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Members of the Corporate Services Sub Committee

Our Ref:

Your Ref:

30 January 2001

Dear Member

Further to recent discussions and meetings Wiltshire County UNISON branch writes to formally request that the Corporate Services Sub Committee consider funding an additional full-time post within the branch for the next two years. This will bring the total resources to two full time employees.

As this letter will hopefully demonstrate this request is not due to any single factor but is rather an early proactive response to the numerous challenges which the council and branch face. If the branch is not resourced efficiently, it will not be able to handle the substantial levels of consultations required by law of the County Council with the branch

Significant issues which the council faces during the period which will inevitably and legally require significant consultation include;

- *Best Value*
- *implications of the financial crisis*
- *externalisation of WDS*
- *proposed outsourcing of the Home Care Service*
- *transfer of Mental Health Services*
- *transfer of adult care to Primary Care Trust*
- *reorganisation or outsourcing of day services for people with learning difficulties*
- *outsourcing of respite care homes*
- *amalgamation of education and libraries with Social Services Childcare division*
- *transfer of under 8 to Ofsted,*
- *PFI's*
- *transfer of registration & inspection unit to care standards.*

If this list in itself is not compelling enough it must also be remembered that general everyday issues of staff representation will continue for example;

- *job evaluation*
- *health and safety*
- *equal opportunities*
- *grievances*
- *disciplinarys*
- *pay issues*
- *pension*
- *redeployment*
- *servicing the various staffing committees.*

Alongside these matters is perhaps in someway the more important informal negotiation and representation work, which goes on between Wiltshire County Council and UNISON, which is vital in securing the outstanding industrial relations which currently exist.

This later list is in itself demanding enough to exhaust all existing resources both within the branch and also the support the branch is entitled to from UNISON's regional full-time officers. To put this into perspective the one UNISON secondee post currently deals with a caseload of approximately 50 individual, group and corporate cases at anyone time and is regularly working excessive hours. In the current year her recorded working hours are 10% beyond contracted hours.

Whilst it may be reasonable to assume that support would be available from stewards within the branch, this is currently not realistic. This is because UNISON can currently only really call upon six active members. This is not due to apathy or lack of support from the 1,500 or so members within the branch but is rather due to the difficulty staff have managing their County workloads and simply do not feel able to spare time doing Union work. It must be remembered that when a steward spends time on UNISON duties, their own work is not covered. Consequently members do not feel able to balance both workloads and are therefore not becoming stewards. To demonstrate this one relatively new steward resigned due to the pressures of their workload and a number of experienced stewards are also reviewing their position again due to pressures of workload. Staff in WDS have said no one felt able to come forward due to the pressures combining being a steward (as witnessed by them) and meeting their workloads.

It is unrealistic to think that this position will change in the imminent future and consequently it is likely that unless there is some intervention in the way proposed then effective consultation between staff and the council will be untenable. It must be remembered that UNISON representation of staff outside of the teaching Unions is by far the most significant and therefore no other group is in a position to facilitate this.

The consequences of ineffective consultation are very worrying. Firstly the County may struggle to meet its legal obligations with regards consultation. If however there is proper consultation, this will result in a gain for the County, as it will be able to demonstrate it has acted properly in matters relating to employment. There would therefore be a reduction in the likelihood of WCC being taken to court by employees

or ex-employees or have the services it has contracted for being disrupted or interrupted through similar court actions against their new employers.

Poor communication with staff will also mean they have lack of understanding of situations and will make ill –informed decisions. Equally if all communication is received only through the Council they may become cynical and disbelieving of what is being said. This could easily lead staff to become more resentful and volatile with the Council and more prone to industrial action. Whilst UNISON can clearly not guarantee to always take the same line as the council, we will always take a pragmatic stance and currently are sympathetic and empathetic of many of the issues the council face. We will always look to provide staff with a realistic position and expectation of what can be achieved and hopefully will therefore negate the potential possibilities mentioned if all staff information comes through personnel.

Hopefully this letter has demonstrated the need and the reasons for requesting an additional post within the branch. Whilst we therefore recognise and sympathise with the council regarding the current difficult financial situation it faces, the cost of providing an additional officer is offset by the lack of take-up in time to carry out duties, attend meetings etc by stewards. Perhaps more pertinently however any potential legal settlement costs, which may occur if communication fails can be, averted by supporting this post.

Ultimately the branch would point to the good record of working, which exists between UNISON and the Council. We have always worked together to overcome differences and this has been largely successful. Relationships have always been good, are so now, and the lines of communication are open and direct. It is our assertion that this post is essential if this is to be maintained.

As to regards how this post would work the branch would seek the secondment of a member experienced in consulting with WCC knowledgeable of negotiating structures within the council and currently active within the branch. Realistically given the complexity of the task it will also require somebody with the appropriate project and general management experience.

As regards the way they will work the most significant benefit will be the potential to split the workload although it is anticipated that the appointed person will assume greatest responsibility for negotiation. It is likely that a branch council sub-committee will be formed with representatives from each department. These will hopefully feed into senior management within each department allowing for regular and easy communication between staff and management.

Ultimately you will of course have your own thoughts and opinions on what is being suggested and we would welcome the opportunity to discuss this with you in more detail. Regardless of how you see the position operating we would at least hope you can see the importance of such a post which is in our opinion central to the long term prospects of industrial relations within WCC.

Yours sincerely



Chris Pettifer

UNISON Branch Officer (Negotiator)

ON BEHALF OF THE BRANCH EXECUTIVE