

Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee Inquiry into Trade Union (Wales) Bill

Submission on behalf of the Welsh Local Government Association

Introduction

1. The Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) represents the 22 local authorities in Wales, and the three national park authorities and three fire and rescue authorities are associate members. The Association seeks to provide representation to local authorities within an emerging policy framework that satisfies the key priorities of our members and delivers a broad range of services that add value to Welsh local government and the communities they serve.

Background

2. The WLGA and Welsh local authorities have a long-standing and mature working relationship with the recognised trade unions that developed further since devolution. All the key terms and conditions of employment within local government have been arrived at through national collective agreements and local negotiated agreements with the trades unions.
3. The WLGA has supported and embraced the concept of social partnership which has helped steer local government through severe financial difficulties. We strive wherever possible to seek consensus, although there are clearly occasions where employers and unions take a difference stance. For example, the use of third sector bodies or cooperatives in terms of delivering public services has been an area of disagreement in recent years. Nevertheless, we firmly recognise as employers that engaging with the workforce through the recognised trades unions played a significant part in ensuring that service continuity has been at the heart of some difficult decisions and fulfilling the Welsh Government's strategic aim of having citizen-centred services.
4. Industrial action within local government in Wales has been minimal over the past 10 years despite the backdrop of austerity, service efficiencies and a reducing workforce. Those that have occurred have been mainly instigated at a national level and in some circumstances the impact has been mitigated in Wales through a 'Welsh way' of dialogue and discussion, most notably with Teachers around the issue of 'Observation', in which the WLGA played a negotiating role.

The Role of the Trades Unions

5. The WLGA respects the role of trade unions and its members and understands that it can play a positive role in supporting the workforce. The public face of trades unions is often seen as confrontational and being in constant disagreement, which is often symptomatic of an escalated industrial dispute. Whilst it is acknowledged that employers and trades unions do not agree on everything and disputes do occur, we believe strongly that there are many positive sides in working in partnership with Trades unions .
- a. **Health and Safety and Well-being.** The trades unions have a shared agenda with employers around the health and well-being of the workforce. Regulations in the form of The Safety Representatives and Safety Committees Regulations 1977 and the Health and Safety (Consultation with Employees) Regulations 1996 require employers to engage with their workforce on health and safety matters. Local government in Wales has often gone beyond this requirement and joined with trades unions to promote good health and safety and well-being. Undertaking health fayres, promoting specific health initiatives and generally supporting good health.
 - b. **Learning and Development.** Welsh local government has worked with the Wales TUC to support Union Learning Representatives who help their members acquire essential/ core skills that helps them in work and life. Welsh local government has worked particularly closely with the Wales TUC to develop an e-learning hub called All Wales Academy for Local Government.
 - c. **Pastoral care and Support.** The trades unions provide a range of pastoral supports and services that can assist employees who are members of a trade union. These can include a range of financial and legal services, health plans and support. These can have a positive impact on staff that enable them to continue in work and provide excellent public services.
 - d. **Equalities –** The trades union have another shared agenda in promoting equality and diversity and avoiding discrimination in the workplace.
 - e. **Advocacy & Representation –** there will be occasions when individuals or groups will be subject to employment processes that may affect their continued employment status. These may include discipline, redundancy and redeployment, performance management issues or retirement. Local government accepts that these individuals may require support and representation at a such a difficult time. Trades unions can assist the individual through the process, provide clarity on issues and often make these processes quicker and expedient.

Social Partnership

6. The Welsh Government is committed to the concept of social partnership as set out in 'Working Together for Wales- A Strategic Framework for Public Service in Wales.'. Welsh local government is a key stakeholder in the arrangements that support this. Welsh local Government forms part of

the Workforce Partnership Council (WPC), which is a tripartite forum involving Government; Trades Unions and public sector employers. It also abides by the principles contained in the WPC's 'Partnership and Managing Change Agreement (2012)'

7. The WLGA has actively supported the 'Creating Successful Partnerships' programme and delivered the programme in a number of authorities.
8. Welsh local government continues to engage with trades unions at an all-Wales level and supports the Joint Council for Wales. This is a joint trade union and employer's forum that provides a useful vehicle to share new and emerging issues that impact on local government; seek to provide agreed solutions to national issues; share good practice and resolve disputes should they arise.

Dispute Avoidance and Resolution

9. There will be occasions when disagreements will arise between local government employers and the trades unions. Mechanisms are in place to seek to resolve issues before formal disputes occur. Engagement at the earliest opportunity between employers and trades unions can help alleviate the need for disputes and avoid disputes escalating into industrial action.
10. In the event of formal disputes developing there is an expectation enshrined in ACAS codes that the parties should exhaust all 'local' procedures for dispute resolution prior to referral to ACAS or Employment Tribunal.
11. Welsh local government has a range of dispute resolution processes to help deal with individual and collective disputes.

The Trades Union (Wales) Bill

12. The following comments are provided specifically in relation to those elements of the proposed Trades Union (Wales) Bill:

Ballot Thresholds for 'Important Public Services'

13. The WLGA does not recognise the distinction between 'health, education, fire and transport service' and the other services provided by local authorities. Waste collection, Social Care, regulatory service and others are all important public services. The WLGA does not recognise the need to differentiate between these services for ballot purposes.

Paid facility Time and Publication of facility Time

14. The Welsh local government position on facility time has been that reasonable time off with pay should be available for trade union activities. This has been stated a number of times in the Joint Council for Wales.

15. It is recognised that different authorities have differing facility agreements. These are based on a range of factors and features relevant to that authority and will include: -
 - Size of workforce
 - Geographical area
 - Budget Constraints on supporting arrangements
 - Transformation and change management Programmes
16. Local authorities should be free to develop a facilities agreement that best suits the needs of the authority. These facilities agreements are revisited periodically to ensure they are fit for purpose.
17. The WLGA supports the notion of localism and does not support a top down, one size fits all approach that would impose requirements on individual local authorities.
18. The WLGA does not see the benefit in the wholesale publication of facility time agreements. As alluded to above each local authority will have its own factors and features that will dictate the characteristics of its facilities agreement. Without a thorough understanding and insight into the issues and challenges that authority is facing, some of which will be confidential and sensitive, it would be impossible to compare on a fair and consistent basis, and therefore it will not be in the public interest. Internal processes such as annual budgeting and review of HR and corporate policies provides, together with scrutiny arrangements provides robust opportunity to ensure that facility agreements are fair and reasonable in the context of each authority.

Deduction of Union Subscriptions from Wages (check-off)

19. There has been a longstanding arrangement for authorities to deduct union subscriptions through payroll processes. Since the UK Governments Trade Union Act was being considered oral evidence from authorities suggested that where this was happening Service Level Agreements were in place that ensured authorities were recompensed for undertaking this.
20. We understand that as a result of the proposed legislation a number of trade unions have opted to deduct their subscriptions direct through direct debit. In view of this the WLGA will seek to establish a more up-to-date picture on check -off arrangements.
21. There are also some advantages to local authorities of assisting trades unions with subscription collection. Apart from any recompense they receive it does also allow local authorities to have an appreciation of union membership and density. It assists with understanding level of turnout and voting in the event of a ballot being undertaken. This can also be used to inform the facility time agreement if membership levels change.

22. At another level it allows individual staff who are trade union members to be quickly and appropriately signposted to their trades union for help, support, advocacy and representation if necessary. Having this understanding can save time and resources.

Conclusion

23. At the meeting of the WLGA Council in September 2015 it resolved (by majority of 21:1) to oppose the UK Government Trade Union Bill. As part of the debate they determined that the measures in the then Bill were disproportionate and they would undermine relationships between employers and the staff.
24. With the publication of the new White Paper on Local government it is the case that councils in Wales are due to embark on a significant journey. The White Paper recognises that "the local government workforce is an essential part of these proposals and the Welsh Government will consider, through the Workforce Partnership Council, how to support the transition over to the new arrangements, using statutory guidance where necessary". The employers recognise that in any major change programme, particularly in the context of recent years, it is vital to take the workforce with you and fully engage with their representative bodies. The trades unions provide an essential vehicle to ensuring that the workforce is represented and engaged in this change process over the coming years.
25. The evidence presented above supports the proposal to bring forward the Trade Union (Wales) Act that will help ensure that the mature and effective relationships that have been developed between employers and trades unions in local government continue to help improve public services in Wales.

Welsh Local Government Association

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