

MINUTE

of

JOINT CONSULTATIVE COMMITTEE (FIRST TIER)

Minute of Meeting held at 2.00pm in the Council Chamber, Council Headquarters, Giffnock on 14 September 2023.

Present:

Councillor Andrew Anderson
Councillor Tony Buchanan

Provost Mary Montague
Councillor Owen O'Donnell

Union Representatives:

Karen Catlow (UNISON)
Kerry Cameron (UNISON)

John Guidi (SSTA)
Des Morris (EIS)

Des Morris in the Chair

Attending:

Louise Pringle, Director of Business Operations and Partnerships; Margaret McCrossan, Head of Accountancy (Chief Financial Officer); Phil Daws, Head of Housing, Property and Climate Change; Sharon Dick, Head of HR and Corporate Services; Barbara Clark, Chief Accountant; Graeme Hay, Education Senior Manager (Leading Business Change); Tracy Morton, Education Senior Manager (Developing People); Gayle Smart, Senior Manager Unscheduled Care and Intensive Services; Alison Drummond, Health and Safety Manager; and Linda Hutchison, Senior Committee Services Officer.

Apologies:

Deborah Clark and Steven Larkin (UNISON).

Urgent Item of Business

In accordance with Item 7 of the Constitution, Mr Morris intimated that it was intended to consider an urgent item of business, as requested by UNISON, following the item on the Budget Update.

NOTE OF INFORMAL MEETING HELD ON 16 FEBRUARY MEETING

1. The Committee considered, approved as a correct record and ratified the decisions made as recorded in the Note of the informal meeting held on 16 February 2023.

BUDGET UPDATE

2. The Chief Accountant commented on the budget outlook for 2024/25 to 2025/26, clarifying that the assumption being made was that local authorities would receive a flat cash

settlement from the Scottish Government, with no increase provided for inflation which was reducing but remained high. She reported that, in addition to inflation, various other current pressures, such as pay increases and loan charges associated with the Council's ambitious Capital Programme had to be absorbed by the Council. She also reported that in 2022/23 directors had identified 3 years of savings options for 2023/24, 2024/25 and 2025/26, on which there had been public consultation in autumn 2022. Subsequently the Scottish Government had blocked any teacher or Pupil Support Assistant (PSA) savings for 2023/24, but its position on these savings for the following 2 years remained unclear.

It was explained that the Head of Accountancy (Chief Financial Officer) had forecast the financial shortfall for the following two years to be just under £23m, excluding pressures that required to be addressed by the Health and Social Care Partnership (HSCP) and East Renfrewshire Culture and Leisure Trust (ERCLT). This was before account was taken of any Council Tax increase, or use of non-earmarked reserves or savings. Over the next few months this figure would be fine-tuned as departments, with assistance from Accountancy Services, calculated in detail expected funding pressures for 2024/25 and the Scottish Government announced the Grant settlement in December 2023. The Chief Accountant highlighted that the shortfall figure also needed to be refined to take account of the 2023/24 pay award when settled.

Regarding COVID funding, the Chief Accountant confirmed that the COVID Reserve was now fully committed, with any ongoing pressures previously covered by that Reserve requiring to be absorbed by services in future.

It was reported that over the forthcoming months, in line with normal practice, the Budget Strategy Group (BSG) would be continuing to consider various approaches to closing the budget gap, such as increasing Council Tax, the use of efficiencies and spending reductions and increased income. The Chief Accountant confirmed that the BSG would also consider the use of reserves, assisted by the fact that in the current financial year a budget under-spend of £1.8m was currently forecast. However it was emphasised that reserves could only be used once and would only delay the need to identify savings that impacted on the base budget. It was confirmed that the BSG would also consider fiscal flexibility, which had permitted the re-phasing of Public Finance Initiative (PFI) debt freeing up £15m on a one-off basis, although this sum had already been committed to addressing issues regarding the 2023/24 to 2025/26 budgets. The Chief Accountant highlighted that the overall financial outlook for 2025/26 appeared worse than for 2024/25, which would be further impacted by the increasing pressures facing the HSCP which may struggle to operate on a flat cash basis from the current year forwards.

The Chief Accountant indicated that work was ongoing regarding savings options identified during the previous year, with no new savings options for 2024/25 currently being sought. When the 2023/24 budget had been approved by the Council in March 2022, just over £2m savings for 2024/25 had also been approved, due to the long lead in time associated with implementing them. Approval of just under a further £1.4m of savings identified for 2024/25, associated with which there was also a long lead in time to achieve the full in-year savings, would be sought from the Council in October 2023. These included reductions in school janitorial, cleaning and physiological services, crossing patrols, mixed tenure and the Connor Road Young Person's Accommodation. There were further tough, previously identified savings options of just over £1m in 2024/25 and £5m in 2025/26, excluding teachers and PSAs.

It was concluded that a substantial amount of work required to be undertaken on the budget prior to its consideration by the Council, the scheduled date for which was 28 February 2024.

Mr Morris referred to related discussions at a Trade Union (TU) meeting earlier in the week. Having confirmed that the TUs were aware of the savings proposals to be submitted to the

Council in October 2024, in terms of schools he highlighted that some impacted on both UNISON and Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS) members and some on the former only, but a key issue was that all impacted on the school learning environment.

Mr Morris reported that he and Mr Larkin had had an opportunity to address the BSG in 2022, indicating that they would welcome the chance to do so again in 2023. He also stated that the TUs would welcome consultation continuing on the budget.

The Committee noted the position and related comments made.

PAY CLAIM 2023/24

3. Referring to the most recent COSLA pay offer of 13 September, Ms Catlow expressed dismay regarding the detail, described it as pitiful, stressed that a better offer would be fought for, and stated that the Scottish Government, COSLA and Council Leaders needed to find a solution, which could not come from the low paid. She expressed doubt that the forthcoming strike action would be called off.

Councillor O'Donnell acknowledged the serious concerns expressed, commenting on the need for further discussions on the feedback from the Trade Unions on the offer made by COSLA. Subject to agreement by COSLA, and although he did not expect a solution to be found immediately, he anticipated the need for further engagement with the Scottish Government on the pay offer and affordability issues being encountered by Councils.

Ms Catlow stressed that the pay increase should have been implemented by 1 April 2023, expressing deep concern regarding the ongoing delay in resolving the issue and the pay rise being delivered. Councillor O'Donnell acknowledged the issue raised, stated it had been hoped to resolve the issue by April or as soon as possible after that, and expressed hope that consensus on the way forward could be found with or without Scottish Government assistance.

The Committee noted the position and related comments made.

EDUCATION DEPARTMENT HEALTH AND SAFETY REPORT 2022/23

4. The Committee considered the Education Department Health and Safety Annual Report 2022/23, referring to the Department's commitment to health, safety, welfare and security improvement, as illustrated in the progress made during the past year in achieving objectives and setting targets for 2023/24. It was confirmed that the report related directly to the Corporate Health and Safety objectives and how they were supported across the Education Department, and itemised progress made, areas for further development and proposed actions for 2023/24.

The Education Senior Manager (Leading Business Change) highlighted key aspects of the report, including that the Department had demonstrated a strong commitment to addressing health and safety risks at work and to further enhancing a positive health and safety culture. He commented on the corporate accident and incident reporting system (Alcumus) launched in 2021/22, work done to address a backlog of issues that had built up due to COVID, and the emphasis placed on continuing to provide training opportunities for all staff through e-learning and face-to-face sessions. He also referred to the extent of work done with Property and Technical Services to implement actions.

The Education Senior Manager (Leading Business Change) reported that violence to staff remained a significant concern and continued to be prioritised, there having been a marked increase in such incidents. A significant number related to pupils with additional support needs

or a small number of pupils posing distressed behaviour in specific schools, with a need for further analysis of the reasons having been identified. Further areas of focus included fire alarm activations. He concluded that the objectives set for 2023/24 demonstrated that a broad range of actions would be taken, progress on which would be referred to in the next Annual Report.

In response to Councillor Anderson, the Education Senior Manager (Leading Business Change) reported that the use of Office 365 was being explored to introduce an online system for the submission and approval of school excursion requests and, on a more general issue, confirmed that departmental objectives were developed in collaboration with the Education Health and Safety Advisor and approved by the Education Management Team.

In response to Ms Catlow who raised an issue regarding the cost of accidents and ill health, the Education Senior Manager (Leading Business Change) explained that, as reflected in the report, information on ill health retirements remained to be confirmed. He undertook to provide this to her when available. In response to a further issue raised by her, the Education Senior Manager (Developing People) reported that various factors were contributing to an increase in violence towards staff, including that some young people were finding the post pandemic transition to a more structured learning approach difficult. She referred to associated analysis being done, confirming that a Violence to Staff Working Group including Trade Union representation would be considering this issue. She highlighted that a proactive approach was being taken on behaviour management, such as adopting bespoke approaches and providing individual training for those supporting those with additional support needs. Councillor Buchanan, supported by Provost Montague, welcomed the approach being taken to addressing such behaviour and its causes, highlighting that this was a country wide issue. He welcomed the recording of such incidents to determine the scale of the problem, following which Councillor O'Donnell referred to the importance of categorising them to help fully determine why they were occurring which needed to be established. Mr Morris acknowledged and welcomed that the department was taking the issue seriously with a view to reducing these incidents, emphasised the need for staff to feel safe whilst doing their best to address pupils' needs, commented that the EIS acknowledged that many pupils had complex needs beyond their own control, and highlighted that ascertaining what effective change was required would be amongst issues the Working Group would focus on.

In response to Provost Montague, the Education Senior Manager (Developing People) indicated that a report could be submitted to a future meeting on the outcome of the work being doing on this issue by the Working Group, acknowledging that such behaviour impacted on many people such as families and those witnessing such behaviour. Councillor O'Donnell welcomed the proposal regarding a further report.

Having heard Councillor O'Donnell comment on unwanted fire alarm signals which occurred for various reasons and a related change of practice by the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service which had been discussed by the Cabinet (Police and Fire) earlier in the day, the Education Senior Manager (Leading Business Change) reported that there remained some concerns regarding this and it had been recommended to staff that they take a cautious approach. In response to clarification Councillor O'Donnell sought on the categorisation of a serious incident that took place relatively recently in Crookfur Primary School playground, the Education Senior Manager (Leading Business Change) undertook to confirm this to him. He stressed that the department was taking the incident very seriously, doing associated work with Corporate Health and Safety, and intended to prepare a fuller report including an associated action plan regarding the wider school estate.

The Committee:-

- (a) noted that the Education Senior Manager (Leading Business Change) would confirm the position on ill health retirements to Ms Catlow when available;

- (b) noted that the Education Senior Manager (Leading Business Change) would confirm the categorisation of the incident in Crookfur Primary School playground to Councillor O'Donnell;
- (c) agreed that a further report on addressing violence to staff be submitted to a future meeting; and
- (d) otherwise, noted the report and related comments made.

EAST RENFREWSHIRE COUNCIL CORPORATE HEALTH AND SAFETY REPORT 2022/23.

6. The Committee considered the East Renfrewshire Council Corporate Health and Safety Report for 2022/23, referring to progress made on the Council's Health and Safety objectives during the year, and providing detail of the proposed objectives and priorities for 2023/24. It was confirmed that, in addition to the Annual Health and Safety Report, quarterly management reports were provided to departmental management; that the Council had a clear commitment to providing a safe and healthy environment for all employees, service users and others who may be affected by Council activities; and that the Council could demonstrate its commitment to on-going effective implementation of the health and safety policy, effective monitoring and review processes for health and safety performance, health and safety generally and continuous improvement.

The Head of Housing, Property and Climate Change highlighted key aspects of the report, including what went well, progress made against objectives for 2022/23 most of which had been completed, areas of focus for 2023/24, training delivered, and the position on accident data and reporting. He confirmed that there had been no Health and Safety Executive activity within the period covered by the report, but that seven buildings had been audited by the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service. Having highlighted the range of mechanisms in place to consult with employees on health and safety issues, he thanked the Health and Safety Manager and her team for their work over what had been a difficult past few years.

In response to Provost Montague, the Head of Housing, Property and Climate Change explained how 1st aid risk assessments for all Council properties and services, which were up to date, followed a very specific format. Also in response to her, the Health and Safety Manager confirmed how 1st aid boxes were checked such as for accessibility and the adequacy of their contents, and confirmed what the work done regarding defibrillators had focussed on. It was clarified that in the past two years 1st aid training had covered use of the equipment taking account that 1st aiders were usually called upon to use it when needed in buildings. Provost Montague commented that a church in her Ward offered defibrillator awareness sessions, suggesting that it could be worth considering this for staff to reduce fear that may exist of using them.

In reply to Councillor O'Donnell, the Head of Housing, Property and Climate Change confirmed that information on the Reinforced Autoclaved Aerated Concrete (RAAC) building assessments done were covered in a separate report, although there could be an overlap between that report and the one being considered by the Committee. He stated that there was nothing to prevent a change of approach as there was no prescribed format for the Annual Health and Safety Report, confirmed that a report on the fabric of buildings was not one that was routinely submitted to either this Committee or the Cabinet, but indicated that he was happy to consider change and discuss this further with Councillor O'Donnell at some point if that was helpful.

The Committee noted the report and related comments made.

COUNCIL HEALTH AND SAFETY COMMITTEE

6. The Committee considered and noted the Minutes of the meetings of the Council's Health and Safety Committee held on 28 February and 23 May 2023.

DATE OF NEXT MEETING

7. It was noted that the next meeting was scheduled to take place on Thursday, 15 February 2024.

CHAIR