Upgrading the Finance / HR System – Verbal Update -

The Operational Manager for Employee Services informed the Forum that the present Finance and Human Resources solution was 13-14 years old and support would run out in December 2021. Therefore, this system needed to be replaced soon.

A new solution had been initially agreed as part of the system upgrade, this being the Oracle 'Cloud'. He explained that this was a far more 'user-friendly' system and had the added advantage that users could work on this remotely, given the current circumstances. Also, managers and employees could input into the system directly.

The Operational Manager for Employee Services went on to say that a team would be set up in order to manage this project, which would run over the next twelve months. As part of this, the Council would be seeking assistance from an external implementation partner which would be done under a tendering exercise. This partner would help the Council to implement the new system. He went on to say that this was a big project, particularly with the ongoing Covid-19 Pandemic, but it needed to be done and offered clear benefits.

Mr. Pappas (Unison) asked if there would be any reduction in terms of staffing due to the upgrade. He also cited issues around managerial input where at present, some managers were not inputting time sheets within the deadlines set.

The Operational Manager for Employee Services replied that currently managers submitted worksheets for Human Resources (HR) to input in. This had the potential for errors to be recorded twice. Under the new system however, Payroll would move to an auditing or quality assurance role, monitoring the entries that managers and others had made. The new system would also provide better data extraction and analysis, which would help the Council.

It was

AGREED – T H A T the verbal update on Upgrading the Finance / HR System be noted.

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(l) Update on the following –

(1) Coronavirus Recovery Strategy -

The Head of Policy and Business Transformation outlined the strategy, explaining that background work in producing this strategy had been presented to a number of Committees within the Council already. The report he was presenting today was the full Cabinet-approved strategy.

The strategy was structured around the three phases to the Council's management of the pandemic: response, transition and recovery as well as its practical application in real-time, for example, the efforts made in getting children back to school, which formed part of the 'transition' phase.

Reflecting on the learning from response had identified nineteen recovery priorities which had been aligned with the Council's Well-being Objectives drawn from the Corporate Plan 2020-25.

The Head of Policy and Business Transformation described the current situation within the Vale of Glamorgan, where local restrictions were in place and which were similar to those in many Local Authorities in Wales. The appropriate restrictions were recommended by the local Incident Management Team (including the Cardiff and Vale Public Health Board and Cardiff and Vale Local Authorities) and forwarded to Welsh Government (WG). This team met twice each week. Outlining the number of cases within the Vale of Glamorgan, he stated that this currently numbered 57 cases per 100,000 population (compared to 124 per 100,000 in Cardiff), with a positivity rate for tests of 4.8%; the Head of Policy and Business Transformation adding that these figures were regularly discussed by the local Incident Management Team. He explained that the threshold whereby Local Authorities needed to make recommendations in this area was at 50 cases per 100,000 and/or 5% test positivity. Once met, Local Authorities would need to go to WG with recommendations for restrictions, which WG could either accept as was or vary. The review period for these restrictions worked on a rolling seven-day period. As part of this, the local Incident Management Team looked at areas experiencing 'clusters' of Covid-19 cases, such as in care homes or schools and then took appropriate action. In terms of local business, the Council was supporting these in order to operate safely during Covid-19 as well as applying enforcement measures when required.

The Head of Policy and Business Transformation wished to thank the Head of Human Resources and Organisational Development for their work with the Trade Unions as part of the recovery strategy.

The Head of Policy and Business Transformation then went on to outline the next steps of the recovery strategy, with this going to the Scrutiny Committees in October. These would be presented by the relevant Directors with an emphasis on specific service lines.

No.

The Chairman felt that that the Trade Unions should be able to have sufficient time to comment on this, with Mr. Pappas (Unison) stating that copies of the Recovery Strategy would be rolled out to Trade Union members.

The Head of Policy and Business Transformation explained that the ongoing interaction with Trade Unions was important in order to ensure a high level of staff engagement with the strategy. As part of this, he would continue to share the strategy via StaffNet and engage via team meetings.

However, Mr. Pappas (Unison) pointed out that not all staff could access internal communications, such as those in the Vale Community Resource Service (VCRS), Social Care and in Waste Management who were harder to reach groups. The Head of Policy and Business Transformation replied that he would look again at how best to reach out to these groups and, if necessary, to look at further team meetings in order to achieve this.

The Chairman stressed the importance of cascading the strategy to staff who had issues around literacy, for example, by relying on Managers to verbally update such staff.

An Elected Member raised the issue of the potential spread of Covid-19 within care homes and other sites such as schools. He stated that as a Councillor he needed to be reassured in order that he could reassure the public that these issues were being handled sensibly by the Council and that safety was the priority.

The Head of Policy and Business Transformation replied there was ongoing, regular communications around these issues with the relevant staff, for example, staff that needed to self-isolate based at schools or care homes.

The Director of Learning and Skills added that each school had a very robust set of procedures concerning Covid-19 cases. She highlighted that such cases within schools, for example, were low within the Vale of Glamorgan compared with many other Welsh Local Authorities and she could provide more details on those if required. Such data was regularly submitted to WG and could be broken down by either school staff or pupil. The Director of Learning and Skills also referred the Forum to the comments made by the WG Education Minister about there being very little transmission of Covid-19 within schools.

The Elected Member responded by saying that it would be useful to have the data outlined by the Director of Learning and Skills forwarded to the Forum in order to provide the basis for informing and reassuring members of the public.

The Director of Learning and Skills wanted to reassure the Forum that continuous updates were being made to school risk assessments to reflect the latest advice, guidance and operational experience. Individual staff risk assessments had also been conducted with those staff deemed as being high risk receiving more 'bespoke' assessments. At present, no major issues were picked up as a result of those assessments at schools, with information and updates being received on a fortnightly basis via meetings with Trade Unions.

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Lorraine Lancaster (NASUWT) raised the issue that whereas many schools were indeed consulting with Trade Unions around operational guidance on Covid-19, there were some that still were not, despite the efforts of the Trade Unions in order to get this dialogue. She added that some staff continued to feel unsafe at school due to Covid-19 and that sometimes issues raised around this were either not being resolved quickly enough or taken seriously.

The Head of Human Resources and Organisational Development replied that HR were aware of only one school where the issues raised existed, and they continued to work with this school in encouraging them to speak to NASUWT and the other Trade Unions. However, if Trade Union members were aware of other schools where there were such issues, then they should let HR know.

Sarah Greenslade (Unison) raised the issue of cleaning within schools, with some staff in certain schools reporting there was insufficient or no hand sanitiser available, for example. In other schools, however, no issues had been raised about cleaning and cleanliness at all. There needed to be more consistency across schools in order to prevent clusters of Covid-19 cases emerging. Lorraine Lancaster (NASUWT) added that such concerns around health and safety would be raised with the Council.

The Director of Learning and Skills replied that such concerns were looked into closely by the Council but this did mean that sometimes after reviewing the situation the Council found that the concerns raised were not substantiated.

The issue of domiciliary care was raised, where it was stressed that the Council fostered a positive relationship with both Council and privately employed staff around raising concerns with Covid-19. It was acknowledged that it came down to how comfortable staff felt within their working environment as this could range from staff willing to be in the working environment but having concerns through to willing but with no concerns at this time. Where there were concerns, staff could raise these via HR and Occupational Health. In terms of care homes, the Council would continue to liaise with Public Health Wales and WG. Communications would also be made concerning persons visiting care homes. Furthermore, in terms of home visits, the issues around either staff or clients having family members shielding would also need to be considered and addressed.

Mr. Pappas (Unison) referred to waste delivery, stating that Mr. Greaves (GMB) attended the remote Joint Council for Wales meeting where this was discussed and the Vale of Glamorgan Council was cited as not providing a suitable service in terms of this and they would be writing to the Council as a result. He went on to say that at the start of the pandemic, Waste Management staff had various forms of protection in place for example, Waste Management staff following the refuse truck in a pool car in order to reduce numbers within the cab of the main vehicle and having full Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) on. In Mr Pappas' opinion, these measures had slipped since. Mr Pappas stated that the Council needed to act now in order to reinforce protection measures for staff working in Waste Management before seeing a spike in Covid-19 cases and its subsequent impact on the provision of this key, statutory, service.

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The Head of Human Resources and Organisational Development stated that she was on the same call as Mr. Greaves and had listened to the issues raised. She pointed out that the majority of Local Authorities (eighteen) had gone down the route of having three members of staff within the cab of the refuse truck wearing PPE and masks which was also the approach that the Vale of Glamorgan Council was now taking.

The call highlighted that at this time there had been no evidence of increased transmission rates when having three members of staff (in PPE) in the cab of the refuse truck.

The Head of Human Resources and Organisational Development added that at present employees appeared to be happy with these arrangements, and that they had been agreed upon as part of the local Health and Safety meetings with local representatives, although she appreciated the concerns raised about this by GMB and Unison. She also understood there would be a WLGA meeting in the near future where such issues would be discussed and hopefully a national position put forward, which the Head of Human Resources and Organisational Development would report back to the Forum about.

Mr. Pappas (Unison) stated he was working with Mr. Greaves (GMB) and the Operational Manager for Neighbourhood Services: Operations in order to get better face masks and viricidal hand wipes for staff. Many Waste Management staff were no longer required to congregate at the Alps offices but rather were picked up separately.

An Elected Member observed that the next meeting of the Forum would be in January 2021 and so asked the Head of Policy and Business Transformation that when the Coronavirus Recovery Strategy was presented to Scrutiny and other Committees prior to the next Forum meeting, that potential resolutions to the questions raised at this meeting be sought.

Finally, the Chairman wanted to pass his and the Forum's appreciation and thanks to all council staff for their hard work and efforts during the Covid-19 outbreak.

It was

AGREED – T H A T the update about the Coronavirus Recovery Strategy be noted.

(m) Date of Next Meeting –

AGREED – T H A T the next Joint Consultative Forum meeting would be held on 18th January 2021.