

## Social Partnership - Annual Report (2024/25)

### 1. Background

On 1 April 2024, the new Social Partnership Duty (“the Duty”) on public bodies came into force in Wales. The Duty is set out in sections 15, 16 and 18 of the Social Partnership and Public Procurement (Wales) Act 2023 (“SPPP Act”). It complements existing well-being duties to which certain public bodies are already subject to under Part 2 of the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 (“WFG Act”).

In carrying out sustainable development, public bodies listed under section 6(1) of the WFG Act, will be required, in so far as is reasonable, to seek consensus or compromise with their recognised trade unions, or, where there is no recognised trade union, other worker representatives, when setting their well-being objectives and making decisions of a strategic nature about the reasonable steps they intend to take to deliver those objectives set under section 3(2) of the WFG Act.

Section 16(2) of the SPPP Act, sets out a number of specific requirements relating to the Duty, which a public body must comply with when ‘seeking consensus or compromise’. The requirements are intended to ensure that trade unions or other representatives of the staff of public bodies are fully and properly involved when a public body sets its well-being objectives, or when making strategic decisions about the reasonable steps the body is taking to meet those objectives.

The SPPP Act states that:

**in order to seek consensus or compromise a public body must include its recognised trade unions or other representatives of its staff in the process of setting objectives or making decisions, by (in particular):**

- (a) consulting them at a formative stage of the process, and**
- (b) otherwise involving them throughout the process by:**

- **providing sufficient information to enable them to properly consider what is proposed, and**
- **providing sufficient time to enable them to adequately consider what is proposed and respond.**

The intended effect of the legislation is to improve the economic, social, cultural, and environmental well-being of people in Wales by strengthening the role of social partnership within strategic decision-making.

The SPPP Act requires in-scope public bodies to produce an annual report to evidence how they have complied with the duty, which must be submitted to the Social Partnership Council (“SPC”) for scrutiny.

Section 18 of the SPPP Act states:

- (1) A public body must prepare, in respect of each financial year, a report of what it has done to comply with the duty.**
- (2) The report must be agreed with the public body's recognised trade unions or (where there is no recognised trade union) other representatives of its staff or contain a statement explaining why it was not agreed.**
- (3) The public body must publish the report, and submit it to the SPC, as soon as reasonably practicable after the end of the financial year.**

## **2. The Council's Well-Being Objectives**

The Council's four well-being objectives were developed during 2022 following a comprehensive needs assessment and consultation activity with a range of key stakeholders to include residents, staff, trade unions, businesses and elected members. They are designed to address the most pressing challenges for Carmarthenshire whilst maximising the Council's contribution to the seven national well-being goals. The objectives are as follows:

- (a) Enabling our children and young people to have the best possible start in life - *Start Well*.
- (b) Enabling our residents to live and age well - *Live and Age Well*.
- (c) Enabling our communities and environment to be healthy, safe, and prosperous - *Prosperous Communities*
- (d) To further modernise and develop as a resilient and efficient Council - *Our Council*.

To ensure their appropriateness they are reviewed on an annual basis following a period of consultation with the aforementioned key stakeholders. The challenges for the County are consistent with those identified in 2022, and therefore our well-being objectives remain unchanged.

## **3. Existing Trade Union Consultation & Negotiation Frameworks Within Carmarthenshire County Council (CCC)**

CCC has well-established information, consultation and negotiation frameworks in place with its recognised Trade Unions. The Trade Unions recognised for collective bargaining purposes are:

- UNISON
- GMB
- Unite
- National Association of Headteachers (NAHT)
- National Association of Schoolmasters and Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT)
- National Education Union (NEU)
- Undeb Cenedlaethol Athrawon Cymru (UCAC)
- Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL)

The current employee relations frameworks provide for regular meetings within the Communities, Education & Children's Services and Place, Infrastructure and Economic Development Departments. These meetings are attended by the respective Directors and Heads of Service.

A Corporate Employee Relations Forum, chaired by the Assistant Chief Executive and attended by the Cabinet Member for Organisation & Workforce and Trade Union (non-schools) Regional Organisers, allows for consultation and negotiation to take place on corporate matters relating to NJC employees.

The Joint Consultative Forum provides the opportunity for communication and consultation between the political Group Leaders of Carmarthenshire County Council (CCC) and representatives of the Trade Unions recognised for negotiating purposes (for NJC employees).

Within its explanatory communication to public bodies, WG has stated that:

*“Social partnership is a way of working designed to pursue mutual gains within the context of policy development and implementation, or operational change, but not primarily used as forums for information exchange, collective bargaining, or consultation. It works on the basic principle that more can be achieved by employers and workers, predominantly through their trade unions, working together in a spirit of co-operation and collaboration.”*

Notwithstanding the established consultation and negotiation frameworks that allow for regular interface with the Trade Unions, the advent of social partnership provides an opportunity not only to review the efficacy of these arrangements but to strive to develop a more positive working relationship by emphasising the importance of effective communication, collaboration, and continuous improvement.

#### **4. Working In Social Partnership 2024/25**

Throughout the year the Council has maintained its commitment to working in partnership with the Trade Unions by maintaining its established frameworks for regular communication and consultation but has also strived to engage on a range of strategic matters affecting the workforce.

These have included discussions on the Council’s financial management outlook with a presentation made to Trade Unions, in January 2025, by the Director of Corporate Services and Head of Finance, in relation to the setting of the 2025/26 Council budget.

The Transformation Manager has provided the (non-schools) Trade Unions with an insight into the support that is being provided to corporate departments to effect change programmes that can result in efficiency gains. It is hoped that working collaboratively on an ongoing basis with the Trade Unions can lead to further efficiencies being identified, there being an acknowledgement that the Trade Unions are able to bring forward “hands-on” experiences of working practices from those operating within operational settings.

The Chief Digital Officer has endeavoured to appraise the Trade Unions of the Council’s approach, through its Artificial Intelligence (AI) Strategy, to maximising the potential of AI and allaying concerns about any negative effect on employees.

In this respect, demonstrable productivity gains have already been achieved for the benefit of Social Care practitioners in being able to produce case notes in a significantly shorter timescale. Repetitive and time-consuming tasks associated with recruitment and selection have also required a much-reduced level of input from staff enabling them to focus on more qualitative aspects of the process. The Trade Unions are being kept updated as services identify opportunities to embrace AI solutions.

As is part of the requirements of the Local Government & Elections Act formal consultation with the Trade Unions was undertaken in June 2024, on the degree to which CCC is meeting its performance requirements as an organisation. The Trade Unions were asked to respond to several questions with the evidence gathered enabling CCC to build on the intelligence gained through similar consultation activity which has taken place on an annual basis since 2022.

Furthermore, during 2025, CCC has been subject to a Panel Performance Assessment (PPA) to develop its understanding of how it is operating and how it can ensure the delivery of effective services long-term. As part of the assessment, the Panel requested a meeting with Trade Union representatives, with the contribution of the Trade Unions considered as being very valuable as part of the overall assessment.

Looking forward to 2025/26 it is intended that existing communication processes will be further developed to allow for the earliest consultation with Trade Unions on the Council's well-being objectives. It is fully acknowledged that early and meaningful communication is essential to work successfully in partnership and so meet the expectations and requirements of the Social Partnership Duty.

## **5. Case Study - Social Partnership Workshops**

As a means of enhancing a greater understanding of social partnership, WG arranged three separate conferences across the country with the event in Swansea, held in late September 2024 being attended by officers from the People, Digital & Policy (PDP) Division as well as some CCC trade union representatives. This was very well received by those in attendance and led to the Chief Executive considering that it would be advantageous to engage the expertise and independence of an external provider, IPA, to facilitate some Social Partnership workshops. The intention being that these workshops could further develop and maintain a positive working relationship by emphasising the importance of effective communication, collaboration, and continuous improvement.

IPA are a leading authority on Partnership working having been previously sponsored by Welsh Government to develop and deliver a programme of facilitated training workshops for organisations in the public sector in Wales.

In January 2025 IPA provided their proposal for delivering separate workshops to the Trade Unions and to senior managers including the Corporate Management Team (CMT) and other Heads of Service who regularly engage with the Trade Unions. The Trade Unions were asked for comment, and it was agreed that these workshops should take place in March 2025.

The workshops were held on 4<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> of March and set out to consider Social Partnership from the perspectives of the Trade Unions and Senior Management by:

- Exploring the Trade Unions' and CCC Senior Management's perspectives on working in partnership.
- Understanding the thinking behind the Social Partnership and Public Procurement Act (Wales) 2023 and the principles of partnership working.
- Identifying any perceived barriers to working in partnership and ideas on how to work through them.

After reviewing the information gathered at the workshops IPA recommended the facilitation of a joint workshop involving CMT and trade union representatives, aimed at answering two questions:

- 1. How far can we go in developing a partnership approach at this time?**
- 2. What will we all do to work together to develop this?**

The workshop took place on 15<sup>th</sup> May 2025 and led to the Chief Executive seeking the agreement of the Trade Unions to provide the Council's Cabinet with a communique which would reflect the positive outlook engendered at the meeting. The agreed text included the statement:

*"We believe that the outcomes of this workshop will pave the way for a more collaborative and effective partnership. We are committed to continuing this positive engagement and building on the strong foundations established during this session. The workshop was one where truths were shared from all parties but most importantly it was a very positive meeting and provides us with a strong foundation for a much-improved working relationship in the future".*

## **6. Trade Union Feedback (Unison, Unite and GMB)**

The joint recognised Trade Unions within Carmarthenshire County Council welcome the opportunity to engage as genuine social partners with the Council as defined by the Social Partnership & Procurement Wales Act 2023.

The Trade Unions want to see a transparent and committed joint approach that identifies the necessary changes required to achieve common goals, that brings positive outcomes for our membership. This needs to include a jointly agreed strategy that identifies the necessary steps required to introduce meaningful partnership working in Carmarthenshire Country Council.

The Trade Unions recognise that a clear strategy is essential when seeking to maximise the opportunities identified within the Act and being able to achieve joint goals.

To that end we request a detailed strategy is jointly developed which sets out the highest standards as enshrined within the Act.