

Minutes of the PCS Senedd Cross-Party Group meeting held via Zoom on 24 June 2021

Present: Mike Hedges MS (Chair); Heledd Fychan MS (Vice-Chair); Hefin David MS; John Griffiths MS; Carolyn Thomas MS; Ryland Doyle (MS Support Staff, Mike Hedges); Lewis Owen (MS Support Staff, Rhys ab Owen); Helen West (MS Support Staff Julie Morgan); Siân Boyles (PCS); Jimmy Gill (PCS); Jayne Smith (PCS); Siân Wiblin (PCS); Darren Williams (PCS).

1. Welcome and apologies

Apologies had been received from Rhys ab Owen, Jane Dodds, Llyr Gruffydd and Rhianon Passmore. Hefin David explained that he had to leave early for a medical appointment.

2. Introduction to PCS and the Cross-Party Group

PCS gave a brief overview of the union's work in the civil service and related areas and the operation of the Cross-Party Group since its establishment in 2005.

3. Election of Chair and Vice-Chair

Mike Hedges was elected Chair and Heledd Fychan was elected Vice-Chair.

4. Workplace Covid-19 Safety Issues:

(a) DVLA Dispute

PCS gave an update on the union's industrial dispute with the DVLA over workplace Covid safety, which had been underway since February. There had been more than 620 positive Covid cases amongst DVLA staff. Of the 6,200 staff, more than 3000 are working on site and the DVLA is currently in the process of returning almost 500 staff to site, a process they wish to complete in July. PCS had serious concerns about the pace of the return to the workplace and the number of staff involved and the fact that these included staff classed as vulnerable and clinically extremely clinically vulnerable, as well as staff who have been successfully working from home throughout the pandemic.

PCS had been close to an agreement with the DVLA and its parent department, the DfT, which included a more gradual and measured system to return staff to the workplace, with review points on transmission rates. The deal had been taken off the table at the 11th hour on 1 June, apparently as a result of ministerial intervention. The contentious element of the deal was apparently a proposal to make payments to staff in recognition and reward for their work throughout the pandemic; this would have cost approximately £1.2million, yet the DVLA had revealed that their annual reward pot for operational staff was £4.2million.

The union asked for support in the following areas:

- MSs to ask the First Minister's Office to make representations to Grant Shapps to get the agreement back on the table and settle this dispute.
- MSs to get the DVLA to pause their current plans to return 300 more staff to the DVLA site over the next few weeks. PCS have formally demanded that 'Phase 3' be paused, following the FM's announcement last week. So far they have ignored PCS' concerns, however, bringing a further 116 staff back to the site this Tuesday, with another 152 planned to follow next week.
- Messages of support for our strike action, tweeted to @DvlaYes and @pcs_DVLA

Group members questioned the factors underlying management's intransigence and offered their continuing support for the union's action. Mike Hedges suggested that PCS should step up its campaign on social media.

b. DWP workplace safety concerns

PCS set out the union's concerns over the current situation in the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) where since April, the Department had been asking considerably more staff to return to jobcentres to carry out face-to-face interviews with customers, despite evidence that staff had delivered an excellent service to customers remotely throughout the pandemic and that 50% of claimants were currently failing to attend face to face appointments, the Department continues to insist that face-to-face is best. Senior DWP officials had recently confirmed that face-to-face appointments were mandatory as part of a benefits conditionality regime, due to a UK Government instruction. The union had undertaken a consultative ballot of all members affected to see if they would be willing to take strike action to protect their safety. The ballot closed on 2 June and 74% of those who responded had voted to support the proposed action.

Group members expressed their concern for the wellbeing of affected staff and service-users and were ready to raise the matter as the union's campaign developed.

DWP South Wales relocation project

PCS reported that the DWP was also pressing ahead with plans to relocate 1,800 staff from six existing offices, mostly in the South Wales Valleys, to a new purpose-built 'hub' on Treforest Industrial Estate, in the face of union concerns over loss of jobs to existing communities; the inability of hundreds of staff to transfer, due to mobility issues, caring responsibilities, inadequate public transport links and a lack of parking at the new site; and the fact that the new office is located in a flood-risk zone, which was badly affected by storms at the start of 2020. Despite the pandemic, staff from Merthyr Tydfil were due to transfer to the site in July and staff from Gabalfa in Cardiff in September, with the remainder of moves scheduled to take pace in 2022 and 2023. PCS had held several meetings with MSs representing the constituencies affected, most recently in March, and some of them had written to DWP ministers but received no satisfactory response.

Heledd Fychan reported that local residents had also been in touch with her to convey their concerns about the site, especially in relation to the flood risk. She suggested that it would be worth contacting local MSs again, as there had been some changes following the May elections.

5. Pay issues

(a) General PCS Pay Strategy

In March, PCS had submitted a pay claim for 2021/22 covering the whole UK civil service to the Chancellor for the Duchy of Lancaster, Michael Gove. This sought to challenge the pay freeze announced by the Chancellor of the Exchequer for 2021 and address the impact of a decade of pay freezes and pay caps, which had seen living standards fall by around 20% in real terms. The union's claim was for a 10% pay award, as well as improvements in annual leave and in the London weighting and a reduction in the working week. It had also reiterated PCS' long-standing objective of securing a return to national bargaining on pay and terms and conditions, covering all workers in the civil service and its related areas, ending the delegated bargaining system, which had resulted in huge disparities in pay between workers doing comparable jobs. The union had called on UK ministers to engage in direct negotiations and had also submitted sectoral pay claims to the Chief Operating Officer of each department of state, covering the core department and each of the executive agencies or similar arms-length bodies for which these parent

departments are ultimately responsible. Thus far, there had not been a positive response either from the UK government centrally or from individual departments.

(b) Welsh Devolved Sector Pay

PCS acknowledged that the Welsh Government had never endorsed the austerity pay policy applied by Westminster ministers and had sought, where possible, to deliver somewhat more generous pay awards but Wales' dependence on UK government funding had meant that civil and public servants in the Welsh devolved sector had also been affected by Treasury pay restraint. Welsh ministers had, however, been more receptive than their Westminster counterparts to PCS' aspiration to achieve greater pay coherence and significant progress had been made in this area during 2019, with unions joining employer representatives and senior officials to contribute to three workstreams, dealing respectively with pay; other related conditions; and pensions. The Covid-19 pandemic had interrupted this work but PCS was anxious to get it back on track as soon as possible. The union had taken the initiative in this respect by writing to the Welsh Finance Minister, Rebecca Evans on 22 February with a pay claim for 2021/22, covering the Welsh Government itself and a number of subordinate employing bodies, seeking – as with our sectoral claims for the Whitehall departments – a 'levelling up' to the best available pay rates, in addition to a cost-of-living award and improvements in working hours and annual leave. A response had, however, still not been forthcoming.

The union indicated that it would welcome any representations that could be made to ministers.

6. Welsh Culture Sector Funding

PCS reported on the longstanding funding issues affecting the National Library of Wales and National Museum Wales, which had been exacerbated by the pandemic and caused both organisations to embark, by early 2021, on wide-ranging restructuring exercises, entailing probably compulsory redundancies, while also offering staff no pay increase for 2020/21. Due in no small part to campaigning and lobbying by PCS and our sister-unions, the Welsh Government had announced a financial rescue package on 3 February intended to avoid job losses and other damaging cuts but this provided the necessary resources only for the (then) current and next financial years and this extra funding now needed to be embedded in the organisations' grant-in-aid to ensure their long-term sustainability to forestall similar problems recurring in future.

Heledd Fychan, drawing on her experience in the sector and role as Plaid's Culture spokesperson, agreed that the sector needed stability. She was due to meet the new Deputy Minister and would be pressing the case for three-year budgets.

7. Welsh Government Voluntary Exit Scheme 2017

PCS was seeking resolution of an issue related to the Voluntary Exit of some 140 Welsh Government staff in 2017 under the terms of the Civil Service Compensation Scheme 2016, which was subsequently struck down by a High Court judgement, causing the civil service to revert to the previous, 2010 scheme. The 2010 terms had been more generous than those introduced in 2016 and the Cabinet Office had advised departments that they might need to make an additional payment to staff who had left while the 2016 scheme was in force. The exit payments that had been made could still be considered lawful, however, if departments believed they would have paid the same amount even if the 2010 Scheme had been in place. The Welsh Government has taken this approach and declined to offer an additional payment, yet the terms it offered the staff who left followed the standard tariff introduced in 2016, hence PCS believes that the Welsh Government would have paid more under the 2010 scheme and is therefore duty-bound to make up the difference.

The union had met the Welsh Government Permanent Secretary on 1st September 2020 to present its position but was still awaiting a substantive response nine months later, and was now pursuing legal action against the Welsh Government, although it would still prefer not to have to go to court.

8. Devolution Proposals regarding the Justice Sector and the Health and Safety Executive

PCS drew attention to the fact that Welsh ministers were now committed to pursuing greater devolution of powers to Wales, including over Justice and Policing and the Health and Safety Executive, in both of which areas the union has members. While the union had tended to favour greater devolution in principle, it did not currently have policy in relation to these specific areas. It was therefore seeking discussions with ministers and officials as soon as practicable, and was also interested in helping to re-establish the Justice Unions Cross-Party Group, which had operated in earlier sessions of the Assembly/Senedd. PCS would keep its own Cross-Party Group informed of developments.

9. Any Other Business

PCS gave brief verbal reports on two other issues that had arisen recently:

- (a) The uncertainty facing staff within the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales, which would be merged into the planned new Commission implications as a result of the Tertiary Education and Research Bill (Wales); and
- (b) The revelation that Sport Wales was considering a proposal to outsource the management of its Plas Menai site in Bangor, which would affect the many PCS members based there, and had failed to consult or even inform the union.

The union was seeking to raise both issues with ministers and officials and would report back as appropriate.