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UNISON COMMENTS ON APPENDIX F

UNISON favours option A in respect of ensuring Union members in Schools retain access to good quality and accountable Trade Union representation.

In doing so we think it would be useful for members of the School Forum to be clear on the benefits of this approach

- Trade Union Reps are elected in accordance with the rules of their Union, in our case this means that we elect two post-holders on an annual basis from within our membership. Doing so ensures that all members have a say and that there is a far broader choice than if each School elects its own Rep.

Under UNISON rules it is a requirement that representation of local members is provided by an elected officer from within the Branch rather than a regional Officer. The current arrangement allows us to do so where there is no local representative and prevents prolonged delays in providing representation avoiding stress for the members concerned and disruption for the Schools.

- Option B may seem superficially attractive but it should be noted that many Schools do not currently have Trade Union Reps, and that even where they do there is a limited capacity to properly represent the membership. This is due to the lack of independence of local Reps and the inability of Schools to release them for appropriate training as well as attendance at meetings.

In respect of Option B the effect would be to disenfranchise and dis-empower Union members in Schools where there is no one who is willing to be the Trade Union Representative in smaller Schools where the number of staff may be small. As highlighted above even where the reps are elected they would need access to support and advice on a range of more complex issues.

Using the current model has clear benefits in terms of minimising disruption for Schools. Option B would leave a situation where at short notice a Representative could be pulled away from her/his duties in order to represent a member or to attend a meeting. Proportionately many of our Reps are frontline staff specifically Nursery Nurses, Teaching Assistants/SNAs, and Administrators. Such disruption could lead to children having to be sent home due to child to adult ratios or children being disadvantaged by removal of one to one support for a period of time. For example dealing with a single disciplinary could mean a School based representative being unavailable for several days on a single case.

- Option A provides Union Reps a wider and more focussed approach it also ensures the independence of the advice. It also deals with situations where more than one Trade Union representative is required. This position is common in circumstances such as grievances or disciplinaries. Some members will not feel able to approach a colleague when seeking Trade Union Representation. From a School point of view it prevents there being any conflict of interest where the Rep is affected by a particular restructuring proposal or is for that matter subject to action by an employer on an individual basis. The employer has the ability to talk in confidence with a Trade Union representative who is not directly involved and can be assured of any "off the record" discussions remaining so.

- It should be made clear that the costs associated with Union Reps do not represent individual salaries for this work. Union Reps on release continue to receive the salary of their substantive posts. This point may seem obvious but I re-iterate it, as there are many negative stories in the current political climate which seek to portray Trade Union reps as highly paid “barons”. The reality for UNISON is that our Reps are frontline workers. The costs are also shared across all Schools meaning that the real cost per School would compare very favourably to the individual costs of releasing representatives to attend the number of individual and collective representations undertaken by the two Branch Officers.
- The current arrangements have worked well for many years and were adopted as a direct result of the realisation that a more localised approach was neither cost effective nor desirable. In reality the Schools save money since they pool the cost of providing representation rather than having to replicate arrangements on a School by School basis. As with other pooled services this means it is available when required and that there is a seamless approach that works to the benefit of both the UNISON members and the Schools. The effectiveness of this has been demonstrated by Academies choosing to “buy-back” this service.
- The Current arrangements ensure there is an ability to negotiate (where required) on model policies and procedures, which Schools can, chose to adopt. This has proved very effective in reducing burdens on Schools and saved countless hours of localised negotiations on a School-by-School basis. Option B would not facilitate this.
- Union members facing redundancy or restructuring need appropriate support, which is best delivered by someone outside of the immediate School, environment. Borough wide reps have the benefit of having an overview of vacancies in other neighbouring Schools and better contact with non School Union Reps, which helps to maximise redeployment opportunities and thus redundancy costs with Schools.
- UNISON has an effective record of engagement with Schools and the local Authority as a result of the current arrangements. For example work carried out on reviews of the Personnel Handbook job descriptions, policies and procedures, and TUPE consultation where Schools have either opted for or been required to convert to Academy Status.

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