

Group Leaders Meeting with Trade Union Representatives

MINUTES OF THE GROUP LEADERS MEETING WITH TRADE UNION REPRESENTATIVES MEETING HELD ON 1 FEBRUARY 2022 AT COUNCIL CHAMBER - COUNTY HALL, BYTHESEA ROAD, TROWBRIDGE, BA14 8JN.

Present:

Cllr Ernie Clark, Cllr Richard Clewer, Cllr Ian Thorn, Cllr Ricky Rogers and Cllr Laura Mayes

Union Representatives:

John Drake – UNISON
Mike Harrison - NEU
John Hawkins – ATL/NEU
Mike Osment - UNISON
Adam Smith - NAHT
Alan Tomala – UNITE

Officers:

Andy Brown - Corporate Director Resources & Deputy Chief Executive and s.151 Officer,
Terence Herbert – Chief Executive
Perry Holmes – Director Legal and Governance
Parvis Khansari – Corporate Director Place (Acting up)
Joanne Pitt - Director - HR & Organisational Development
Lucy Townsend – Corporate Director People
Lizzie Watkin - Assistant Director - Finance and Deputy s151

1 **Welcome and Introductions**

The Leader welcomed everyone to the meeting and asked attendees to introduce themselves.

2 **Apologies**

Apologies were received from:

- Mike Leigh, NASUWT representative
- John Read, NAHT representative
- Keith Roberts, GMB representative

3 **Notes from the previous meeting**

The notes of the previous meeting held on 2 February 2021 were received and noted as a correct record.

4 **Wiltshire Council Financial Plan Update 2022/23**

Cllr Richard Clewer, Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Finance provided an overview of the Council's proposed budget for 2022/23.

In presenting the overview, the Leader explained that it was useful to look at the budget proposals over three years, rather than just the one year it was set for. The Leader explained that these were extraordinary times, with COVID preventing routine savings over the past two years; uncertainty regarding government funding; high rates of Adult Social Care inflation and transformations in the Adult Social Care system all having an effect. The funding settlement received from central government was larger than expected at £12.5 million, where we had only forecasted receiving £5 million. However, future funding settlements were still uncertain and there were many unknowns. The budget equalisation reserve would be used to help address shortfalls.

The Leader stated that Council Tax would increase 1.99% plus a 1% levy for Adult Social Care. Spending was not being cut, more money was being spent this year, although not always in the same places as previously. Difficult decisions had to be made and there were issues around car parking and staffing savings to consider. Overall, this was strategic budget with long term plans that Wiltshire Council could fund.

At the Leaders invitation Andy Brown (Corporate Director Resources, Deputy Chief Executive and s151 Officer) stated that the budget proposals were a three year plan, where financial resilience and sustainability were key considerations, and this budget improved on the position of previous years. For the next two years a balanced budget was proposed, however, there was still a shortfall at the end of three years that would need to be addressed.

The union representatives then had an opportunity to make statements and ask questions regarding the Budget.

John Drake (UNISON) highlighted the concern and anger of his members regarding the proposals. He stated that Union Members were facing a proposed hike in National Insurance, a cost of living increase, below inflation pay rises and the removal of enhancements and changes in terms and conditions. All of this made other authorities look more attractive to work for and may result in a loss of staff for Wiltshire Council.

Alan Tomala (UNITE) also stated that they had received a large volume of negative feedback from their members on the changes to terms and conditions.

Mike Osment (UNISON) stated that there had been some movement since December with the larger than expected government settlement and in light of that urged the Council to reconsider the proposals. Feedback regarding the

proposed changes to the terms and conditions was the worst he had ever received.

The Leader responded that the various staffing proposals from officers included dealing with vacant posts and also the proposed changes to terms and conditions which were under consultation. He acknowledged the points being made and stated that the discussions and consultations should continue.

Mike Osment (UNISON) commented on the proposed increase in car parking rates and whether Wiltshire Council had fully considered the impact on local businesses. In response the Leader stated that the proposed changes would bring in an extra £700,000 a year and that the Council would aim not to increase parking prices again in this Council's term. It was not felt that this would affect how many people visited town centres, which was a complex issue; people needed reasons other than shops to visit town centres.

Adam Smith (NAHT) stated that he had a narrow focus on schools and education and highlighted concerns regarding SEND budget overspends, which seemed to exceed budget forecasts and then had to be clawed back from mainstream schools, when school budgets were already very tight. Schools were facing many issues such as increasing heating bills, absence insurance not covering the costs of supply staff and problems recruiting staff. Also, the problems faced by smaller schools having to teach over mixed year groups were discussed.

The Leader and Andy Brown explained that central government were responsible for the funding issues with the dedicated schools grant and Wiltshire Council were legally unable to top up dedicated schools grants with its reserves. Wiltshire Council was lobbying government to resolve the issues with the dedicated schools grant. The Leader also encouraged Mr Smith to lobby MPs on the issue. Cllr Mayes also stated that she would request the various boards she sat on to lobby central government. Lucy Townsend (Corporate Director People) stated that the SEND Approval Board looked at the deficit and would make their views known to central government.

Terence Herbert (Chief Executive) spoke on the staffing proposals and the concerns the unions had raised. He acknowledged the cost of living increases and difficulties faced by staff. Mr Herbert stressed that the Council was trying to avoid redundancies. It was explained that some of the terms and conditions had been out of date and not fit for purpose so had to be updated. Mr Herbert also stated that Wiltshire Council had been slightly taken aback by the feedback from staff on the proposals and that he took the strength of feeling very seriously. However, although it was difficult, saving had to be made. Wiltshire Council did not want to lose staff either through redundancies or staff leaving, and there were many reasons why people wanted to work for Wiltshire Council aside from remuneration. By changing the terms and conditions it was hoped that redundancies could be avoided. The Council would look at the options and the discussions and consultations would continue.

In response to a question from the unions Andy Brown explained that in December there had been a budget gap of approximately £41 million. This had been reduced to £10 million, partly by the larger than expected government settlement and also by £25 million of saving proposals. These included a £7 million reduction in the staff budget, to be met by removing vacant posts, holding vacancies open and amending the terms and conditions. If the government settlement had been £5 million as expected the Council would have had to look at very drastic measures.

The Leader stated that Cabinet had resisted some proposals that would have caused staffing issues and had heard what the unions had said. Officers would continue the consultations and discussions with unions. In response to questions as to whether the only options other than those proposed would be savings elsewhere or redundancies, the Leader stated that broadly speaking that was correct. One of the only other options would be to use more of the reserves and that would mean that we were not a viable Council, otherwise savings would need to be made elsewhere. Officers would continue the negotiations.

The Unions stated that they would work with officers as they also did not want redundancies.

The Leader thanked everyone for attending and for offering their views.

(Duration of meeting: 4.40 - 5.15 pm)

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