



To Councillors:

David Hopkins, Cabinet Member Delivery & Operations (Deputy Leader)

Andrew Stevens, Cabinet Member - Business Improvement & Performance

Andrea Lewis, Cabinet Member - Homes, Energy & Service Transformation (Deputy Leader)

Clive Lloyd, Cabinet Member Adult Social Care and Community Health Services

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Scrutiny

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04 May 2021

BY EMAIL

CC Cabinet Members

Summary: This is a letter from the Workforce Working Group to the relevant Cabinet Members following the meeting of the Working Group on 29 March 2021. It is about the effects of the pandemic on the Workforce.

Dear Cllrs Hopkins, Stevens, Lewis and Lloyd

The Workforce Scrutiny Working Group met on 29 March 2021 to look at the impact of the pandemic on the health and wellbeing of staff; how the Council is supporting this; issues around home working; staff sickness; staff turnover; use of agency staff and pressures.

This letter provides you with feedback from that meeting.

We would like to thank Andrea Lewis, Clive Lloyd, Adam Hill, Sarah Lackenby, Geoff Bacon and Adrian Chard for attending to present the report and answer questions. We appreciate your engagement and input.

OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY / TROSOLWG A CHRAFFU

SWANSEA COUNCIL / CYNGOR ABERTAW

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Sarah Lackenby provided a brief update and stated that the position the Authority was in before the pandemic regarding agile working put it in a good place. For the majority of staff who were desk based, they were able to migrate them quickly to work from home. The Staff survey carried out in the summer last year, when staff had been working from home for a few months, had a very good response. As time went on, new arrangements were brought in for staff to undertake a risk assessment, to buy equipment and to borrow furniture. In the survey, staff were asked if they were struggling or felt excluded digitally and they responded that they did not need much training, even on Teams.

Whilst the Working Group found the meeting informative and interesting, it did have some concerns and we would like to make the following comments.

We felt that mapping was important and requested baseline data for the Number of staff; Male – Female; Part-time/ Full-time/ Zero hours; Salary ranges by department; Salary averages by department; Officers at each level in tiers, from 1 Director all the way down in bands. We also requested comparative information for the last 3 years, to see if there are more or fewer staff in total and where the changes have occurred. Officers confirmed they have all of this supplementary information, and will circulate it to the Panel.

We discussed how Sickness levels appear to have reduced and heard that there will be more work undertaken to look into it in more detail.

We heard that there has been a lot of activity on Track, Trace, Protect (TTP) and volunteering and that it was great how the workforce responded to the crisis. Staff were eager to be involved and to help out where they could at food banks etc.

We noted that Health and Safety were able to put in place a large amount of support for the wellbeing of the workforce, and that staff have been encouraged to take leave especially from the summer onwards and this continues. If staff are unable to take annual leave they are able to carry it over.

We queried Trade Union (TU) engagement and insight and were informed that meetings with Unions were held weekly during the height of the pandemic and are now held two-weekly. We noted that any issues were raised and addressed at the meetings, and the Director of Social Services attended the first 10 minutes to answer direct questions about Social Services. Also all risk assessments went in front of TUs; TUs were consulted on, for example, PPE; setting up TTP; and any frequently asked questions about staff, for example, shielding. Issues with annual leave and deployment were also 'run passed' the Unions.

We told you how we felt that it was a novelty for many staff to work from home to begin with and queried if staff have found it harder to work from home as time has gone on. We were informed that the results of the survey were very positive; 87% said they liked working from home. We heard that the intention is to follow it up with another staff survey in a few months, now that restrictions are lifting. Officers said they felt everyone has found it harder as time has gone on, not necessarily due to working from home but because people have been confined to their homes.

We asked about the route for staff to take if they are not getting support and were informed that in the survey, 77% of staff felt they knew where to go to get help. We heard that there are different avenues for staff to take. Officers felt staff should speak to their line manager in the first instance, or if they feel they cannot, they can go to Human Resources or they can refer directly into the Psychological Support Service (Psychological First Aid) and can access information online.

We expressed our concern about whether staff want to work from home because it makes them happy and suits their lifestyle or because they are afraid to go out. We also mentioned that we feel all staff should have some face-to-face contact with colleagues/managers and queried if this is happening. Officers confirmed that in the survey, 84% said they would like to work two days or more from home after the pandemic; 85% said they feel more productive working from home. We heard that anecdotally some staff and managers said they feel everyone is more accessible now using Teams remotely and that it has brought barriers down. We noted that this might be explored in the next staff survey. We also heard that anecdotally, some staff/managers said they found it easier juggling their commitments whilst working from home. Officers said they had not heard so far of staff being afraid to go out and that this would be explored in the follow up survey. We noted that if staff have to go into the office, you are making sure they have a safe environment.

We raised the issue about when offices re-open and meetings start again in person. We asked what the general feeling was about staff stress and anxiety of meeting face-to-face, especially with the public. Officers confirmed they are trying to assess what the risks will be and are putting appropriate measures in place to ensure staff have appropriate equipment and social distancing in place between members of staff and the public. All of this is being documented in a risk assessment and managers are working with teams on this. We heard that it depends on the role but as many Services as possible have moved their service on line with phone and email support to back it up and that a range of things are being put in place. In terms of meetings, we heard there is a clear procedure when booking meeting rooms and systems are in place to enable face-to-face meetings.

We discussed staff stress and anxiety, whether the Authority employs psychologists in the Wellbeing Team and whether we can employ more. Officers felt it was something that needs to be reviewed when we come out of the pandemic, under Workforce Planning. We heard that front line staff have found the help invaluable. Officers believe the Authority employ Talking Therapists (not psychologists) and agreed to confirm their technical role outside of the meeting. In terms of guidance sent out to all staff and managers, officers confirmed it is made clear to managers they have to be aware of potential health impacts of Covid, and if they identify any potential issue then its referred to occupational health as a stress related issue. Guidance also makes clear that managers are to ensure they talk to staff on a regular basis.

From Adult Services and Child and Family Services point of view, we heard there is opportunity for Psychological First Aid run by Occupational Health and Corporate Services, offered to front line staff in social care. The Directorates are also working with the Association of Social Workers on a wider wellbeing and psychological toolkit that staff can access online as and when they need to.

Regarding vaccinations, we received confirmation that front line staff in key areas have been offered the vaccine. Adult Social Care staff were the main cohort in priority two; 89% have received the first dose, 74% the second dose. In Education, specialist school staff were added into this cohort. We heard that a very small number were not inclined to take the vaccination.

We asked about staff carrying out a role that was face-to-face with the public before the pandemic, and how this is working now as staff are working from home. We were informed it is a mixed picture. Some face-to-face roles are continuing where they need too and risk assessments are being done for these. Other roles have shifted to telephone and email support where people cannot get online.

We also queried the effect staff working from home has had on the public as we feel that many members of the public are not computer literate. We were informed that there was some work with Local Area Coordinators and the Third Sector, helping people directly who had to shift to online channels and needed help. We heard that moving services online was helpful for some people but for those who struggled, they were helped by volunteers. We noted that digital inclusion is quite high in Swansea and that over 75s and those who did not want to use digital were the ones who were helped. We heard that post pandemic, officers hope older people will find it helpful to access more services by phone / online.

We heard that District Housing Offices closed during the pandemic and there was a surge to more residents contacting the department online. We also heard that the Authority has been wanting this to happen for some time and that this is therefore a success story.

We heard that the Authority has a stand-alone home working policy and that it would be circulated to the Panel for information following the meeting.

We mentioned that we thought many of the staff who continued to work through the pandemic might have been agency staff or outsourced staff and queried if we would be bringing those staff and services in-house. Officers agreed that our suggestion to take on agency staff who worked as refuse collectors etc, would be taken back to the appropriate department to consider.

Officers confirmed that staff were encouraged to take leave but due to the pandemic are able to carry over up to 20 days annual leave to be taken in the next two years.

We heard that the roll out of agile working would continue with further dialogue on aspects of it. We also heard that future agile working policy goes beyond the pandemic and that when current advice to work from home changes, we can expect to be working in a socially distanced environment for the next few years and that office layout should be designed to accommodate that. Officers expect that staff will be empowered to work from home for focus work and that work in the office will move to a collaborative space for when teams need to engage.

We expressed our concern that the flexibility of working from home is sometimes, taken too far, and that home becomes work place not home. Officers confirmed that it

would be optional to work from home in the future. The plan is to offer flexible working; one of the locations is working from home. It will be job specific, as for some jobs it is not appropriate to work from home as they need team support to do the best for residents in Swansea.

Panel queried how staff will be encouraged to complete the next survey and if it will be anonymous to enable a good appraisal. Officers confirmed the first survey was anonymous and the second one will be too and that the response was exceptional with positivity around home working. We heard that the results of next survey, which is taking place around May time, will be analysed to see if opinion has changed.

Following the meeting, we discussed progress and made the following conclusions:

1. We would like to give our thanks and acknowledge the hard work and commitment of all staff, the senior management team and everyone in the organisation who have worked so hard doing their jobs and supporting the people of Swansea in very difficult times.
2. We found the briefing very informative and we are reassured that the Authority is doing what it can to support its workforce during and post pandemic.
3. We feel that mapping is important and ask that the supplementary data and comparative information requested prior to the meeting be provided to the Panel.
4. We were pleased to hear about the extensive engagement with the Trade Unions and hope that this will continue in the future.
5. We support the approach of having an agile working policy and accommodation strategy that is more flexible and provides work/life balance, whilst still meeting the needs of the residents of Swansea.
6. We recommend that support for health and wellbeing of staff be part of home working and request a copy of the stand-alone home working policy.
7. We made the suggestion and would like reassurance that agency workers, who have worked through the pandemic, will be offered a position with the Authority.
8. Regarding mental health help, we would like clarification of the correct procedure for staff to follow, the services they can access for help and what happens after the initial contact has been made. We would also like to see data on a) sickness taken for this reason; b) whether people think they have been helped; and c) the services they accessed to get this help. We do not feel the follow up survey will pick this up.
9. We would like confirmation of the correct title for 'Talking Therapists', if they are employed by the Authority, and their role.
10. We would like reassurance that if a blended approach is taken, that members of the public who are not computer literate or are vulnerable will be given the help

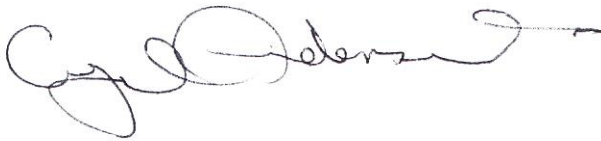
they need and that issues will be resolved, for example, phones are answered or forwarded on to someone else; issues with uploading photos for blue badge holders are resolved.

11. We will be recommending to the Scrutiny Programme Committee that a follow up meeting of this Working Group is held in six months, when the results of the follow up survey have been analysed and we understand better what the future holds for the Authority and its workforce.

Your Response

We hope you find this letter useful and informative. We are interested in hearing your thoughts about the issues raised and would ask that you respond to the points in our conclusions by 25 May 2021.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Cyril Anderson', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

COUNCILLOR CYRIL ANDERSON
CONVENER, WORKFORCE SCRUTINY WORKING GROUP
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