

MINUTE

of

JOINT CONSULTATIVE COMMITTEE (FIRST TIER)

Minute of Meeting held at 2.00pm in the Council Chamber, Council Headquarters, Giffnock on 28 September 2017.

Present:

Councillor Caroline Bamforth
Councillor Tony Buchanan
Councillor Stewart Miller

Councillor Paul O'Kane
Councillor Gordon Wallace

Union Representatives:

Mr James Cowans (SSTA)
Mr Martin Doran (GMB)
Ms Sharon Kelly (EIS)
Mr Mark Kirkland (UNISON)

Mr Steven Larkin (UNISON)
Mr Gordon Lees (UNISON)
Mr Des Morris (EIS)
Mr James O'Connell (UNITE)

Chief Executive/Councillor Buchanan in the Chair

Attending:

Lorraine McMillan, Chief Executive; Andy Cahill, Director of Environment; Margaret McCrossan, Head of Accountancy (Chief Financial Officer); Iain Maclean, Head of Environment (Strategy); Sharon Beattie, Head of HR, Customer and Communications; Mary Docherty, QIO, Education Department; Tracy Morton, Education Senior Manager and Eamonn Daly, Democratic Services Manager.

Apologies:

Phil Daws, Head of Environment (Operations), Joe Lynch (Unison).

APPOINTMENT OF CHAIR AND VICE CHAIR

1. The Chief Executive intimated that as this was the first meeting of the committee following the local elections, it was necessary for the committee to appoint a Chair and Vice-Chair and that she would act as Chair until the appointments had been made.

She explained that in terms of the constitution, the appointments would last for the duration of the Council, that when the Chair was appointed from either the Council or union side, the position of Vice-Chair should be filled by one of the representatives from the other side. She also clarified that notwithstanding the positions of Chair and Vice-Chair the chairmanship of meetings of the committee would alternate.

Thereafter the Chief Executive called for nominations for the posts of Chair and Vice Chair, with Councillor Buchanan being nominated for the position of Chair and Mr Morris (EIS) being nominated for the position of Vice-Chair. There being no further nominations, Councillor Buchanan and Mr Morris were elected to the positions.

As Mr Morris had chaired the last meeting of the committee Councillor Buchanan assumed the chair for the remainder of the meeting.

MINUTE OF PREVIOUS MEETING

2. The committee considered and approved as a correct record the Minute of the meeting held on 19 January 2017.

REVENUE BUDGET CONSULTATION 2018/21

3. The committee considered a report by the Head of Accountancy (Chief Financial Officer) providing details of the plans for consulting on the Council's revenue budget for the period 2018 to 2021.

Commenting further, the Head of Accountancy explained that an announcement on the Council's settlement from the Scottish Government was expected on 14 December, with the process for thereafter approving both the budget for 2018/19 as well as indicative budgets for 2019/20 and 2020/21 being explained.

Welcoming the consultation processes that were taking place Mr O'Connell acknowledged that the trades unions were aware of the financial challenges facing the Council. He referred to the issue of 1 year settlements for local authorities as well as details of settlements being provided to local authorities earlier, asking that the government be lobbied on both these issues.

Councillor Buchanan explained that although there was cross-party support for three year settlements, such a move was unlikely as the Scottish Government continued to receive its settlement from the UK Government annually. He also explained that there was support for earlier release of the settlement figures but again this was dictated by when the Scottish Government received the relevant information from the UK Government. In addition, in response to Mr Larkin, Councillor Buchanan explained that the Council, along with other local authorities did formally lobby the Scottish Government through COSLA, emphasising to Scottish Ministers the need for front line services to be adequately resourced.

Mr Doran referred to the likely trade union campaigns regarding the preservation of jobs, seeking support for these.

Discussion also took place on the Council's position to date regarding no compulsory redundancies. Councillor Buchanan referred to the UK Government's austerity programme, the effects of this programme on the local government financial settlement, and that despite this the Council would endeavour to continue with the no compulsory redundancy commitment it had given in the past. This was echoed by Councillor O'Kane.

Mr Kirkland referred to the high quality services currently delivered for East Renfrewshire residents, questioning how the current standards would be maintained if staffing levels were reduced. In addition Mr O'Connell referred to the implications for staff who had to deal with the consequences of any decisions taken by the Council to reduce service levels.

Mr Morris also indicated that the EIS response to the forthcoming consultation exercise would make clear where it was considered that savings would affect service delivery. In connection with which Mr Cowans highlighted the additional work already carried out by school technicians and that any cuts in this service would have an impact on learning and teaching.

Responding to the comments made, Councillor Buchanan acknowledged the role of the trade unions in representing the interests of their members. He highlighted that councillors had a responsibility to manage services within available resources and that the Council always tried to strike a balance between the service provided and the associated implications for staff. He explained that the consultation exercise would set out in detail to the public the challenges facing the Council and that responses to the exercise would be given careful consideration, that no decision would be taken lightly, and that the Council would do everything it could to retain staff and services.

The committee noted the position.

ENVIRONMENT DEPARTMENT CHANGE PROGRAMME AND USE OF CONSULTANTS

4. Mr O'Connell indicated that this item had been placed on the agenda at the request of the trade unions. He referred to the ongoing change programme and service redesign in the Environment Department and the associated use of consultants. He explained that the trade unions had concerns about the use of consultants, the services they had provided and the consultancy costs, which the unions considered to be high.

Mr O'Connell also questioned the need for consultants to be used at all suggesting the management should be best placed to know what changes were required within their department. He acknowledged that there were significant savings to be made through the change programme and service redesign, but any savings achieved were reduced by the consultancy costs. Furthermore Mr O'Connell highlighted that whilst the Environment Department was the focus of his comments the use of consultants was an issue that spread across the authority and that in the view of the unions there were suitable qualified staff who would be able to carry out the work that consultants were being employed to do.

This view was supported by Mr Kirkland who also commented on the ability of existing staff to carry out reviews, with a corresponding reduction in costs.

Councillor Wallace reported that the use of consultants across the Council had been an issue that had been examined by the Council's Audit & Scrutiny Committee in the past. Agreeing with the views of the trade unions on the expertise of staff, he did suggest that in many cases the issue was that the staff did not have the time to carry out the review work in addition to their day to day responsibilities.

Mr Doran was also heard on the use of consultants by the Council and that it suggested that the Council did not have the necessary in-house expertise.

Responding to the comments that had been made, Councillor Buchanan emphasised that the Council did not take any decisions to use consultants lightly. He highlighted that the scale of the review in the Environment Department was in itself an issue in relation to the amount of time required and referred to the potential to upskill staff through the current review which would ensure more of a similar nature could be undertaken in-house in the future.

Commenting further, Mr O'Connell suggested that staff could have been seconded into posts and reiterated the view that the senior managers in the Environment Department had the appropriate skills to conduct the review without needing to employ consultants. He concluded by stating that whilst it was for management to determine how to take the review forward, the unions disagreed with the decision to employ consultants, and that there was real concern that this would lead to a privatisation of some services.

Having heard Councillor Buchanan further, the committee heard from the Director of Environment who gave a comprehensive explanation of the review and the reasoning behind the use of consultants.

Reference having been made to the Council's Modern Ambitious Programme (MAP) he explained the reasons for his decision to have a complete departmental transformation and referred to the collaborative group that had been set up and to the comprehensive discussions that had already taken place at that forum.

He outlined in detail all the steps that formed the review and commenting on the costs of consultancy, highlighting that from a total estimated cost of £343,000 savings of £4.5 million were anticipated

In response to earlier comments on staff expertise, he explained that staff did not have expertise in transformational change or the capacity to take forward such a review, hence the need for consultants experienced in these areas to be taken on. In addition, he explained that in his view it was more appropriate to employ consultants as and when required.

He highlighted that whilst the consultants would make recommendations, any final decisions on which if any of these to take forward would be his, and concluded by expressing his surprise that the unions had asked for this item to be placed on the agenda, particularly in light of all the communications between management and the unions that already had and would continue to take place.

Mr O'Connell having been heard further in reply to the comments by the Director of Environment, the Head of Environment was heard on the processes that had been used for procuring the services of the consultants. In reply, Mr O'Connell acknowledged the processes used but clarified that the unions' concerns related to the ongoing use of the consultants and associated costs in the course of which he stated that the savings to be accrued from the Modern Ambitious Programme had been requested but not received. He also explained why the unions had brought the matter to this meeting.

Councillor Wallace having referred to the unions' reasons for asking for the matter to be placed on the agenda for this meeting, the Head of Environment explained that in addition to the normal departmental JCC arrangements, a special consultation group had been established in relation to the review. This group met regularly in addition to which informal discussions were always taking place. This was confirmed by Mr Kirkland who reiterated that the unions' concerns related to the use and cost of consultants in taking forward the review.

Mr Larkin questioned whether any of the consultant's findings had been unexpected by the management. He also questioned whether, in light of the Director's comments about lack of expertise in the area of transformation change leading to the need for consultants being employed, if in future it was considered that staff did not have the skills required to undertake a job, they would not be subject to a capability hearing.

In conclusion, Councillor Buchanan suggested that there needed to be a balance between things being carried out in-house or employing consultants. He again referred to the hope that the upskilling of staff would mean that more work like this could be carried out by staff in future, that the use of consultants was not a decision that was taken lightly and careful consideration was always given to whether such action was necessary.

The committee noted the information.

HEALTH AND SAFETY COMMITTEE

5. The committee took up consideration of the Minutes of the meetings of the Council's Health and Safety Committee held on 26 January and 27 April 2017.

Mr Morris referred to the discussions at both meetings regarding the Accident and Incident Reporting System (AIRS), and to the possibility of a campaign to promote the use of the system. He explained that similar discussions had taken place at the most recent Health and Safety Committee meeting on 6 September, that the EIS was supportive of the use of the system and that more generally the trade unions would be keen to participate in any promotional campaign for the system.

In response to a question from Mr Doran on lone working, the Head of Environment undertook to establish the status of the lone working report and advise him accordingly.

The committee noted the Minutes and the additional information.

DATE OF NEXT MEETING

6. The committee noted that the next meeting was scheduled to take place on Thursday, 18 January 2018.

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