



To Councillor:

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)

Mark Child, Cabinet Member Adult Social Care and Community Health Services

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07 March 2022

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 2 February 2022. It is about the effects of the pandemic on the Workforce.

Dear Cllrs Hopkins, Stevens, Lewis and Child

The Workforce Scrutiny Working Group first 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. It was agreed to hold a follow up meeting in around 6 months once the results of the second staff survey had been received and analysed. This meeting was held on 2 February 2022 and discussed the latest position, information and experience in relation to these issues, and what the future holds for the Authority's workforce. This letter provides you with feedback from this follow up meeting.

OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY / TROSOLWG A CHRAFFU

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We would like to thank David Hopkins, Adam Hill, Geoff Bacon, Adrian Chard and Rhian Millar for attending to present the report and answer questions. We appreciate your engagement and input. The Working Group found the meeting informative and interesting.

Cllr David Hopkins wished to put on record his thanks to all staff, who have worked so hard over a difficult two years.

We queried the percentage of all Council staff who are working from home. Officers agreed to provide this information outside of the meeting but require clarity on the point in time the question refers to. We will clarify this to enable officers to provide this information.

We felt the Council should have more full time rather than part time jobs at the lower end of the pay scale. We also felt there was a disparity in the percentage of female workers at the lower end. Officers responded that part of the reason the workforce strategy is being revised is to look at diversity, equality, protected characteristics etc, as all these need to play a part in who the Council recruits, where it recruits and what it does.

We queried if there is an entry exam for posts in the Waste department. Officers stated there are no entry exams, but the Authority does have a selection assessment criteria and process to appoint the best person for a job, this is the same for all jobs across the Council and is normal practice.

We asked if there is an opportunity to offer vacancies to agency staff who are being employed by the Council on a temporary basis to cover sickness etc. Officers stated that there will always be a need for some agency staff to cover sickness in essential services, but measures are being taken to reduce the numbers of agency workers and they will have the opportunity to apply for traineeship roles and other roles if they desire.

We queried how the Council is going to assess and manage agency workers in the future. We heard that the Governance and Audit Committee has been assured that line managers are complying with the agency workers policy and that this is being regularly reviewed. Also, officers are working with line managers to identify opportunities to minimise the number of agency workers. Cllr David Hopkins confirmed he is looking at this issue and will report back to scrutiny at a later stage.

We stated that we are aware that there is a Return-to-Work Policy for staff illness but queried if there is an opportunity for a member of staff to phone up anonymously and talk to someone. We were informed Occupational Health deal with a large number of responses from staff, plus there is a Helping Hands helpline which provides support and counselling which is confidential, but it is not anonymous. However, there is anonymous advice and support available on domestic abuse and harassment, the contact information is published online and the Council signposts to it. There is also training provided on domestic violence to the senior management team and managers on how to deal with this issue.

We raised the issue of workforce planning for the future as there are many employees between the ages of 40 and 60 and asked if there is a strategy to 'straighten out the curve'. Officers responded that they are not going to be selective or look to employ

younger or older people, it is about the Council ensuring it is attracting people across the board and that people of all ages are encouraged to apply for all jobs including traineeships and apprenticeships. We heard that the Council is mindful that there is a natural cliff edge of people retiring around the age of 60 and it needs to ensure the workforce is coming through with the knowledge, skills and experience to fill gaps if people choose to leave, it is about succession planning and being prepared.

We raised a query regarding sickness absence and what the roles are for the people appointed into support roles in various departments. We heard it has been identified that staff need additional support so sickness absence officers have been appointed in the main Directorates, who will support line managers and team leaders in making sure the sickness absence policy is administered and identifying proactive ways to reduce sickness and prevent sickness happening in the first place.

We requested that the Council goes back to having one Human Resources department which is responsible for all HR functions and one Cabinet Member holding this portfolio. Officers confirmed the role of Head of HR and Service Centre has just been advertised, which will bring the HR, Organisational Development (OD) and Service Centre back together all under one department and they suggested this would be a good opportunity to look at how this sits under one Cabinet Member.

We queried what measures have been tried to recruit more people into Social Services. Officers confirmed that a recruitment and development policy has been developed for Social Services which is not just about pay, it is about using different channels for recruitment, working on staff morale and offering a healthy work/life balance and flexibility. An additional recruitment officer has been brought into Social Services to look at making these roles more attractive and the Service Centre is prioritising advertising these roles. The Authority is supporting and developing leadership through mentoring and coaching and Social Services has taken this on board. There are also opportunities for career development with opportunities for Service wide progression.

We queried how the Council is supporting its staff working from home. Officers responded that the instruction is to work from home if you can. For those staff who find this difficult, they are encouraged to come into the office. Managers have retained regular contact with their staff through team meetings, 1-2-1s etc. Lots of information has been provided on working from home and up to date equipment has been provided. Officers confirmed that regarding confidentiality, the Council already had an agile workforce and it is the employees responsibility to ensure they are working in a secure environment.

We expressed concern about the rising energy costs for staff working from home and asked if the Authority advises staff on how to claim money back from the tax office. Officers confirmed that this information is made readily available to staff through the Agile Working Policy, trade unions, a link via the Council's Covid-19 FAQs page direct to HMRC website, also mentioned in staff briefings, in staff newsletter and in Phil's blog.

We requested the January figures for Occupational Health and these were confirmed as follows: Occupational Health Referrals 101 (94); Health Surveillance 78 (52); Counselling Referrals 55 (53). Officers stated that these figures were not unusual for

Alert Level Zero and that the Occupational Health team is being strengthened this year with extra funding being made available.

We were aware that the pandemic has moved forward the agile working policy and accommodation strategy considerably. Officers confirmed that the Authority started its journey on agile working before the pandemic and is now moving from how it manages its accommodation for Covid to how it manages its accommodation for the future for the workforce. It is at the final stages in terms of enabling all staff who worked from the Civic Centre and Guildhall to work in an agile environment. We heard the accommodation strategy will be informed by a number of things set against what the business needs are.

We requested feedback on the effects of long covid on staff and the support given to them. We were informed that there is a long covid protocol for local authorities in Wales which protects staff from reductions in sick pay if suffering from long covid. This protocol is coming to an end and is in the process of being reviewed to consider issues of equality and fairness across any other long term sickness absence. We heard the number of cases in Swansea is minimal with approximately 16 people affected in December and receiving benefits out of this agreement.

We queried if the Authority is aware of the number of staff working from home whilst they are ill (especially with covid). Officers stated that people could have covid but not be ill, so are fit to work and do their job. If they are not fit to work, the Authority expects them not to work. The Authority records everyone who is off ill with covid and supports them but there are not large numbers.

We felt it would be useful to have a 'one stop' shop to contact if people have several questions they want answered. We were informed that the Service Centre can answer a number of questions from staff and the public. From a Councillor point of view, we heard that they can email any questions to the Director of Resources, until the Head of HR and Service Centre post is appointed.

We queried how the Councils productivity was affected by staff working from home. Officers stated that this was a very difficult question to answer. Generally, the leadership team feels and results from the survey suggest that staff feel more productive, however, the Authority is affected by the productivity of other partners and organisations that it links in to, which can cause delays.

Panel Members raised a number of queries about surveys. We wanted to know if the Authority is considering undertaking another follow up survey and were informed the staff survey usually takes place annually but there may be opportunities to do more ad hoc surveys on particular aspects. We felt that sometimes surveys are slightly too constrained and are keen on the use of comment boxes which are open ended. Officers stated that there has to be a balanced approach as certain statistical information is required.

We heard that one difficulty was how the Authority engages with all its workforce going forward particularly front-line workers, it needs to find different ways of approaching them. Officers confirmed the survey was focussed more towards home workers as staff working from home had the most change to how they work and many front-line staff continued with their jobs.

We felt confidentiality of surveys was very important and queried if the Authority was able to ensure this. Officers confirmed they are confidential.

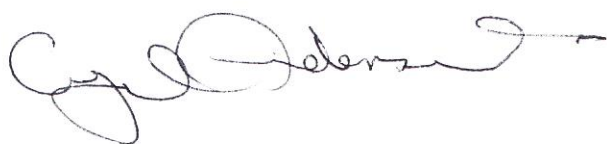
Following the meeting, we discussed progress and made the following conclusions:

1. We would once again 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 this follow up session very useful. We felt reassured by the answers given and felt confident that the Authority is progressing in the right direction with regards its workforce.
3. We had some concerns that the recent survey may not be a true reflection of how staff are feeling as the number of responses was low. We feel the Authority needs to find ways of getting a higher response to surveys but realize this is a difficult task. We would encourage officers to, amongst other things, make more hard copies of surveys readily available; try offering incentives to staff for completing a survey; and consider including something in new employee contracts to encourage them to complete surveys.
4. We were pleased that information on how to claim money back from the tax office for working from home is made readily available to staff in various ways. We would like to see reminders of this published on a regular basis so all eligible staff can take advantage of it.
5. We were very pleased to hear that all HR functions will be brought together under one Head of HR and Service Centre. We hope that this will result in one cabinet member for this portfolio.

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 28 March 2022.

Yours sincerely

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

COUNCILLOR CYRIL ANDERSON
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