

GROUP LEADERS MEETING WITH TRADE UNION REPRESENTATIVES

DRAFT MINUTES OF THE GROUP LEADERS MEETING WITH TRADE UNION REPRESENTATIVES MEETING HELD ON 4 FEBRUARY 2016 AT NORTH WILTSHIRE ROOM - COUNTY HALL, TROWBRIDGE BA14 8JN.

Present:

Councillors:

Councillor Jane Scott, Leader of the Council, Conservative Group Leader
Councillor Ernie Clark, Independent Group representative
Councillor Gordon King, Liberal Democratic Group representative
Councillor Ricky Rogers, Labour Group representative
Councillor Dick Tonge, Cabinet member for Finance
Councillor John Thomson, Deputy Lead of the Council

Union Representatives:

Alan Tomala, UNITE
Sue Anderson, UNISON
John Hawkins - ATL
Jane Hunt - Unison

Officers:

Dr Carlton Brand, Corporate Director
Maggie Rae, Corporate Director
Michael Hudson, Associate Director - Finance
Barry Pirie, Associate Director - People and Business Services
Robin Townsend, Associate Director – Corporate Services
Liz Creedy, Head of Service – Corporate Support
Joanne Pitt, Head of Service - Human Resources Services
Will Oulton, Senior Democratic Services Officer

1 Welcome and Introductions

The Leader welcomed all those present to the meeting who in turn introduced themselves.

2 Apologies

Apologies had been received from Cllr Glenis Ansell. Cllr Gordon King attended as a substitute; and from Carol Vallely of the GMB.

3 Notes of the Last Meeting

The notes of the last meeting held on 5 February 2015 were received and noted.

4 **Wiltshire Council Financial Plan Update 2016/17**

The Leader opened the session by reemphasising that the funding settlement from Central Government had been difficult. Normally, if there are to be changes to the way the settlement is calculated, there would be a consultation period, but this time the Government had not consulted which had left many in Local Government unhappy. The final settlement had not yet been agreed, and there had been significant political pressure applied, including lobbying from local MPs, to ask the Government to reach a more equitable settlement for Wiltshire and other rural Counties. It was anticipated that the settlement would be agreed by the 10 February 2016.

The Leader went on to say, that the approach that the Council was continuing to take was seeing how better to deliver services, and redeploy staff, so that services to the community would be maintained and that the scale of redundancies could be reduced. It was acknowledged that to protect services parish and town councils would be asked to do more, and volunteering would have to be encouraged.

With regard to redundancies, the Council was anticipating that these would total approximately 200 posts. The Council would prioritise agency staff, and seek to reduce the consultancy bill. It would be the Council's policy to seek to retrain and retain staff to reduced involuntary redundancies.

Cllr Dick Tonge, Cabinet Member for Finance, outlined the financial position for the next year and emphasised where certain income was ring-fenced and where the budgetary pressures were likely to be. The Council had to prioritise spending on helping the most vulnerable which meant, inevitable, that spending cuts would be focused on unring-fenced discretionary services. He went onto explain how officers had taken account of new house building when calculating council tax income, and outlined changes to the way exemptions were applied to empty homes. Council tax would be increased by 2% and that an additional 2% would be levied to fund social care, but it was acknowledged that this, in itself, would not be able to meet social care demands; so that approximately £25 million of savings was required.

In response to a question from Alan Tomala, The Leader stated that the way the government grant to Councils had been calculated had fundamentally changed, and that the details of some specific grants, such as for Public Health and the Better Care Fund, had not been finalised.

Cllr Tonge emphasised that County Councils, across the country, had had a larger proportional reduction. He stated that he would let the Unions know when the settlement had been reached,

In response to a question from Alan Tomala, The Leader stated that whilst it was hoped to minimise the impact on frontline services, she couldn't promise

that there wouldn't be any impact. For instance, it was likely that response times to customer contacts may not be as prompt as in the past, as staff workloads increased. The Leader went on to emphasise that the Council would prefer to minimise levels of service in a particular area rather than cut services altogether. The Council would seek to reduced management costs and protect the vulnerable.

In response to a question from John Hawkins, Cllr Tonge stated that some of the press reports on the proposed changes to the way NNDR income was distributed had been unhelpful and had lead to some misconceptions amongst the wider public.

Admin note: Below is a link to some government guidance, referred to in the meeting, which may help to clarify the proposal.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/key-information-for-local-authorities-provisional-local-government-finance-settlement-2016-to-2017>

Sue Anderson referred to an official response by Unison, appended to these minutes. In her presentation, she acknowledged and appreciated that the Council was facing cost pressures and demand for services. She stated, though, that staff found it difficult to accept changes to their agreed terms and conditions, as many staff were already working harder and longer. Furthermore, many staff were feeling extremely tired and stressed, and further changes could only exacerbate this. Retaining favourable terms and conditions was key to recruiting and retaining the staff needed.

In response to a specific point about increases to certain areas of expenditure, Carlton Brand stated that the use of the wording 'improvement' was misleading and that the increase in expenditure was to maintain existing levels of service. Maggie Rae stated that the Corporate Leadership Team did not take lightly any proposals to change terms and conditions for staff, and it was acknowledged that these were subject to further negotiation with the unions.

In response to a question from Cllr Ricky Rogers, Carlton Brand stated that many contracts had below inflation rate increase built in and some, for instance in highways, would actually decrease.

Carlton Brand went on to say that he would share with the Unions what the net position was for staff numbers, as there had been recruitment as well as redundancies. Maggie Rae went on to state that the Council was hoping to offer, albeit to a limited number staff, bursaries to retain in social work, an area of recruitment need for the Council.

Sue Anderson highlighted the difficulty in taking up opportunities for redeployment for people at risk of redundancy, as the window available is often relatively short. Michael Hudson stated that if the Council was able to secure a four year settlement, it would be better able to plan workforce change.

The Leader reaffirmed this view, and stated that whilst there was likely to be a continued reduction in the Government Grant to Councils, that if Councils had more control over Council Tax rates and NNDR income, then the Council would be able to better plan its own finances.

In response to a question from Sue Anderson, the Leader acknowledged that it would be preferable that the Council agreed a position on terms and conditions with the Unions to cover a four year period, which would give both sides some stability.

Sue Anderson reemphasised that many staff were feeling frustrated and insecure about their positions within the Council which has wider impacts on their overall quality of life. The Leader acknowledged that uncertainty could have a detrimental impact on staff, and that she hoped that with a four year settlement, the Council would be able to offer greater certainty to staff in the future.

Cllr Gordon King acknowledged that this was a painful time for some staff, and also hoped that a clear financial outlook would add in planning.

In response to a question from Alan Tomala, Maggie Rae stated that the Council was proposing to change the way a person's income is taken into account when calculating the rate they should pay for the adult social care. The Council, whilst performing this reassessment, would be assisting individuals to access any benefit entitlements, so that their income was maximised. This was coupled with the Council's drive to improve older people's health so that they could better look after themselves, thereby reducing the call on the Council's services.

In response to a question from John Hawkins, the Leader stated that some budgets had gone down and some up, and that this was done on the basis of then needs in certain area. She did not advocate giving departments arbitrary cut targets that bore no relation to the Council's Business Plan.

In response to a question from Sue Anderson, Michael Hudson stated that some budget had been made available to service areas that had not been able to meet their incoe needs through fees and charges. This was done so that these departments would not be unduly disadvantaged in comparison to other departments that were no reliant on fees and charges income.

In response to a question from Sue Anderson, Carlton Brand stated that the number of agency staff employed at the Chippenham depot was higher than the others, but that this was done due to the uncertainty over the letting of particular waste contracts, and that some agency staff were cheaper than permanent employees.

In response to a question from Sue Anderson, Barry Pirie stated the Council was unlikely to use savings derived from the reduction in the use of agency staff to fund the prevention of changes to staff terms and conditions.

The Leader thanked the Union representatives, and the other Councillors, for attending the meeting, and asked that senior officers keep Cabinet members briefed with regard to the continued negotiations with Union representatives.

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Wiltshire Council Proposed Budget – UNISON Response

The Council has stated they need to find £2.5m of savings from the T&C's of staff in order to make the Budget balance. On top of this there are also 200 redundancies proposed.

Over the last few years staff have seen their pay fall drastically in real terms, and seen their duties and responsibilities increase as the number of staff has diminished.

We believe that any proposals to cut T&C's further will only serve to demoralise staff and impact on productivity, at a time when there is a need for all staff to perform to their highest abilities in order to provide the appropriate level of services to the community.

We believe that there are alternative ways of achieving this saving, and that they would be not result in the detriment of service provision to the people of Wiltshire.

The proposed budget shows that there is an increase of £3.350m increase in spending on Contract Payments and Third Parties.

Within this, there are various elements of spending, and we believe that it is possible to find almost the entire £2.5m savings from a number of these elements. The specific areas are:

Improve street sweeping - £0.410m

Improve litter collection - £0.880m

Improve grounds maintenance - £0.720m

Better play area maintenance - £0.190m

These four areas give a total of £2.2m. It is important to note that these areas of spend are not to maintain the current service provision, but are around 'improvements'.

Whilst a desire to make improvements is admirable, the reality is that at a time when the authority is face large cuts to grants, and pressures on expenditure, it is not possible to make improvements on a large scale.

We welcome the investment and improvements that are planned in areas such as social care, but feel that the above improvements do not represent 'value for money' when compared against the impact of cutting terms and conditions.

The fact that those areas of expenditure are being made to outside bodies and private companies only serves to compound the feeling of staff that they are not being valued appropriately.

The lack of any detail as to what or how the increased expenditure will actually be used for is also a cause for concern. The council will not have direct control of this expenditure, instead it is being handed to others to manage.

Whilst adopting the above proposal would not cover the entire £2.5m, there are other areas of expenditure that could be looked at to add to this, though we also recognise some of the proposed spending in this area are needed.

However, if the Council were to decide that they were not prepared to look at any other areas of expenditure to find this remaining sum, it would still make any conversation with members about terms and conditions a lot easier to have, as they would see that efforts have been made to further mitigate against the scale of such cuts.

Yours sincerely,



Sue Anderson
Secretary, Wiltshire UNISON