

THE EXECUTIVE – 27 MAY 2008

REVIEW OF WORKING ARRANGEMENTS – RESPONSE BY UNISON

UNISON is represented on the Working Arrangements Project Group and the Working Arrangements User Group and is able to express views at these meetings. However, when the User Group met last on 13 May the report on Working Arrangements for the Executive meeting of 27 May was not mentioned. Staff had no knowledge of its content until the report appeared on the internet on Friday 16 May.

UNISON would ask that members of the Executive take into account the following comments when considering the recommendations contained in the report. UNISON believes that these comments reflect accurately views held by many staff, both union members and non-members and that it is vital for the success of the project to consider the needs of staff.

Single Site

UNISON is not opposed to the principle of a single site for back office functions and service administration for the Council.

UNISON is also not opposed to flexible working, including remote and home working to improve the utilisation of East Herts office accommodation. In fact UNISON actively promotes flexible working practices but wishes to stress the importance of ensuring that no member of staff is forced to adopt a working pattern that takes no account of personal circumstances or that is unsuitable.

There are concerns about the following:

- **Location**

There appears to have been very little research into a Bishop's Stortford option for centralising staff. This town is larger than Hertford, is expanding faster and unlike its county town rival has excellent communication links. Wallfields is remote from the town centre and will need extensive refurbishment to accommodate a near 60% increase in staff. Hertford has the vast County Council but the offices in Bishop's Stortford are the main source of local public sector employment. UNISON would ask that the search for suitable accommodation in towns other than Hertford is not abandoned at the end of May but continues for at least another two

months when a final decision can be made at the Executive meeting of 1 July 2008.

- **Staffing Issues – Relocation to Hertford**

There is a higher percentage of women and part-time staff in Bishop's Stortford who need to work locally in order to manage childcare and other domestic arrangements. Relocation to Hertford would inevitably result in the resignation of a number of staff and a loss of experience and expertise to the Council. In the Paragon survey Hertford respondents, unlike those in Bishop's Stortford did not raise the costs or problems of travel as an issue. The Council would need to ensure that relocation to Hertford did not constitute a form of indirect discrimination against the group of staff who are adversely affected.

- **Space Issues – Relocation to Hertford**

UNISON accepts that the available office space could be used more efficiently, although the assertion of "half empty buildings which are costly to run" referred to by a Councillor is a gross exaggeration and does not take into account staff who are in and out of the office throughout the day.

UNISON remains sceptical that Wallfields is large enough to accommodate staff without creating an unpleasant and cramped working environment.

The workspace efficiency standard said to be adopted by the Office of Government Commerce of 10 sqm per person referred to in paragraph 4.9 of the report UNISON believes is inaccurate.

Below is a quote from the report by the Office of Government Commerce headed 'Efficiency Standards for Office Space', recommending 12 sqm per person.

3 The proposed Office Floorspace Standard

3.1 The Office Floorspace Standard

The Office Floorspace Standard for the use of occupied office space should be set at 12m² per person, measured on the net internal area.

- **Parking Issues – Relocation to Hertford**

Parking at Wallfields can be problematic currently. This will inevitably be exacerbated if the relocation takes place. This issue will need to be addressed before any move takes place.

Financial Appraisal

UNISON welcomes the proposal to present a financial appraisal and property options paper to the next meeting of the Executive. The Council will only at this point be able to make an informed decision on whether relocation at this point in time is financially viable and know the timescale over which potential savings will be achieved.

Proposal for Establishment of New Post of Programme Director

UNISON believes the decision to fund the above post at a time of budget constraints is unjustifiable, particularly, after efficiency savings such as the withdrawal of the funding to the CAB and the decision not to provide a summer play scheme have only just been implemented. It is particularly hard for staff to swallow when many are struggling to cope with problems caused by frozen vacancies and delayed recruitment.

The Council has only recently undergone a management restructure, having made three very able chief officers redundant. Savings from the restructure will not be realised until at least the year 2009/10, since the Council is until then having to fund the costs of the redundancy payments and early release of pensions. For example, the cost to the Council (as outlined in the Executive report of 16 November 2006) of one of the redundancies (the cheapest) over a period of three years was £145,000. This payment will be hard to justify to council taxpayers if another chief officer is now engaged.

The whole purpose of the restructure was to streamline the corporate management team, making it less top-heavy and to invest the savings in frontline services as stated in the Executive report of 12 September 2006.

“As a result of the restructuring a rationalization of posts a lower levels will occur. It is recommended that the savings that accrue from this report be used to fund any changes at lower level. This being in line with the Council’s policy of redirecting the resources to front-line services.”

UNISON believes that the Council has sufficient internal resources and expertise to manage an office relocation, without the need to create a new post at a cost to council taxpayers of £300,000 over a three year period. The current cost of chief officers’ salaries at East Herts is in the region of £450,000 per year, a significant sum of money.

In the same 12 September report the remit of the three proposed director posts was as follows:

“Whilst each Director focuses on the leadership of their directorate, delivery to performance targets and the management of resources, they will also undertake responsibility for corporate areas requiring improvement. They will therefore also be responsible for leading cross-council teams with remits that range from policy development through to challenge or review and implementation programmes.”

The review of working arrangements to date has been overseen by the Director of Internal Services, working closely with the Assets and Estates Manager. UNISON is of the view that with the help and contribution of other officers, this level of expertise should enable the Council to successfully manage the programme and achieve the desired objectives.

Conclusions

UNISON will co-operate fully with the review of working arrangements in order to achieve the most cost effective and efficient delivery of services to users in East Herts. A decision to relocate to Wallfields should not be taken at this stage until at least the paper on property options has been produced and all the options evaluated. Once a full financial appraisal has been completed, the Council will know the level of investment required in order to successfully relocate. Substantial investment will be required in IT equipment and support, in office refurbishment, in disturbance allowances etc. A decision on whether to create a new chief officer post should at least be put on hold until this information is available and has been fully assessed.