

THE HIGHLAND COUNCIL
Joint Consultation Group (Administrative Etc, Manual and Crafts Staffing)

Minutes of Meeting of the Joint Consultation Group (Administrative Etc, Manual and Crafts Staffing) held in Council Headquarters, Glenurquhart Road, Inverness on Friday, 12 December, 2008 at 10.30 a.m.

Present

Employer's Representatives:

Mrs C A Wilson
Mr M Rattray
Mr A Henderson
Mr N Donald

Miss J Campbell
Mrs J Urquhart (substitute)
Mrs P Munro
Mr J Ford

Staff Side Representatives:

Ms E Johnston (GMB)
Mr T McCarthy (UNITE)
Mr A Wemyss (UNITE)
Mr G McDonald (UCATT)

Mr S Manning (UNISON)
Mr S Burroughs (UNISON)
Ms L MacKay (UNISON)

Officials in attendance:

Mr A Geddes, Depute Chief Executive
Ms M Morris, Assistant Chief Executive
Mr H Fraser, Director of Education, Culture & Sport
Mr J Batchelor, Head of Personnel, Chief Executive's Service
Mr A Williams, Health and Safety Manager, Chief Executive's Service
Ms C Christie, Employee Development Manager, Chief Executive's Service
Ms K Zoryk, Senior Personnel Adviser, Chief Executive's Service
Mr D Robertson, Head of Accounting, Finance Service
Mr A MacInnes, Administrative Assistant, Chief Executive's Service

Mrs C Wilson in the Chair

1. Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were intimated on behalf of Mr J Finnie of the Employer's Side and Mr G Reynolds, Mr B Crabtree, Mr K Matthews and Mr R Whyte of the Staff Side.

2. Job Evaluation and Equal Pay

The Chairman agreed that this item, not on the agenda, be considered as a matter of urgency, due to recent developments which had affected the issue of job evaluation letters to staff.

The Assistant Chief Executive advised that all staff had been informed that the job evaluation and equal pay letters would be sent out today. However, yesterday the Council received an e-mail from Unison advising that they had serious concerns about the new pay and grading structure and were, therefore, proposing to take legal action against the Council, if the Council proceeded to implement the new

pay and grading scheme. On the same day the Council received an update from its External Equality Impact Assessor which suggested that further work was required to complete the Equality Impact Assessment of the pay and grading structure.

The Assistant Chief Executive advised that as a result of these late developments, the Council's Modernising Employment Sub-Committee at a meeting held earlier in the day, had agreed to postpone the issue of the job evaluation letters. This would enable further discussions to take place with the External Equality Impact Assessor, in order to complete the impact assessment. Further discussions were also required with Unison to understand the concerns they were now raising.

However, it was advised that Equal pay letters had not been affected by this decision and these would be sent out as planned. The decision to pay the 3% national pay award with effect from 1 April, 2008, for APT&C staff and Manual Workers, was also not affected.

It was acknowledged that this would be a disappointment for all staff, and this was deeply regretted, but the Council hoped to be in a position to issue job evaluation letters early in the New Year. All staff would be informed of this latest development following this meeting.

At this point, Unison representatives requested a short recess in the meeting, to consider their position.

When the meeting resumed, Unison responded to this latest development by advising that they welcomed the postponement of the issue of job evaluation letters, as they were of the view that the new pay and grading structure widened the gender pay gap. This could have been avoided if Highland Council had taken Unison's advice on the Equality Impact Assessment. They advised that Unison were aware of this statement by Unison.

However, the GMB representative stated, for the record, that the GMB was not part of this statement by Unison.

Thereafter, the Group **NOTED** that:

- i job evaluation letters to employees had been postponed, but it was hoped to issue the letters early in the New Year instead;
- ii equal pay letters would be issued to employees as planned; and
- iii the national pay award of 3% with back pay would be implemented from end January, 2009.

3. Minutes of Last Meeting

There had been circulated for confirmation, Minutes of the last meeting of the Group held on 19 September, 2008, which were **APPROVED**.

4. Budget 2009/10 Update

The Depute Chief Executive was in attendance at the meeting, to provide an update on the Budget for 2009/10.

By way of summary, the Group was advised that despite some easing off of pressures on budgets from projected energy and fuel costs, there were still

significant increases on these costs compared to previous years and combined with emerging pressures on budgets e.g. implementation of job evaluation scheme, it was likely that the Council would still have to face a budget gap of around £20m in 2009/10 and £15.1m in 2010/11. Services had been asked to identify a 5% saving in their budgets in each year. Services were also identifying actions necessary to deliver savings beyond a 2 year budget horizon, which would help make the Council more effective and efficient.

Continuing, a report was to be submitted to the next Council meeting on 18 December, 2008 seeking approval of saving proposals for 4 Services – Chief Executive, Finance, Housing and Property, and Planning and Development Services. On 12 February, 2009, the Council would agree the budget and council tax for 2009/10 and indicative figures for 2010/11.

Therefore, the financial outlook for the Council remained extremely challenging, and the Council would continue to review the way it operated its Services to make them more efficient and effective.

In response to a question from the Staff Side, the Depute Chief Executive advised that all Directors had been asked to ensure that staff affected by the budget proposals be consulted. However, it was felt unlikely that budget proposals to the Council in December, 2008 would have any impact on staff currently employed by the Council, albeit there may be an impact on current vacancies in the organisation. However, the Staff Side pointed out that in not filling vacant posts, this put additional pressures on existing staff.

Thereafter, the Group **NOTED** progress on the budget for 2009/10.

5. Fourth Employee Survey – Service Specific Improvements

The Depute Chief Executive and the Director of Education, Culture and Sport were in attendance at the meeting to give a presentation on Service specific improvements within their respective Services in response to the fourth Employee Survey.

Finance Service

By way of summary, the Depute Chief Executive advised that overall the results from the 2007 Employee survey were mixed for both the Council and its Services. The response rate from Finance was good with 79% of employees responding to the questionnaire. The results from the 2007 survey for Finance were down on those from the 2005 survey, but above the results from the 2000 and 2002 survey.

The response showed an improving picture of support by line managers and training and development also continued to be well received. However, issues over job security, pay, morale and communication led to a slight fall in overall satisfaction. Communications were still seen as not working well as they could be and staff were still not sufficiently aware of what senior management did.

The Finance Service specific improvement action areas were highlighted as follows – communication; performance and stress management; working arrangements, and change management. In order to deliver on these improvements, the Depute Chief Executive referred to the following measures to implement the improvements - staff issues would be escalated from team meetings to the Finance Management Team; monitoring of actions through the

Finance Service Quarterly Performance Review, the Employee Survey Reference Group and the Resources Committee; involving staff wherever and whenever appropriate; and there would also be a series of team briefings by the Head of Exchequer.

Education, Culture and Sport Service

By way of summary, the Director of Education, Culture & Sport advised that in terms of job satisfaction/interesting work, the results from the survey in his Service were encouraging, with a high number of staff feeling satisfied with the kind of work they were doing. However in terms of job security there was an overall reduction in the results of 14% from the last survey. In relation to Career development the results were broadly similar to the previous Survey, with 35% of respondents satisfied and 26% dissatisfied. In terms of team ethos, generally the results were good and up slightly from the last survey, with staff feeling that they were given the opportunity to show initiative.

The Director also went onto provide the results of the survey in relation to – factors most important to staff; morale in the service, workload, stress, line management; and most of the results in these areas were in line with the previous survey.

It terms of forward planning, it was advised that the Service was taking forward a programme of self evaluation and the outcomes of the Survey were a central element in this process. Future actions would be informed by staff participation in this evaluation.

In relation to current actions being undertaken, arising from the results of the survey, the Director confirmed that the following actions would be progressed:- full implementation of Personal Development Plans by March, 2009; Leadership programme was being delivered to promote interest in career development across the Service; a programme of training in Health and Safety would be delivered to 300 janitorial and caretaking staff; a culture of staff participation would be developed through working groups and development groups, and increased participation in MDP5.

Finally, the Director also referred to the various measures to improve communication with staff, including team meetings and briefings; a new Service wide newsletter; a new approach to web-based information for all staff to be launched in January, 2009; further opportunities to participate in the Work Positive Scheme, and information gathering had started on a review of clerical and administrative processes across the Service aimed at improving processes and job satisfaction.

In response the Staff Side advised that in terms of communication, they welcomed the proposal to use technology as means of communicating with staff, but pointed out that only 50% of Highland Council employees had access to the Intranet. Therefore they asked that staff who did not have access to the Intranet would be provided with the same information by some other means.

In this respect, the Director of Education, Culture & Sport confirmed that hard copies of staff information would be made available to staff who did not have access to the Intranet.

Thereafter, the Group **NOTED** the information contained in the presentations by the Depute Chief Executive and Director of Education, Culture & Sport on Service specific improvements arising from the Employee Survey.

6. Shared Services Diagnostic Project – Corporate Improvement Programme

There had been circulated Report No. JCG/10/08 dated 4 December, 2008 by the Depute Chief Executive which advised that the Shared Services Diagnostic Project had concluded and had led to the development of the Corporate Improvement Programme. The Programme was a major council wide initiative at present focusing on planning a transformation agenda with the ultimate objectives of improving – customer satisfaction; efficiency and stakeholder satisfaction. There were 8 projects in the Programme, details of which were contained in the report.

It was reported that the projects within the programme were currently in the planning stage and activity at present was focused on developing the programme and projects. The intention was that the plans for each project, the programme and the Communication plan would be finalised in February, 2009. At this point the information would be available for the Council to confirm commitment to the programme or seek further information.

The Group **NOTED**:

- i that the Shared Services diagnostic project had concluded and led to the development of the Corporate Improvement Programme;
- ii that projects with the Corporate Improvement Programme were currently in the planning stage; and
- iii that a progress report on the Corporate Improvement Programme would be submitted to a future meeting.

7. North of Scotland Local Authorities (NOSLA)

The Depute Chief Executive referred to the previous meeting of the Group when a presentation had been made by the NOSLA Project Manager providing an update on progress being made in relation to the NOSLA feasibility study. He advised that a further meeting of the NOSLA Board was being held today and therefore a further update on progress would be submitted to a future meeting.

In terms of the feasibility study being carried out by the Board, the Depute Chief Executive felt that while the outcome of this would be positive, it was unlikely that the Board would recommend implementation of a single NOSLA Revenues and Benefits organisation at this stage, due to the Scottish Government's intention to replace Council Tax with a new Local Income Tax. However, he advised that there were other opportunities for sharing services between Councils and the Board would be examining these in due course.

Therefore, the Depute Chief Executive advised that a report back on the outcome of the feasibility study would be reported to the Group in due course, but it was unlikely to recommend any major changes at this stage.

Thereafter, the Group **NOTED**:

- i progress in relation to the North of Scotland Local Authorities feasibility study; and
- ii that a report would be submitted to a future meeting on the outcomes of the feasibility study.

8. Supporting Employees Experiencing Domestic Abuse Policy and Management Guidelines

There had been circulated Report No. JCG/11/08 dated 2 December, 2008 by the Head of Personnel which introduced the Supporting Employees Experiencing Domestic Abuse policy and management guidelines, as an employment policy which addressed the requirements within the Violence against Women Strategy 2008.

The report set out the background to the formation of the policy. It was acknowledged that the Council had responsibilities, as its own employees may be victims and perpetrators and therefore measures were required to be put in place which would prevent domestic abuse; provide protection from domestic abuse and ensure that the appropriate services were available for those affected by domestic abuse. To fully meet the policy objectives an action plan had been developed for implementation.

In discussion, there was general support for the policy which would help address a serious and difficult problem. In particular, it was noted that the Council's partners in the Highland Wellbeing Alliance were putting in place a plan for perpetrators of domestic abuse, and it was hoped to include this aspect in the policy as well, so that perpetrators could be offered help with behavioural change.

Thereafter, the Group **AGREED**:

- i to support the introduction of the Supporting Employees Experiencing Domestic Abuse policy and management guidelines; and
- ii that the trade unions be invited to provide any comments on the policy and management guidelines by 16 January, 2009.

9. Mileage Allowance Review of Rates and Compensation to Staff

There had been circulated Report No. JCG/12/08 by the Staff Side relating to a request for a review of Mileage Allowance rates and compensation to staff.

There had also been circulated Report No. JCG/13/08 by the Assistant Chief Executive which considered the latest request from Unison for an increase in the Lease/Hire Car rate.

The Staff Side advised that they had previously raised concerns over the financial burden being placed on staff when paying for fuel to undertake Highland Council activities during 2007/08. However, they advised of their disappointment that staff had not been offered a revised mileage allowance or compensation for the costs they had occurred.

Their claim was for – backdating all lease/hire car payments for 12 months at the additional amount of 6 pence per mile travelled; and with immediate effect resetting the Lease/Hire car rate from 11 pence to 15 pence (previously claim was for 16p) per mile or equivalent average forecourt price, and they outlined their justification for this claim.

Having considered the claim further, the Staff Side were prepared to accept that any revision of current mileage rates be considered as part of the introduction of a harmonised terms and conditions package for the Council. However, they were still of the view that employees should receive backdated lease car payments for 12 months at an additional amount of 6 pence per mile travelled.

The Management Side's response to the Staff Side's claim was that while the rate of 11pence was below the actual cost of diesel based on average mileages, the headline rate of 11 pence ignored the other elements of the calculation both on the car lease scheme and on the car hire rate. In this respect, examples of these calculations, detailed in the report, showed that employees in both circumstances received more per mile than the headline rate and the requested rate.

However, following consideration, while it was accepted that any future changes to mileage rates should be dealt with through the harmonised terms and conditions package for Council employees, it was generally felt that the Staff Side's claim for back payment of fuel costs should be looked at again.

Thereafter, the Group **AGREED**:

- i that the current mileage allowance rates be maintained and any revision be considered as part of the introduction of a harmonised terms and conditions package for Council employees; and
- ii that a further report be submitted to the next meeting, addressing the Staff Side's claim for backdated payments of 6p per mile travelled on the Lease car rate, for 12 months.

10. Dates for Meetings in 2009

The Group **AGREED** the undernoted dates for their meetings and that of the Central Safety Committee in 2009:

Friday, 6 March
Friday, 26 June
Friday, 18 September
Friday, 11 December

The meeting ended at 12.10p.m.