

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE
LOCAL JOINT PANEL HELD IN THE
ROOM 27 WALLFIELDS, PEGS LANE,
HERTFORD ON WEDNESDAY
28 JANUARY 2009 AT 4.00PM

PRESENT: Employer's Side

Councillor M Wood (Chairman).
Councillors M R Alexander, D A A Peek,
J O Ranger (Substitute for A P Jackson).

Staff Side (UNISON)

Chris Clowes, Chris Cooper (Vice Chairman),
Jenny Francis, (Substitute for A Stevenson),
Jane Sharp.

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE:

Lorraine Blackburn	- Committee Secretary
Simon Chancellor	- Head of Financial Support
Emma Freeman	- Head of People and Organisational Services
George A Robertson	- Director of Customer and Community Services

28 APOLOGIES

An apology for absence was submitted from Councillor A P Jackson. It was noted that Councillor J O Ranger was attending as a substitute in his absence.

ACTIONRESOLVED ITEMS29 MINUTES

RESOLVED – that the minutes of the meeting held on 3 December 2008 be signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

30 STAFFING IMPLICATIONS ON THE COUNCIL'S BUDGET PROPOSALS

The Secretary to the Staff Side submitted a report seeking Unison's involvement in the consultation process as part of the formal budget consultation processes. The Secretary to the Staff Side commented that whilst there was a series of consultations seeking the views of key audiences and stakeholders on budgetary matters, those key audiences did not include employees of East Herts Council. The Secretary to the Staff Side commented that this was of concern to Unison given that staff may be directly affected by this year's proposals. At the request of the Secretary to the Staff Side, Unison had met with the Acting Director of Internal Services and the Head of People and Organisational Services on 20 January 2009 and that a further HR / Unison meeting would take place on 30 January 2009.

The Secretary to the Staff Side acknowledged the difficulties associated with the budget and sought assurances that if redundancies became necessary, that these should be on a voluntary basis. A number of alternative measures were suggested as being capable of generating savings. These included:

- Voluntary reduction in hours
- Reduction in overtime
- Flexible/early retirement

ACTION

- Stopping the use of temporary staff / consultants (unless essential)
- Sabbaticals / career breaks or secondments
- Reduction of car journeys between Hertford and Bishop's Stortford (and by offering incentives to encourage car sharing)
- Re-introduction of the staff suggestion scheme with paid rewards for good staff savings

The Secretary to the Staff Side commented that information from the (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) viewed redundancies as false economies, and a "short term fix" and urged employers to plan for recovery by retaining staff rather than downsizing and risking long term damage to business. Additionally the Staff Side wished to protect terms and conditions of employment and to avoid a panic reaction to the current economic downturn.

The Secretary to the Staff Side expressed concern at one of the proposed savings within Appendix B of the report now submitted, specifically the cessation of the floral displays at The Causeway and Wallfields. These measures had been introduced to improve the quality of the air and increase humidity in offices especially in those where the windows were sealed such as The Causeway.

The Secretary to the Staff Side questioned whether the £328,000 deficit was due solely to a reduction in interest rates. She commented that there had been reductions in land charges fees and building control fees. She queried whether the downturn could have been predicted. She referred to a request last February by Councillor N Clark who had raised the issue of 5.3% interest rate and whether this should be revisited.

ACTION

The Secretary to the Staff Side commented that in the past, Unison had been consulted as part of the budgetary consultation process when there had not been any staffing implications. She also commented that Unison should be consulted before the budget was set so that the views of employees could be heard. She further commented that these consultations should be part of the formal budget processes.

It was acknowledged that the salary budget was high and it was hoped that a further meeting with the Head of People and Organisational Services could resolve some issues. The Secretary to the Staff Side commented that the £328,000 deficit was over and above efficiency savings which had already been achieved.

Councillor J O Ranger commented that meetings in the past had involved Unions and that these had been very valuable and had brought forward some helpful suggestions in terms of what savings could be achieved. He supported the introduction of budget consultations with Unison. He referred to changes in work attitudes being promoted in the USA and Japan.

The Director of Customer and Community Services welcomed the approach by Unison requesting timely consultation. He drew attention to the decreasing levels of interest and investment levels as set out in Appendix B11 of the report now submitted. Over the period from 2007/09 to 2010/11, it was predicted that there would be a drop in income from £5M to £1.9M based on the information currently available. He commented that in terms of management actions, a figure of £328,000 had been set for 2009/10 financial year but over a four year period, the Medium Term Financial Plan identified the need to find £1,043M savings from staff costs. There was also evidence of falling income from car parking, land charges and a number of services.

The Secretary to the Employer's Side commented that the Chief Executive at recent briefings had concentrated on

ACTION

the 2009/10 budget gap and had encouraged staff to read carefully the budget papers to gain the full picture.

The Director of Customer and Community Services commented that it was not the intention to panic staff but to recognise how serious things were. He agreed that consultation was very important but stressed that the budget would not be set until March 2009. The Secretary to the Staff Side commented that focus groups had already been consulted on the budget but that Staff had not.

The Director confirmed that he had been present when voluntary groups responded to general proposals involving the budget. He saw no reason why staff might not also have the opportunity to comment on general principles in this way. He commented that it was Members' role to make the budget decisions and Officers' role to implement those decisions. On that basis, comments would be welcomed.

The Secretary to the Staff Side commented that Staff would not wish to enter the political arena, but when issues involved savings which had implications for the workforce, Unison would wish to be consulted and work together and without the threat of redundancies.

Councillor M R Alexander commented that the Council was not panicking, but that it was looking at the business working efficiently. Consultation had to be meaningful.

The Local Joint Panel Vice Chairman commented that Staff had heard about possible redundancies in the Observer newspaper. He commented that the Chief Executive had always commented that she would advise Staff what was happening first and that this situation was "appalling". He commented that Staff had worked hard to identify savings. It was not acceptable for a Member to then discuss efficiency savings and redundancies without reference to the Chief Executive. He hoped that the Member had been "reprimanded" and urged Members to

ACTION

first clear any matter involving Staff through appropriate channels. He recommended early discussions with Unison.

Councillor J O Ranger commented that early discussions with the Unions would be beneficial in order that problems could be highlighted.

The Head of People and Organisational Services commented that a very productive meeting with Unison had taken place with both the Staff Side and the Employer's side in terms of reviewing how savings could be achieved.

The Secretary to the Staff Side sought the Council's commitment to retaining staff and in avoiding compulsory redundancies. She commented that savings could be achieved without the need to make redundancies.

The Director of Customer and Community Services commented that the Council considered redundancies as a last resort. He commented that organisations should be fit for purpose and focus on the needs of the organisation, retaining talent so that when the Council comes through the recession, it was fit for purpose. He commented that skills retained had to be the skills that the Council needed. For that reason, he stated that it would not be possible to say that there would never be any compulsory redundancies or make promises that there would only ever be voluntary redundancies.

The Secretary to the Staff Side expressed concern about the use of the word "talent" as it suggested that the Council was happy to rid themselves of staff if they had no "talent". She commented that the use of the words "skills and experience" were better.

The Head of People and Organisational Services commented that it was her view that skills, attitude and ability were aspects of "talent" i.e. they contributed to the success of the organisation. The Director of Customer

ACTION

and Community Service Services commented that this included the ability and willingness to learn new skills.

Councillor D A A Peek commented that it was his view that hard work was also a talent and that hard work was just as appropriate as skills. He was not concerned about the use of the word "talent".

The Secretary to the Staff Side commented on the selection process in relation to redundancies and how it could allow the Council to "weed" out staff based on sickness, disciplinaries and skills.

The Director of Customer and Community Services commented that the recession had come as a shock to most people and because of that, some staff might not feel that consultation had been timely or appropriate.

The Secretary to the Staff Side commented that there had been no consultation with Unison, and that the meeting today had been called at Unison's request. She commented that a meeting needed to be timetabled as a matter of course to consider issues before the budget was set.

The Director of Customer and Community Services gave a commitment on behalf of CMT, to ensure that there would be timely meetings convened in relation to Unison and the budget process.

The Secretary to the Employer's Side commented on the need to review terms and conditions of service to ensure that they were fit for purpose and value for money. She commented that in some instances, it was not now appropriate to offer bonuses to retain staff. These matters would be reviewed in due course.

The Local Joint Panel supported a formal process of budget consultation on staffing matters between the Staff and Employer's side on an annual basis.

ACTION

RESOLVED – that (A) a formal process of budget consultation on staffing matters between the Staff and Employer’s Side via the Local Joint Panel take place on an annual basis at the time of public consultation;

(B) the Head of Paid Service, Director of Internal Services and the Head of People and Organisational Services undertake meaningful, timely and appropriate consultation with Unison on workforce matters arising from the published budget proposals; and

CE/DIS

(C) the Council reiterates its commitment to retain staff talent and relevant skills within East Herts Council and take what steps it can to avoid compulsory redundancies.

31 DATE OF FUTURE MEETING

RESOLVED - that the next meeting of the Local Joint Panel be held on 18 March 2009.

The meeting closed at 5.10 pm.

Chairman
Date