



July 2006

Scrutiny Panel Review of Staff Recruitment and Retention Amended version

Thank you for the opportunity for UNISON to make a submission on the report in front of your Panel. The union wishes to work with the Council in its efforts, to quote Councillor Tomlinson, to become or continue to be “an employer of which its employees can be proud” and we welcome the comment that the Council’s employees are its greatest asset. I believe that the report highlights most of the main issues correctly and makes many constructive recommendations and wish to make a number of comments on the issue raised.

Retention of staff

UNISON have requested that a flexible retirement policy be developed and our view is that this needs to be developed in the context of upcoming changes to the pension scheme.

The union strongly agrees with the working group’s comments about equality and diversity issues and we agree that the Council needs to do more in this field. Indeed UNISON, TGWU and Personnel are already working on an equal pay audit which is looking at where there may be equality issues in terms of pay and grade and making recommendations for action. This includes looking at current practice on the payment of a ‘market forces supplement’ which is used to attract and retain certain employees in certain posts where there is a competitive market for skills. We are investigating whether the system is working within the remit of ensuring equal pay for work of equal value. UNISON believes that the Council can and should do more in terms of addressing any equalities balance problems using lawful positive action measures. For example by targeting training and development to ensure that any ‘glass ceiling’ in terms of women’s promotional opportunities is overcome. More also needs to be done to enable greater recruitment and retention of people who declare themselves as disabled.

We agree that a lot has been done within the Council to improve the support for staff training and the unions are working with the Training Unit. In terms of work-life balance and innovative ways of working UNISON is also keen to work with the Council to ensure staff feel comfortable in their working environment and work in ways that maximise their productivity and balance between home and work. To this end we also believe that the Council’s flexi-time policy needs to be updated and amended and Personnel have recognised this. The union is keen to work with the Council in offering staff a wider range of choices of working patterns to accommodate their needs.

UNISON supports office centralisation because the current work environment is a positive disincentive to work for Salisbury District Council. If this were allowed to continue for much

longer we would have serious concerns about staff health, safety and welfare. There are many challenges ahead for staff in the decant and move into new offices however there are many opportunities as the report highlights. We are unaware whether the Council has mapped the home locations of it's staff but expect that a move out of Salisbury would cause even more significant recruitment and retention issues which would impact on costs and service delivery.

The report recommends further work on exit interviews and we believe this is one significant area where the Council could indeed be taking more action. We are aware that the Council gather some information however the report correctly says that there are gaps in the current information available. Whilst some of the information is private and confidential in nature the Council could and should be more actively reporting on the reasons why people are leaving and taking action as appropriate. For example are people leaving to join another local authority or private sector organisation and why? Are they leaving for better pay or promotion? Are they leaving because there were problems at work, for example stress or bullying, and how does the Council deal with such problems or are they just ignored and left to fester for remaining staff? Why do some individuals choose to leave and rather than make a claim using dignity at work or grievance procedures whilst employed?

Recruitment

UNISON supports efforts to bring in new employees and 'grow our own' officers through apprenticeship schemes or other forms of training.

Medium Term Financial Strategy

Whilst we note that this report has focused on processes and procedures with regards to recruitment and retention of staff it is impossible for this union to view this issue in isolation without talking about the context. There are some important matters which this report does not address with regards to the economic climate of the Council and staff conditions.

Security of Employment and Redundancy

There are some people who are forced to leave the Council who would rather remain for no fault of their own. UNISON is concerned that the threat of compulsory redundancies may be rising. For example there were four redundancies at the last Full Council. The Council's 'security of employment' policy is progressive in terms of commitments to attempt to avoid redundancy however too often when a redundancy is identified we are still losing people from employment in the Council rather than retaining their experience and skills. Some may try and pin some blame on the individual for not being flexible enough when presented with other opportunities however no employee presented with redundancy in the last few years has turned down 'suitable alternative employment' (a legal term which says that the offer of a new job should be similar in terms of grade, location, skills and duties). One cannot force an employee into a job which is not appropriate and it is unreasonable to expect this. In UNISON's view the Council, if it genuinely wishes to avoid losing staff through redundancy, must be more flexible when developing it's restructuring plans and more flexible in it's offers of alternative jobs. Whilst we accept that the priority has to be service delivery there is more that can be done in terms of the ways units are structured to avoid displacing employees. More can be done to retain them if that is unavoidable, whether in terms of working hours, retraining or duties of alternative jobs. This takes an organisational and managerial commitment not just a policy commitment.

Increasing pressure, stress and unfilled vacancies

UNISON understands that in some areas of the Council vacancies are not being filled to enable the Council to cope with its financial pressures. We are concerned that the impact of these unfilled vacancies is that existing staff face growing pressure of work. There are also other savings identified in the MFTS which are putting more pressure on resources and this has a consequent impact on staff who are aiming to achieve continuous improvement of services. Unless management and the public accept lower standards of service delivery little pressure is removed from individual officers struggling with a greater workload. This can lead to stress and consequent increased sickness absence. We may end up losing staff under the Council's sickness absence procedures as a result.

Enhanced pay for unsocial hours working

The potential impact on recruitment and retention of staff in key frontline 'out of hours' services, should the Council implement changes to staff terms and conditions of employment, should not be underestimated. Even if changes are agreed with the union following negotiations there is likely, in our opinion, to be a negative impact on employees and a consequent impact on services. We are in a full employment environment here in Salisbury and if it becomes economically less advantageous for people to work in services outside of core working hours, for example at nights, then the Council will find it hard staffing those key services. Staff morale will also suffer in those areas from having to take a reduction in pay.

Travel and parking

Finally we are concerned about the impact of the introduction of the Council's new travel and parking arrangements for its staff and the way in which this policy has been implemented. The changes to the free parking arrangements have been agreed with the unions and we are willing to work with the Council on 'green' travel measures. However the Council should face the fact that employment with the Council has become less attractive as a result of these changes. A major staff entitlement has been removed and not been completely replaced with another. Staff are also not convinced as to the elected Members commitment to their own policies in this area and this impacts on morale. If the Council wants to enable its employees to move away from the car there is more in our opinion that could have been done around public transport and there is absolutely no incentive now for someone who lives within the city boundaries whereas prior to 2000 one received free city centre parking. The Council is facing operational issues with regards to those who require access to a car occasionally for work, so called 'casual users'. The Council committed in the new Green Travel Plan to ensuring that these staff would not have to use their personal cars for work purposes but could access pool cars. However future proposals to change parking and travel arrangements for those who regularly require their car for work, 'essential users', may also impact on staff recruitment and retention.

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