

CONSULTANTS WATCH

Council slashes jobs but still has cash to pay consultants

While Council staff worry about job security, news broke of the Council's continuing obsession with throwing money at consultants.

In 2009/10 the Council spent an estimated £4 million on consultants, according to freedom of information website Whatdotheyknow.com, £1 million more than in 2008/9. The council says this is because of changes in the way consultancy spending is recorded, but that's what they would say isn't it?

Most shocking is the news some of these consultants are paid more than £1,000 a day.

Here's the break down by directorate:

- Children's services splashed out just over £1.5million in 2009/10, an increase of around 200% on the previous year.
- Environment and regeneration was next in the wasteful spending stakes with £953,000.

This is the department formerly managed by current Chief Executive Martin Esom who appears to favour employing consultants ahead of permanent staff. He was also involved in employing the Renaisi Consultancy, the procurement criticized by the Independent Panel Report.

The data is based on estimates by the Council, and refers to staff employed at management levels, not temporary frontline staff.

Council leader Chris Robbins said he wants to cut the number of consultants to save money. In fact UNISON has been pushing the Council to do this for years as previous UNISON Matters will show.

Back in 2003 the Council assured us that consultant spending would fall. There was even a scrutiny committee looking into reducing the costs. But all such initiatives have failed: the Council continues to employ consultants – the Transformation Team itself is headed up by consultants.

Councillor Akram, portfolio holder for staffing matters, said "We are doing all we can to reduce expenditure on consultants in this borough, but in some circumstances it is a cost effective and efficient way of delivering services to employ temporary staff with specific areas of expertise".

UNISON says that if councillors really mean that then they need to exert some control over their free spending management team who employ consultants whenever they possibly can.

Branch Meeting Tuesday 12 October 2010 12 – 2 pm Council Chamber

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Disability Group

Join the UNISON support and action group.

Whether you have unresolved issues at work, need advice or would like to meet up for support, you will be welcome on

Thursday 29th

September at 4:00

**at Chestnuts Hall,
Walthamstow Town Hall.**

We hold monthly meetings and invite outside speakers. We can help if you are having problems getting reasonable adjustments and flexible working arrangements. The cuts will not improve the situation – we need to work together to get change.

Contact Su Manning on 8496 4479 or 07837 407988 e-mail: su@unison-wf.fsnet.co.uk

VT - R.I.P.



VT (formerly Vosper Thorneycroft, makers of warships and weaponry) are no more. The company was taken over by another international concern, Babcock, in July.

Interestingly Babcock is also best known for making military paraphernalia and also has a Head Office in Portsmouth.

The move could bring mixed blessings for UNISON members working for Babcock in Careers, Connexions and education services as VT were increasingly worker unfriendly in their dying days – imposing wage freezes and threatening to end the final salary pension provision amongst a host of attacks on workers terms and conditions.

Although we wait to see where Babcock's priorities lie we have at least had the immediate threat to pensions lifted for the time being. It also looks like the VT obsession to centralize decision making and management functions may also change as we hear that the new company prefers to leave matters for local negotiation.

“Private” in Waltham Forest

Strictly Education have made further redundancies amongst their SNA staff as Schools look for soft targets to balance their books. It seems that special needs provision no longer follows the funding!

Havering Council cuts Prospects Connexions by £444,000 - these cuts will mean the closure of the Romford Connexions Office and the loss of up to 11 staff – one third of the entire establishment. Described as "devastating" even by Prospects management they come at a time youth unemployment is forecast to go through the roof. UNISON has called on Havering Council to think again about these savage cuts and provide evidence that they carried out an Equality Impact Assessment before deciding to make these cuts. Your support is needed: sign the petition at <http://shc1.epetitions.net/> to help UNISON and its members save the Connexions Service in Havering.

ISS Caterhouse - UNISON's campaign for a London Living Wage continues....

Harrisons have finally taken over the staff at Fred Bremer School on a TUPE transfer. In the first month Harrison's failed to collect the members' union subscriptions and then told us they wanted to charge a £1 per head per month to do this. This has now been resolved

Capita Group have recently entered the arena in Waltham Forest now they have taken over Ramesys, provider of IT support in BSF schools.

Walthamstow Academy UNISON is negotiating with management and members regarding a pay and condition offer to cleaning staff which would, in effect, buy any claim to single status off of the staff. When these members TUPE transferred they were in another union which failed along with the Council to ensure that Single Status commitments were written into the transfer contract. The cleaners have now joined UNISON and we are trying to get them the best deal we can in the difficult circumstances they find themselves.

Private and Voluntary Children's Nurseries UNISON has found an astonishingly poor level of management when it comes to HR issues in private and voluntary nurseries, and sometimes flagrant disregard to employment law and rights at work. The sector has a substantial number of employees, and traditionally trade union membership is low. Our private sector outreach officer is trying to increase the membership, but even the few members there are generate considerable case work.

Ascham Homes has restructured and those on notice are seeking alternative posts within the company. UNISON is assisting members with ET claims for unfair dismissal following one of the most flawed restructuring processes ever. Stewards will appraise the situation and to set goals for the forthcoming months.

Outlook Care have declared a pay freeze for all staff this year. UNISON will be consulting members about a response to this. One issue of concern is the "Personalisation of Care" agenda which could create potential difficulties for our members. A review of Adoption Leave is also on the horizon.

NPS - uncertainty around the transfer of the LGPS pension is still under discussion as Waltham Forests and NPS have yet to agree the transfer price.

Greenwich Leisure potential redundancies amongst staff employed by Greenwich Leisure, who work on the Healthwise Scheme in Waltham Forest, is still unresolved.

Private Home Care Agencies UNISON is attempting to seek closer ties with some of the private home care agencies operating in the borough. As with private and voluntary nurseries there is huge potential for recruitment and organising but it is fraught with difficulties – the main one being that employees often have no fixed workplace making it that much more difficult to contact them. By talking to employers we hope to be invited to induction events and thus be able to directly contact staff.

Steve Woodhouse - Outreach Worker

Asbestos threat from asbestos and legionnaires diseases in schools



UNISON safety representatives protesting at government health and safety cuts”

The Council has received **three** improvement notices from the Health and Safety Executive in relation to asbestos management and legionella in Waltham Forest schools. Exposure to either could cause fatal diseases.

Inspections at Henry Maynard Infants and Juniors, Kelmscott and Willowfield Schools found that none had an asbestos management plan and the Council had failed to reduce the risk of legionnaires disease arising from the possible presence of legionella bacteria in the schools' water systems. The HSE say that as all four schools visited failed they are concerned this situation may be replicated throughout the borough. They therefore require the Council to review the situation in all community schools.

Su Manning, UNISON Branch Health and Safety Convenor, says it is very worrying to learn that the Council has not been carrying out its duties to safeguard children and staff in Waltham Forest Schools.

“The HSE have told us that the Council has not met the requirements of its own risk assessment and we now have a situation where the Council is being ordered to carry out its duties under health and safety legislation. A further failure to act could result in prosecution” she said.

“It is quite staggering that this situation should arise at a time that the government are planning to deregulate health and safety further and reduce the number of inspections and notices issued by the HSE. This will only serve to let employers get away with not treating health and safety at work seriously even more” added Su.

Bill Palmer, UNISON's Branch Health and Safety Officer, said: “This has been coming for some time. Waltham Forest schools have been allowed to scrimp and save on health and safety and it is no surprise to see the Council being criticised and given a notice to improve their monitoring of asbestos and the risk of legionella in schools. The trade unions have long complained of inadequate health and safety management in schools and hope that these notices will make the Council take the actions that are clearly laid out in their own risk assessments and the inspectors report.

“Health and Safety could be one of the biggest losers under the new Academies scheme with schools unaccountable to even a poorly performing local authority and an average time between HSE inspections of 38 years. “Only with a mixture of capital expenditure and robust Health and Safety enforcement can schools be a safe and healthy place for students and workers alike” said Su.

Contact: Su Manning or Dave Knight on 020 8496 4703 or 07837 380236.

More information on asbestos can be found on the HSE's web site at:

<http://www.hse.gov.uk/asbestos/index.htm>

Back to College

Sixth Form College Pay

UNISON has submitted the 2010/11 pay claim for support staff in sixth form colleges. The key points of the claim were:

- A substantial increase on all salary scales and allowances combined with a means to 'bottom load' the award for the lowest paid staff
- An additional days' leave for all staff
- Commitment from colleges to pay for ISA registration for support staff
- Review of the support staff pay spine

UNISON highlighted the current high rate of inflation and the impact that this was having on members' standards of living. We presented evidence showing support staff have not benefited from pay rises to the same degree as other staff, particularly principals, and the need for any settlement to address this. At the meeting of the Sixth Form Colleges Joint Negotiating Committee the employers responded that they 'were not in a position to respond to the pay element of the claim.' They stated that the current economic climate and the uncertain funding situation meant that they would not be in a position to respond until after the completion of the comprehensive spending review (CSR) in October 2010.

They also stated that the finances of many colleges were extremely tight. They pointed to the freeze in 16-19 funding rates, reductions in adult funding, the freeze in capital funding and the impact of the VAT increase from January 2011 as an additional burden.

UNISON stated we were disappointed with the response. However, we recognised that the potential for reductions in core funding as a result of government budget cuts had created an unprecedented degree of uncertainty and it was agreed to meet again following the outcome of the CSR. The employers also stated that they were currently unwilling to make any concessions on the other elements of the UNISON Claim. Branches and college reps will be kept up to date with any developments.

FE Colleges - Final Pay Offer

The Association of Colleges (AoC) has tabled its final pay recommendation offer for 2010/11. The final consolidated offer is for a 0.2% increase or £50 whichever is the greater.

This final offer follows the unions' rejection of previous non-consolidated pay recommendation offers put forward by the AoC. Non-consolidated means the pay award would not be added to the pay scale and would not count towards pensions.

The joint unions' position throughout the talks was that a non-consolidated pay award would set a dangerous precedent for future years. The trade union side has made it clear to the AoC that we consider their offer to be measly and unfair, especially when compared to the high rate of inflation. The approach being taken by the AoC is not uncommon unfortunately. UNISON will be consulting members in FE colleges about the offer in early September. In advance of the consultation, the national committee, following consultation with the other unions, will decide its position on the AoC final offer and will communicate their decision in advance of the consultation.

Support from your ULR

We know that there are difficult times ahead and many staff will face major changes at work. **Union Learning Reps** can help and support you through some of these difficulties. Would you like to upskill or brush up existing skills?

Do you want information about different courses for a change of career in the future? Your ULR will talk to you in confidence about your training needs and then negotiate with management to identify and provide training where possible.

We have links with training providers and can find out about courses for you if you are looking for a change of direction.

Phone Julia Poynter – Joint Unions ULR Coordinator for further information on 8496 4457 or e mail Julia@unison-wf.fsnet.co.uk

“Freedom of Information Fiasco!

The Building Schools for the Future programme and the overuse of highly paid consultants have been high on UNISON members' agenda in recent years.

In 2009, one of the BSF permanent staff went on maternity leave and we were told her work would be covered by consultants. UNISON submitted a Freedom of Information Request to the council on the 7th July 2009 asking for the weekly salaries and length of contract for four of these consultants. On 4 August 2009 the Council replied saying it “does not hold this information” and that even if they did, they wouldn't tell us because it would breach the data protection Act 1998.

UNISON appealed against the Council's decision to withhold the information. On 18 September 2009 the Council responded saying they did not hold the “weekly salaries” of the consultants but that of course they did know how much they paid in relation to the employment of consultants. They conceded that they had asked the companies that employed some of the consultants whether they would disclose this information and strangely enough they had all declined to do so. The Council said it was “satisfied that this information could prejudice the commercial interests of both the companies concerned and in fact the Council”.

The contracts varied in length, some ending in November 2010 and March 2012 (a long time to cover for maternity leave!). UNISON appealed to the Information Commissioner and on 20 November 2009 they upheld the Council's position saying UNISON had asked the wrong question at the outset but could submit a new request. UNISON did this on 30 November 2009, making sure that precisely the right questions to ascertain how much these consultants were costing the council were asked. We received their response on 15 December 2009 and this time they owned up to knowing how much they paid for the service of the consultants but they had decided to withhold the information because UNISON had asked for similar information recently.

So, perversely, the Council first argues that that UNISON had not asked the correct question to elicit the desired response then

subsequently tell us that they won't answer because the question is substantially the same as the previous one. They added the commercial interest argument again for good measure, then wrapped up by saying they considered the “Public Interest Test”, and had decided the public interest was best served by non-disclosure.

UNISON appealed again to the Council quoting directly from the Independent Panel Report that had recently looked into financial and organisational irregularities in the Council's commissioning system (this report had itself been commissioned by the then Chief Executive, Andrew Kilburn). One of the report's findings was that “*Waltham Forest is seen as insular and secretive by some important stakeholders*” Indeed, they found “*a number of people, including MPs, have confirmed that the only way they get a response is through FOI requests. This is now regarded as the normal method of communication by many.*” Commenting on the delays, the review concluded that despite a lack of hard evidence “*it is undoubtedly true that where problems exist there is little transparency or urgency in finalising issues.*”

The Council's response on 16 February 2010 gave nothing further away. So it was back to the Information Commissioner for the second time. After a considerable delay, UNISON received an email on the 28 July 2010 from the case worker seeking some clarifications. Then, on 17 August 2010, some 13 months after the original request, UNISON received a response from the Council detailing the amounts paid to three of the consultants over a course of time. They were very large sums indeed! £123,157 over a 6 month period – or an average of £41,052 each for 6 months work – and we don't even know if that was full time work!

To have to wait for 13 months to find out how Council tax payers money is spent is a disgrace. But given the copious amounts of public funds squandered on consultants the Council's reticence is perhaps not that surprising.

Steve Woodhouse
UNISON Outreach Worker

UNISON GEARS UP FOR THE FIGHT AGAINST THE CUTS

UNISON in Waltham Forest has been out fighting and campaigning against the cuts since the ConDem coalition took control of government and the pronouncements of doom and gloom began to spill forth from Downing Street. Even before the election we knew that we faced serious cuts but the government immediately slashed the Area based grants which means many job losses come March, and they also insisted on further cuts from Council budgets. This meant that Waltham Forest now faced cuts of around £30 million and the Council has proposed a reorganisation that primarily cuts middle management jobs.

Reorganisation UNFAIR declares UNISON

The local branch has been involved in consultations with management about the reorganization and has made submissions at Scrutiny Committee and Cabinet arguing the reorganisation protects the top tier. If you count the boxes on the structure there are 19 Chief Officers before the reorganization and 19 afterwards. However, three of the five current black chief officers are losing their jobs. This is a disproportionate impact on senior black officers, but councillors do not seem perturbed by these facts.

We have also highlighted the lack of a proper consultation period. UNISON believes that there are currently around 157 employees facing potential redundancies. Many more are to follow if the Council slavishly follows the government's edicts of cuts, cuts and more cuts. However, the management has cleverly played around with the start and finish dates of formal consultations so that, at any one time, there are less than 100 staff actually included in a formal consultation.

This means that they can carry out 30 day consultations rather than 90 days consultations as required by law if over 99 staff face potential redundancy. They even put one planned reorganisation on hold in order to accommodate a 30 day consultation for this particular reorganization. We believe that this is totally disingenuous and have informed councillors of our views. Still they are unmoved.

Then there is the farcical creation of Residents First, a new service area designed to bring all the Council customer facing services together. Ironically, the single largest area of customer contact – Council Tax and Benefits, which accounts for 25% of callers to shops and counters and 85% of phone calls – is being kept in Finance. You would think it would form the core of the new Residents First Service Grouping, but it doesn't. So there will be different reporting lines for customer services staff depending on whether they deal with Council tax and benefits or not. Illogical decisions like this make you wonder if there is hidden agenda behind this proposal?

The talks have brought small victories: We identified an administrative post in Children's Services which provides an important support function for social workers and other front line staff. Following our representations that post was saved, as was the post of Youth Services Manager.

Worse is to come

We anticipate more cuts in October when the Comprehensive Spending Review is published. Councillors currently expect a 25% cut in budgets, which will mean having to find savings over the next 3 years of something like £65 million. This will spell the decimation of the Council as one in four of all jobs are lost.

Don't Give Up – Join The Fightback

UNISON in Waltham Forest is not going to meekly accept these cuts. We believe we can work with community organizations and campaign against the cuts as they are proposed. Our branch is a longstanding member of the Waltham Forest Trades Council and we recently took part in the local rally of trade unions at Walthamstow market where we held a campaign stall. We have also been active in the formation of the Waltham Forest Anti-Cuts Union, a body formed to bring together user groups, trade unions, community activists and local people to build a wider anti-cuts movement. Their next meeting is at 7:30pm at the William Morris Community Centre in Greenleaf Road on Thursday 7th October. All members will be welcome so please do join us.

There will also be events taking place on 29th September, the European Trade Unions Day of Action against cuts. Our branch will be continuing to collect signatures for the One Million Voices Campaign and we intend to have a stall at the Bakers Arms in Leyton. It would be great if you could join us. The stall will run from about 10am through to 12 noon when we will be attending the rally at Congress House. We would like as many members as possible to join us.

The TUC are planning further events on 19th October so watch out for notices about what our branch will be doing that day and attend the UNISON Branch Meeting on Tuesday 12th October at 12 noon in Waltham Forest Town Hall Council Chamber to get a full update and hear the latest news.

In order to fight back against this onslaught we will need more trade union activists. So why not consider getting involved? Become a steward, a safety rep, an equalities rep or a union learning rep in your workplace and play a role in your union by helping to unionise and organize our workforce. If we can all work together and campaign hard against this government's proposals then we can make a difference.

Waltham Forest Council spends £1.2m on councillors while workers face job losses

Waltham Forest councillors cost taxpayers more than £1.2 million in allowances and expenses during the last financial year, it has been revealed.

Figures released by the authority show £2,640 was spent on travel and subsistence costs, with £469,000 paid out for politicians with a special responsibility at the council.

Council leader Chris Robbins received just over £50,000 last year, including allowances and expenses, while former deputy leader John Macklin - who is no longer a councillor - got £40,000.



Cllr Chris Robbins

Former cabinet members Terry Wheeler, Elizabeth Phillips and Bob Belam were each paid more than £32,000 in total.

Councillors paid the most in expenses include Cllr Robbins, who got £307, along with cabinet members Liaquat Ali who received £264 and Clyde Loakes who claimed £149.

Former Conservative councillor Eric Williams received £262 while Lib Dem Cllr Phillips received £197.

Cabinet member Marie Pye received more than £32,000, including £948 in expenses, although her costs are adjusted because she is disabled.

These sums are more than most of our members earn as an annual salary before tax and it really does make you wonder what the priorities really are. UNISON thinks that it would be appropriate to review these amounts in light of the financial crisis now impacting on the Council.

UNISON LOBBIES THE TUC

The branch sent a contingent of stewards to the TUC on 12 September 2010 to join the lobby calling on the TUC to lead a national demonstration against the ConDem government cuts. Speakers called for a nationally coordinated campaign organized across the labour movement and led by the TUC. Nancy Taaffe, the branch campaigns officer spoke to the lobby highlighting the injustice of the proposed cuts, which will hit the poor and vulnerable while the rich and powerful continue to enjoy their privileged lifestyles.

Our branch had agreed to support this lobby and we were not alone. The Waltham Forest branches of UNITE, NUT and UNISON Health were also present and we formed up to make a contingent of around 40 or so Waltham Forest trade unionists for the march from the Conference Centre to the Mechanics Institute where we heard more speeches. The march consisted of about 700 or so trade unionists from around the country, all united in the belief that the TUC should lead a strong nationally coordinated campaign, similar to those happening in France, Greece, Italy and Spain.

RECRUIT! RECRUIT! RECRUIT!

If UNISON is going to grow and develop in Waltham Forest we really do need to increase our membership. We are calling on all our members to start signing up any work colleagues who are not members of a trade union.

To make this a bit more fun and to provide an incentive we are launching a recruitment competition. The member who recruits the most new people to the union will win a £50 voucher and will be presented with the award at the next AGM in February 2011.

In order to take part, please complete the registration form below and we will send you a supply of membership forms. Simply ensure that you write your name clearly on the front of every form you hand out so that we can total up how many members have joined using your forms.

Activist's Recruitment Competition Registration Form

I wish to register for the Activist's Recruitment Competition

Name:

Workplace:

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Signed:

Date:

Please return this form to Madeleine Lejeune, UNISON Office, Cherry Tree House, Waltham Forest Town Hall, Forest Road, Walthamstow E17 4JF.