

Minutes of the PCS Senedd Cross-Party Group Meeting held on 5 July 2022

Present: Mike Hedges MS; Heledd Fychan MS; Ryland Doyle MS Support Staff; Jayne Smith (PCS); Darren Williams (PCS). Apologies: Huw Irranca-Davies MS.

PCS national campaign on pay and pensions

PCS reported that the union's Annual Delegate Conference in May had agreed to hold a statutory industrial action ballot in the UK civil service and related public sector areas, on the issues of pay, pensions, job cuts and redundancy terms, to begin in September. The union had previously run a national consultative ballot of all public sector members in February and March, over the same issues and, while those taking part had been overwhelmingly supportive of an industrial action campaign, the turnout had been lower than the 50% needed in a statutory ballot. Branches would therefore be working hard over the summer to prepare for the ballot and especially to engage those members who had not voted on the previous occasion. The expectation was that members working for the Welsh Government and its sponsored bodies would be included in the ballot alongside those in the 'Whitehall' sector.

Members agreed to submit questions for answer by ministers in relation to the issues in this dispute.

UK Government review of arms-length bodies and threat to civil service jobs

In April, Jacob Rees-Mogg had initiated a review of agencies and other arms-length bodies under the responsibility of UK government departments, with a view to scrapping, privatising or merging any for which there was deemed to be no "pressing need" in their present form, in order to deliver 10-20% spending cuts. It had been widely reported that the DVLA was one of the principal targets of this initiative, and there was a similar threat to the Passport Office. The Wales TUC Congress in May had carried an emergency motion from PCS, pledging to defend these two bodies and the thousands of Welsh jobs that depend upon them. Meanwhile, on 13 May, the UK Government had announced its intention to cut 91,000 jobs in the UK civil service by March 2025, to return to the 2016 staffing level. The Cabinet Office had subsequently instructed departments and arms-length bodies to submit for how the implementation of 20%, 30% and 40% reductions to staffing and setting out the impact of the reductions on services. PCS conference had carried an emergency motion, instructing the NEC to build a campaign against the planned cuts. The announcement had no immediate consequences for the Welsh devolved sector, but some impact via Barnett consequential could not be ruled out.

Welsh devolved sector pay update

In February, PCS had sent the Finance Minister, Rebecca Evans a pay claim for 2022/23, covering the Welsh Government itself and a number of subordinate employing bodies, which sought to address the pay inequities within the Welsh devolved sector by 'levelling up' to the best available pay rates, as well as seeking a cost-of-living award and improvements in working hours and annual leave. There had been no response as yet but when PCS submitted a similar claim the previous year, the Minister had declined to engage in single-table, cross-employer bargaining that the union was seeking and pay awards were determined on an employer-by-employer basis instead. At the same time, however, in the partnership forum for the Welsh Government and its sponsored bodies, officials had made a commitment to seek funds before the end of the present financial year to raise the pay band minima for the various arms-length bodies to the minima of the corresponding grades within the Welsh Government itself (which has the highest pay levels). There had been a significant delay in confirming this commitment, but unions had now been invited to a meeting with Rebecca and Hannah Blythyn, at which they were expecting to be given a positive update, which would represent a significant step towards pay equity – although without providing any guarantees as to the level of any 2022/23 cost-of-living award for devolved sector staff.

Group members welcomed the apparent progress in this area; PCS agreed to keep them informed.

Workplace Covid-19 update

PCS reported on the push by the UK government to get staff back into workplaces. Most departments were operating a form of hybrid working, whereby staff were expected to spend a certain minimum proportion of their time in the office. The union was attempting to push back on this and, in Wales, to ensure that Welsh Government public health guidance on Covid was being followed. UK ministers were also seeking to end the practice whereby if someone is on sick leave owing to Covid, this is disregarded for pay and disciplinary purposes, which risked encouraging staff with Covid to come into the workplace in order to avoid sick pay or disciplinary consequences. Moreover, they had refused to treat Long Covid as a disability, under the terms of the Equality Act. The Welsh Government and sponsored bodies were continuing to allow most staff without public-facing jobs to work from home where possible.

Mike asked about the Welsh Government's 30% occupancy cap; PCS responded that actual occupancy was currently somewhat lower than this in most offices.

Use of 'fire and rehire' threat by Welsh public bodies

PCS gave an update on the use of a threat by both Audit Wales and the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales to dismiss and re-engage (or 'fire and rehire') staff in order to secure a change to terms and conditions that had not been willingly given in consultation. The union's objections had been disregarded in both cases. Mike and Heledd had both raised questions about this in the Senedd and Mike had initiated a statement of opinion, denouncing fire and rehire, which had been signed by 19 members. PCS had also now written to Peredur Owen Griffiths, as Chair of the Senedd Finance Committee, which has oversight of these bodies, asking it to investigate the matter. He had responded to confirm that the Committee would follow up on these issues during scrutiny later in the year, probably in October/November.

Members pledged to continue to raise the issue wherever possible, in order to maintain pressure on the two employers.

Sport Wales outsourcing update

PCS updated the Group on Sport Wales' proposal to outsource the National Outdoor Centre at Plas Menai, Bangor to an external provider. The union was opposed to this in principle but had agreed to meet management regularly as the process moved forward, in order to remain well informed about the proposals and to influence them in a positive way wherever possible. but we reserve the right to campaign against the outcome. The formal procurement had begun on 21 January, with potential partner organisations invited to register an interest by 28 February, and was due to conclude early in 2023.

It remained unclear to PCS why Sport Wales' stated aim of developing and improving the Plas Menai site and the services that it offers, could not be achieved without transferring the employment of the staff to an external 'development partner.' The union had begun to raise its concerns publicly, issuing a press release and working with Members of the Senedd to raise the profile of this issue and seek assurances from ministers. When asked about Plas Menai in plenary by the local MS, Sian Gwenllian, the First Minister had said that "the Welsh Government does not support the privatisation of this important asset" but Sport Wales management did not accept that their plans amounted to privatisation and consequently saw no need to change their approach.

Heledd reported on her visit to Plas Menai as a member of the Senedd Culture Committee. Management had offered somewhat vague assurances as to the future of the site and its staff following any outsourcing; Committee members had not had the opportunity to speak directly to staff.