

Meeting of the Workforce Partnership Council (WPC)

Monday 11 May 2020 – (12:30-14:30pm)

Skype Meeting

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The Deputy Minister for Housing and Local Government thanked members for continuing to meet virtually during the Covid19 pandemic. She explained that Karen Higgins would monitor any issues raised by members during discussions via email and instant messaging so these could be addressed at the end of each item. Before formally beginning the meeting she asked if anyone wished to raise any issues outside of the agenda.
- 1.2 Mike Payne referred to the ambiguity many of his members were experiencing due to the recent announcement by the UK Government over the gradual easing of some lockdown provisions in England and the impact this could have on the provision of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE).

2. Covid19: General Update

- 2.1 The Deputy Minister for Housing and Local Government asked Helen Arthur to provide a general update on measures to address Covid19. Helen Arthur confirmed regular technical briefings are being delivered by the Welsh Government to the trade unions on a range of issues. She explained that feedback through different channels indicated that there had been a gradual improvement of trust in the health and social care system across Wales. She added that good progress is being made on testing and that in partnership with Public Health Wales (PHW) the Welsh Government would shortly produce a strategy outlining its approach on this subject. She also confirmed that the capacity for critical care bed provision had improved significantly.
- 2.2 Tanya Palmer highlighted the need for greater clarity around the approach being taken on contact tracing in Wales. She stressed the ambiguities that had been generated on this subject due to the perceived relaxation of contact tracing in England. Helen Arthur confirmed this is under consideration and that an announcement by the Welsh Government would be made soon. She added that details around all these issues could be picked up in the technical briefing with the trade unions scheduled for tomorrow.
- 2.3 Julie Cook confirmed that she remained unsighted on the Welsh Government's Health and Social Care guidance document and outlined some of her concerns regarding communication. Helen Arthur confirmed she would provide a copy of the guidance to members.

- 2.4 Chris Llewelyn confirmed that the PPE situation had improved considerably within Local Government. He emphasised the importance of Welsh Government engaging with local authorities on contact tracing and testing moving forward. Helen Arthur confirmed contact tracing will be central to dealing with Covid19 and that engagement will take place with all partners.
- 2.5 Reg Kilpatrick referenced recent media reports suggesting lockdown provisions had been removed across the UK. He emphasised that in Wales the lockdown remains firmly in place with only a few minor amendments having been made. These included the flexibility to exercise more frequently, the re-opening of garden centres (subject to social distancing) and the ability of local authorities to plan for the re-opening of some services such as libraries and recycling centres. He explained that the Welsh Government was adopting a cautious approach in order to ensure the rate of infection, the R figure, remains below 1. He added that currently R is between 0.7 and 0.9 in Wales and outlined the significant increase in the likely number of infections and fatalities if the figure were to go above 1.
- 2.6 He confirmed that as a result of the UK Government lifting provisions there could be an impact on Wales if citizens from English tried to visit some of Wales' well known tourist destinations increasing the chance of spreading the virus. He added that the UK Government would soon be publishing a guidance document to explain their lifting of provisions in more detail and that the Welsh Government would be producing something similar, in consultation with partners, for its own provisions in Wales.

Action: Helen Arthur to arrange with the WPC Joint Secretariat for members to receive a copy of the Welsh Government's Health and Social Care guidance document.

3. Covid19: Counsel General's Work on Recovery

- 3.1 The Deputy Minister for Housing and Local Government asked Gareth Bevington to provide an update on the Covid19 recovery work being led by the Counsel General. Gareth Bevington explained that the Counsel General is chairing two Covid19 recovery boards one which is internal to the Welsh Government and a second that constitutes an external expert reference group. He confirmed there were three round-table meetings last week and that a further three are scheduled to meet soon. He added that any agreements and messaging will be based on the views of the partners represented at the boards.
- 3.2 Mike Payne supported the general approach to recovery being developed in Wales but expressed concerns over the impact of any alternative approaches being proposed in England, especially following the recent announcement by the Prime Minister around lifting provisions. He felt this had generated uncertainty over what constitutes a safe work place and when it is safe to return to work. Gareth Bevington confirmed the impact of

the different approaches being adopted in England form part of discussions within the recovery boards led by the Counsel General.

3.3 Steve Davies explained that the Minister for Education had been very clear about the Welsh Government's position on re-opening schools. He confirmed this had been based on regular discussions with social partners and that shortly the Welsh Government would be publishing a framework document outlining how schools might be re-opened going forward. He added that the recent announcements on relaxing restrictions by the UK Government raised implications for Education in Wales and that these were being considered in producing the framework document.

3.4 Tanya Palmer emphasised the importance of being clear on timescales for any re-opening of schools and the need to keep trade unions, including those representing support staff, informed. Mike Payne added that in England UNISON, Unite and GMB had issued a joint statement on school re-openings. Steve Davies confirmed that Welsh Government education officials are meeting with trade unions twice a week. He confirmed the Minister for Education would give advanced notice over proposals to re-open schools to the trade unions allowing them time to plan their own press related activity.

4. COVID 19: Protecting Progress

4.1 The Deputy Minister for Housing and Local Government invited Fliss Bennee the Co-Chair of the Technical Advisory Cell Covid-19 to update the meeting on what measures are being taken to protect progress against Covid19. Fliss Bennee began by confirming that the Technical Advisory Cell had published some of its Covid19 modelling and confirmed that the R value is decreasing in Wales. She advised that the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) are focusing on ways to protect progress as lockdown provisions are gradually eased. She added that based on the evidence PPE is the least effective way of controlling the virus and that behaviours such as social distancing, increased hand washing and surface cleaning are more important. Moving forward she emphasised the focus would be on developing strong testing and contact tracing in Wales.

4.2 Tanya Palmer emphasised that trade union health and safety representatives are central to carrying out risk assessments within organisations and should be prioritised in receiving any updates on workplace safety from groups such as SAGE and the Technical Advisory Cell. Fliss Bennee confirmed they can be prioritised for circulation in conjunction with public bodies' organisational health and safety representatives. Julie Cook emphasised the importance of employers allowing facility time for trade union representatives to deal with the issues around Covid19 raised by their members. Mike Payne re-iterated the importance of effective communication between trade unions and Welsh Government in addressing Covid19.

Action: Fliiss Bennee to ensure the Technical Advisory Cell Covid-19 prioritises circulation of advice on workplace safety to both organisational and trade union health and safety representatives.

5. Economic Resilience Fund (ERF)

5.1 The Deputy Minister for Housing and Local Government invited Duncan Hamer to provide an update on the Economic Resilience Fund (ERF). Duncan Hamer explained that the ERF sits alongside the main £1.7 billion of support being provided to businesses by the Welsh Government. He confirmed that it is providing £500 million of funding to keep as many businesses as possible viable, £300 million of which has already been allocated. He added that non VAT registered businesses are being prioritised and that a condition placed on companies receiving this support is that they do not make staff redundant. In addition, he confirmed that non-financial support was also being offered including the provision of free training courses.

5.2 Mike Payne explained that some companies in receipt of money from the ERF were still making staff redundant and asked what measures the Welsh Government has in place to monitor this. Duncan Hamer confirmed the Welsh Government has processes in place to assess these situations and that provisions are in place to re-claim funding where necessary. Julie Cook asked if there are health and safety requirements that needed to be in place for companies to receive ERF support. Duncan Hamer confirmed this was not a specific condition of the ERF but that companies should be following health and safety regulations.

6. Social Partnership and Fair Work

6.1 The Deputy Minister for Housing and Local Government invited Jo Salway to provide an update on the work being progressed within the Social Partnership and Fair Work Directorate. Jo Salway confirmed the Social Partnership Bill would not be delivered in this term and that the Welsh Government's intention is to produce a draft by the end of the year or the beginning of 2021. She explained that publication of the draft would test proposals with partners and emphasised that although the outbreak of the Covid19 pandemic had delayed publication the same competence issues remained. She confirmed policy leads within the Social Partnership and Fair Work Directorate are keen to engage with partners on the Bill to test the appetite for its provisions with the WPC.

6.2 Julie Cook emphasised the importance of recognising the role of frontline workers in the Bill. Tanya Palmer highlighted the significance of ensuring the Bill recognises issues regarding the pay and conditions of social care workers, promoting greater parity between them and NHS staff. Jo Salway confirmed her team are looking at how to prioritise recommendations from the Fair Work Report to establish where the focus should lie and that social care forms part of this. She emphasised that the Bill was not on hold but that the Welsh Government would need to be pragmatic about what can be delivered due to the Covid19 pandemic. Tanya Palmer confirmed the importance placed on the Bill and that trade unions will ensure staff are

in place to participate in discussions to progress the Bill. The Deputy Minister for Housing and Local Government explained that pressures did not just relate to staffing issues but were generated by the legislative timetable itself. Chris Llewelyn confirmed that the pandemic may have introduced delays to the Bill but that the over-arching commitment to its development remained in place.

7. Social Care Forum: Progress Update

- 7.1 The Deputy Minister for Housing and Local Government asked to switch the last two agenda items so that progress on the Social Care Forum followed the previous discussion. The Deputy Minister confirmed there needed to be a sharper focus on social care. She confirmed a paper would be produced for the next meeting of the WPC focussing on developing an approach to the Social Care Forum. The trade unions welcomed this paper and asked if it would be produced in partnership. The Deputy Minister agreed to explore this.
- 7.2 Helen Arthur confirmed she would arrange for an initial draft to be provided to the WPC for consideration. Jo Salway stressed the importance of ensuring the paper explores the different mechanisms for how partnership working will be developed in this area.

Action: Helen Arthur to arrange for a paper to be provided for the next meeting of the WPC on developing an approach to the Social Care Forum and to ensure this is circulated to partners for their views.

8. Local Government Bill: General Update

- 8.1 The Deputy Minister for Housing and Local Government confirmed the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Bill has completed Stage 1 of the Committee process regarding consideration of the general principles of the Bill. The Deputy Minister confirmed that due to the on-going situation with Covid19 the Minister for Housing and Local Government has requested that the Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee temporarily suspend Stage 2 scrutiny of the Bill, this was agreed and the intention is to submit a paper to Business Committee shortly setting out proposals for a revised timetable for the Bill. She confirmed all partners would be kept informed of progress by officials.
- 8.2 Mike Payne explained that some local authorities are concerned over the level of debt they are currently experiencing and the impact this will have on their long term future. Judith Cole confirmed that the Minister for Housing and Local Government is in discussions with local authority leaders on this issue.

Action: Reg Kilpatrick to arrange for an up-date to be provided to the WPC on a revised timetable for the scrutiny of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Bill when it is confirmed by the Senedd.

Attendance List – WPC – 11 May 2020

Cabinet

Chair - Hannah Blythyn AM – Deputy Minister for Housing and Local Government

Trade Unions

Tanya Palmer, Acting Regional Secretary, Unison

Mike Payne, Senior Organiser, GMB Union

Julie Cook, National Officer, Wales TUC

Welsh Government

Reg Kilpatrick, Director for Local Government, Education and Public Services

Helen Arthur, Director, Workforce and Corporate Business, Health and Social Services

Steve Davies, Director of Education, Education and Public Services

Jo Salway, Director, Social Partnership and Fair Work Directorate, Office of the First Minister

Judith Cole, Deputy Director, Local Government Finance and Workforce Partnerships, Education and Public Services

Fliss Bennee, Deputy Director, Technology and Digital, Health and Social Services

Duncan Hamer, Deputy Director, Business and Regions, Economy, Skills and Natural Resources

Gareth Bevington, Deputy Director, Marine and Fisheries, Economy, Skills and Natural Resources

Employers

Chris Llewelyn, Chief Executive, WLGA

Richard Tompkins, Director, NHS Wales Employers

Peter Kennedy, Director, Human Resources, Welsh Government

Graham Jones, Strategic HR Director, WLGA

WPC Joint Secretariat

Karen Higgins, Head of WPC Joint Secretariat

Mark Lewis, Senior Policy Manager, WPC Joint Secretariat

Sarah Abraham, Senior Policy Manager, WPC Joint Secretariat

Ceri Williams, Senior Policy Manager, WPC Joint Secretariat

Apologies

Shavanah Taj, Acting General Secretary, Wales TUC

Actions Log

WPC Actions 11 May 2020		
No.	Action	Owner
1	Helen Arthur to arrange with the WPC Joint Secretariat for members to receive a copy of the Welsh Government's Health and Social Care guidance document.	Welsh Government
2	Fliss Bennee to ensure the Technical Advisory Cell Covid-19 prioritises circulation of advice on workplace safety to both organisational and trade union health and safety representatives.	Welsh Government
3	Helen Arthur to arrange for a paper to be provided for the next meeting of the WPC on developing an approach to the Social Care Forum and to ensure this is circulated to partners for their views.	Welsh Government
4	Reg Kilpatrick to arrange for an up-date to be provided to the WPC on a revised timetable for the scrutiny of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Bill when it is confirmed by the Senedd.	Welsh Government