

16-18 Alexandra Buildings
Lerwick
Shetland ZE1 0LL

25 October 2012

Dear UNISON member

An emergency meeting of your branch committee took place on 25 October. We met because stewards and members were reporting that rumours are rife about massive cuts to staffing levels. The meeting agreed that I should brief all members about the situation, as far as we have been able to unravel it; about what may be in store for Council staff, and for the staff of bodies who depend on it; and about the way forward.

What's been happening?

Councillors and council officials are now stating openly that they want to get rid of from 600-1000 employees, because of the financial situation that has developed in Shetland (population 22,000) in recent years. At exactly the same time, the City of Birmingham Council (population 1 million) has decided to sack 1000 employees, and councillors there are speaking about the end of their local government. That is how dire the situation is that we face here.

During the past year UNISON has been trying to deal with this crisis in a responsible way. From October 2011 until Spring this year representatives from UNISON, the GMB and, latterly, UNITE, attended informal meetings with the former chief executive, with a view to reaching agreement about efficiency savings. Our aim was to ensure openness and fairness. Alistair Buchan stipulated that these meetings must be secret, which is why we have not reported back about them until now.

UNISON's position at these meetings was and remains as follows:

1. We acknowledged that the Council's budget, and its reserves, face serious problems.
2. We warned that Shetland will suffer drastically if cuts are made too quickly and too severely. We warned that the Council's timescale of two years to make the cuts would have a devastating impact on the local economy.
3. We pointed out that Shetland has good public services, and that they will be gravely affected forever if the Council does not **plan** for the future.
4. We said that a key way to deal with the situation was to offer fair severance packages to staff who wished to leave.
5. We urged that a joint working group be set up, involving councillors, officials and unions, where the necessary discussion and planning could take place.
6. We said that in return for a commitment to no compulsory redundancies we would discuss change with the Council, with the proviso that we would take any proposals for change back to our members.

Unfortunately, Mr Buchan lost confidence in these negotiations half-way through: why we do not know. We suspect that he was persuaded to drop them. The only decision that was made was to set up a working group.

Meanwhile, two things happened. First, the Council decided in February to set up a large number of 'reviews', to focus on different services. Secondly, Council directors began to meet regularly, along with a consultant, to force the pace for efficiencies: they call their group Directors for Change. As far as we can tell, most of their deliberations have dealt with a proposed budget cut of 35%, to be achieved rapidly, and without attention paid to the consequences for services and the local economy. We understand the intention is that these proposals, with no meaningful consultation, will be presented to councillors at a series of seminars in

November in the hope that they will be rubber-stamped. Indeed, one crusading director has spoken openly about redundancy notices going out at Christmas.

(In fact, under redundancy legislation, employers have a legal obligation to undertake collective consultation over a period of 90 days. Merely providing representatives with plans for redundancy does not constitute consultation, nor does short timescales that allow no time for dialogue to take place.)

The officials' ideas run counter to the principles UNISON had taken to meetings with Mr Buchan. However, UNISON still hoped that the new working group, set up explicitly to facilitate information-sharing, and as the opportunity to consult union members before decisions were taken, would be acknowledged by councillors and Council officials as the appropriate forum for reasonable discussion. When UNISON attended the first meeting, however, we discovered that the UNITE and GMB members, encouraged by their regional officers, had decided not to attend. We regard this situation as highly unfortunate, and will try to persuade our UNITE and GMB colleagues that it is very bad tactics.

What's the position now?

The situation that we face, just now, is that 53 reviews are going on, all over the place, in a piecemeal way. Spreadsheets are being drawn up by individual directors, and it seems that employee numbers throughout the Council are being reduced to a minimum. There is no detail about the actual services that the people of Shetland will receive as a result of proposed cuts in staff numbers – how will day centres run, how will youth work be delivered? Who will suffer most – children, the disabled, the old: the most vulnerable members of our society? With no information, we have no answers to these questions, and neither do the people of Shetland.

Your branch committee decided today to redouble efforts to persuade councillors, officials and our trade union colleagues to change direction. Unlike Directors for Change, we believe that the short timetable being proposed, the piecemeal approach, and the huge cuts being envisaged, will result in grave harm if carried to their conclusion.

If the Council wants to shed staff, it must look at the number of suitably qualified staff required to deliver an acceptable level of service to the people of Shetland . Only then will the Council be in a position to discuss savings through cutting staffing levels. The Council must then offer fair and transparent severance terms to those who want to leave.

UNISON believes that councillors and officials need to engage fully with the working group, so that meaningful, effective and genuine consultation takes place on all matters affecting employees - **before** decisions are made. The group is the only appropriate forum for these discussions. To continue with the current piecemeal approach will only serve to demoralise an already stressed and unhappy workforce. Most important of all, it goes without saying that if there are any proposed changes to terms and conditions, UNISON will always discuss and consult with our members **before** any agreement is reached.

Yours sincerely

Brian Smith
Branch chair