



## **COUNCIL MINUTES: Open Business**

12.30 p.m., Thursday 23 July 2020

Held at multiple locations, via Microsoft Teams software

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### **Council Open Business – minutes 1 to 14 inclusive.**

#### **1. Attendance and Apologies**

Present: Sonia Reynolds (in the Chair), Cathy Clark, Gareth Cork, Toni Schiavone (Vice Chair), Chris Franks, Caroline Davies, Salamatu Fada, Jenni Jones-Annetts, Suzanne Samuel, Guy Wallace Smith, Daryl Leeworthy, Stephen Nicholls, Tim Palazon, Julie Cook, and Dafydd Rhys (excepting minute 8). The meeting was quorate throughout.

In Attendance: Kathryn Robson (Chief Executive), Cath Hicks (Head of Learner Services & Resources), Mark Baines (Head of Curriculum & Performance), Stephen Thomas (Company Secretary/Clerk); Siôn Aled Owen (interpreter); Mary Morris (HR Manager - as observer).

Also: Penelope Farrell and Shauna King (learners), Karina Scott and Leane Saunders (Curriculum Delivery Officers) and Beth John (Regional Manager, SW & Mid Wales) - for minute 2 only; Alan Woods, Claire Maxwell and Marian Jebb (Welsh Government officials) - for part of minute 2 and all of minute 3 only.

Apologies: John Graystone.

#### **2. The experiences of two of our learners**

After the Chair's welcome to all to this virtual meeting, Penelope Farrell spoke enthusiastically of her recent experience of an on-line Art course she attended through the Dove Workshop (Banwen, Neath Port Talbot). AOC|ALW tutor Peter Townend had assiduously adapted and developed his skills to reflect this new means of teaching for his students, including posting videos between the weekly classes held virtually. Students' productivity had if anything increased under the revised format in Penelope's view, and she in particular praised the additional support which had been possible on-line, outside class times. The revised course format had assisted her greatly, providing a regular focus which had helped her psychologically during the lockdown. Karina Scott added that the learners and tutor should be roundly congratulated for making the course such a success, in its former face-to-face and subsequent on-line forms.

Shauna King of Merthyr Tydfil was then introduced by Leane Saunders: they had known each other for 3 years, since Shauna had first undertaken a British Sign Language course with AOC|ALW. She had since completed numerous other qualifications with the Organisation, increasing her levels of self-confidence along the way and leading her to a situation of stable employment. She was now also able to assist with the school learning requirements of her 15 year old step-son, in a mutually supportive family educational role that showed clear linkages between the outcomes of adult community learning and aspects of the school curriculum (both primary and secondary). Her hope was to work with disabled children in future, and she had recently been nominated for an Inspire learner's award by Leane Saunders.

Council members thanked the learners and colleagues for their heartening inputs to the meeting.

### **3. Presentation and discussion with Welsh Government representatives**

Alan Woods commenced by stating that he and colleagues were concentrating their efforts on preparations for a return to physical learning. The fact that information and media attention had centred on schools, higher education and to an extent further education was not an intentional slight: the importance of adult community learning was acknowledged by them, with the increased levels of blended learning being made available much appreciated, and a means of adapting to the possibility of a second spike of the pandemic. It had been good to see what the two learners had said earlier in the meeting, and it would be useful to hear what Council members thought were priorities for the Organisation and the sector as a whole now.

Cathy Clark was an officer at one of our branches (Oakdale & Blackwood) and many of its members did not have suitable digital hardware for the new reality. The governmental representatives confirmed that certain amounts of money for that purpose had been made available by the Minister, and precise details on them would be known in the coming weeks. Would there be further money from the Welsh Government to assist in AOC|ALW's broader move from face-to-face teaching to digital, it was asked? Marian Jebb said that in her realm the *Digital 2030* programme had already existed pre-Covid-19, and the past few months had hurried things along in that domain. Initial emphasis would be placed on funding for digital exclusion – connectivity improvements; then it was hoped there would be increased IT equipment capital funding. Salamatu Fada had experience of a Big Lottery funding scheme where the IT hardware made available for excluded children was loaned, rather than given: this seemed inconsistent with addressing levels of deprivation. While the Welsh Government donated the hardware required to assist digital linking through its grants, funding after the first year was not guaranteed, so such kit should remain the property of the institution which received the grant.

Stephen Nicholls asked whether 'demonstrable progression' - a criterion of measurement of acceptability of educational outcomes, used by a former senior civil servant - was still a term of import post-Covid-19 for the further education department in the Welsh Government. Alan Woods said that funding for all of AOC|ALW's current provision could not be guaranteed, so evidence and feedback from AOC|ALW on what it considered to be its priorities in the adult community sector would be useful. Stephen Nicholls believed there was so much broad added value which learners gained from our courses that 'progression' went in numerous directions and, of its very nature, was therefore difficult to measure and demonstrate in quantifiable terms.

Daryl Leeworthy was a tutor at our Merthyr Tydfil branch in a class which consisted largely of over-80 year olds, who were increasingly lonely and isolated yet for whom digital inclusion would not work: a primary aim of their education was the social interaction that came from it. The governmental representatives were aware that digital alternatives were not a panacea, and that there were significant health benefits too from traditional educational interactions. To make the most of that, closer cross-departmental links into the health and social care fields, and budgets, were required. Strong videoed evidence from our learners might help to convince others within the Welsh Government of the importance of these broader aspects of adult learning experience, even if measurable outputs were tricky to prove. The representatives confirmed that AOC|ALW should look for potential new money from health and social care budgets, based on evidence to support that approach and the claims made that welfare and well-being were proven and important cross-cutting outcomes of adult education. Research evidence to back up such points being made by the Council was needed so as to convince other departments and Ministers: since Covid-19 had assisted in breaking down some of the departmental silos at governmental level, it could prove timely to submit such proof.

A question was asked about developments in the national co-ordinating body for adult community learning, following the Minister's 2019 statement on it. The response was that the Resilience Plan for Covid-19 had been the recent priority for the department, but once that was fully in place the aim was to pick up where things had been left off regarding the national body and its role. Certainly, the Welsh Government was not as far forward on it as had been hoped by now. The Future Generations agenda put emphasis on adult learning too, as did the civic commitment/ engagement strategy at higher education level. Once more reference was made to the need for an evidence base, to show how such dovetailing worked in terms of clear links with lifelong learning. Lastly there was discussion of recent adverse impacts on childcare and transport services and their implications for adult education.

The three officials were thanked for their input and the mutual food for thought that had been offered. Appreciation was expressed for the continuing support that was maintained by the Welsh Government for adult community learning.

#### **4. Current situation on Council member vacancies**

Stephen Thomas informed members that Malgorzata Zedler, the learner governor elected in March 2020, had stepped down from that role for personal reasons a few weeks previously (without having attended any meetings). There were therefore 16 current Council members: the elected seats for the North West and North East democratic regions, and one appointed vacancy from among our Affiliated and Partner Organisations, were yet to be filled, though leads were being pursued for those three vacancies.

#### **5. Minutes of Open Business at the Council meeting of 20 May 2020 and matters arising**

The minutes of the Open Business proceedings of the previous Council meeting, held through Microsoft Teams, were approved as a correct record. Two matters in the minutes were discussed further. On the task and finish working group on branch futures (minute 3), the recently completed internal audit by TIAA had undertaken an assessment of the relations between branches and the central Organisation. **Its conclusions would be used to inform the group's work once TIAA's final report was to hand.** On the same minute, it was stated that **the diversity survey for Council members would be circulated within the coming few weeks.**

#### **6. Minutes of the Learner Experience Committee meeting of 23 June 2020**

The Council noted these minutes from the previous month. Caroline Davies, as Committee Chair, commended the hard work undertaken by office staff and tutors in succeeding to put so much educational provision on-line: that was reflected in greater detail in the Curriculum Report, later in the Council's agenda. It was asked what follow-up there had been on the issue of digital exclusion, discussed in various of the Committee's minutes. It was reported that there remained a challenge to ensure that certain learners were able to receive their education on-line, and there was a continuing need to target those in greatest need of such support. The Organisation was awaiting confirmation of more funding for IT resources from the Welsh Government and possible other sources for it to do that: in the meantime it had done what it could with its somewhat limited stock of IT hardware/software supplies for learners thus far.

#### **7. Minutes of the Resources Committee meeting of 7 July 2020**

Toni Schiavone, as interim Chair of the Committee, drew attention to three points within the minutes, which were duly noted by the Council. On the financial situation for 2020-21 (to be addressed fully later in the Council's agenda) there seemed an inevitability that a financial loss would be made – perhaps of as much as £1/2 million. The proposals for changes to the staffing structure, to be covered in the following minute, had been discussed in detail and given the likely financial situation the importance of the changes proposed being cost neutral ones was key. And finally, the estates strategy as presented to the Committee remained an important corner-piece of the organisation's future. The sole comment came from Chris Franks - reassured that, despite the difficulties of setting meaningful budgets under current circumstances, there had been a decent attempt made at providing indicative figures for the forthcoming year.

## **8. Proposed changes to AOC|ALW's Staffing Structure, 2020**

[Dafydd Rhys left the meeting at the beginning of this item, and returned to the gathering for the subsequent agenda item.] Cath Hicks described the proposals that had originally come forward in March, which had then been withheld because Covid-19 had shown that a broader range of change was required to make the Organisation fit for its new challenges, and went through the more extensive paper that had been approved by the Resources Committee early in July. While there had been some staff consultation already, that would be fuller and more formal if the proposals were approved today, and would occur both at an individual level and with the trade union Unite.

Chris Franks said that the Organisation was intended to be an all-Wales, bilingual body. Yet the likely loss of three members of staff who were all Welsh speakers and based in NW Wales had the danger of reinforcing the perception that we were a monolingual organisation based primarily along the M4 corridor; the additional teaching hours to be given to 5 Welsh speaking tutors would not in his view replace the Welsh language skills to be lost at the core of the organisation. In answer it was reiterated that what was currently in place had come nowhere close to meeting the target that had been set for Welsh medium educational provision – the present structure had simply not worked over the previous two years. The £30,000 budgetary commitment towards Welsh medium tutors (though seemingly small) was greater than had been spent over either of those two years, and could lead to more marketing of courses and greater digital expertise on board. The emphasis would now, rightly, be on the curricular regions to deliver on our Welsh medium educational commitment, while the 'highly desirable' status of the bilingual language skills of the new appointee to the Digital Marketing Officer role was also referred to as relevant here. On the three members of staff who were at risk of losing their jobs, it was confirmed that no funding of project work that might see them transferred to other duties had yet been received. The potential loss of their experience and corporate knowledge was acknowledged as being a risk to the Organisation.

Two Council members also referred to a perceived danger to the voluntary movement too which these proposals spelt out - an apparent side-lining of it, and of democratic engagement. The claim was that there were now in fact 6,000+ members of the Organisation - would they be dealt with effectively by the regionally based curriculum teams, as outlined? There was an acknowledgement that not enough had been done over the recent past to support the membership more broadly. The Senior Management Team expressed its collective frustration that two central commitments - on democratic engagement and on Welsh medium provision - had not been successfully delivered of late. While it might not appear so in the written proposals, the intention was to strengthen undertakings to both of those key facets and so stop making the claim that the democratic aspect in particular was a unique factor for AOC|ALW when in fact it had not been backed up with effective staffing structures to implement it. The sharing of that role amongst more staff members was meant to be a means of deepening its imprint in the Organisation.

Chris Franks remained unconvinced and concerned by the arguments: to him, apart from the loyalty expressed by the Resources Committee members who had spoken up, there seemed little enthusiasm amongst other Council members for these moves, and he still felt a £30,000 commitment to Welsh medium tutors was a paltry investment. That Resources Committee recommendation for approval was however underlined as having come after much deliberation. The Senior Management Team proposed that there was a positive side to approving these proposals today, as it would reduce uncertainty for those staff directly and negatively affected.

**The Council confirmed that it was content for the proposals to go forward for formal consultation, and was reassured that compulsory redundancies were not intended as a consequence of these proposals. Should the consultation phase bring about significant change in the proposals, then the Council would receive the revised scheme for approval at its September meeting; should there be little or no change, then there would be a written report on progress at that same meeting.**

#### **9. Financial Matters - Financial Report and Management Accounts to 31 May 2020**

Mark Baines shared the circulated document with the Council on screen, while running through the key points highlighted in its opening pages. On the commitment made to tutors to pay them for all of the previously arranged courses during Term 3, regardless of whether they went ahead or not, their 'surplus' time had been utilised in many cases by their undertaking second marking duties, preparing and adapting materials for on-line courses, or keeping in touch with learners even if direct delivery had not been feasible. The forecast deficit of c£177,000 for 2019/20, though undesirable, could be covered because of cash reserves of just under £4 million held in our various bank accounts, where balances were divided between some with higher returns and other accounts, so as to spread financial risk. The Audit Committee Chair congratulated the Finance Team on ensuring good systems and oversight to allow such a reserves cushion to be available.

#### **10. Financial Matters - Proposed budgets for 2020-21 and Potential Impact of Covid-19**

As noted earlier, this paper had been approved by the Resources Committee, which had considered the figures to be prudent and had viewed positively the fact that our reserves could cope with a deficit which was within the bounds of manageability for the forthcoming financial year as well, however undesirable the scenario. The budget was founded on the undertaking of increasing delivery outputs by 6%, as agreed with the Welsh Government. Yet the likely scenarios were moving on a weekly basis, leading to a high level of uncertainty: the worst case scenario put here was of a c£470,000 deficit, though continuing discussions with civil servants could conceivably culminate in the pre-agreed delivery targets being reduced. Ultimately however, our Financial Memorandum with the Welsh Government stipulated that we must approve a surplus budget: hence the one agreed by the Resources Committee projected a surplus of c£33,000, whilst meeting the five financial targets for the year.

Class fees were expected to decrease because more unemployed people were anticipated on our courses; cleaning costs would go up, both in our offices and at our community venues, and public service pay increases of 2.5% would also have an impact on our expenditure. The Council asked why the marketing budget was not increased, despite that being a consistent theme at Council meetings and the feeling amongst certain Council members that a mini-relaunch of the Organisation was required given current extreme circumstances. The reply was that the employment of a new, second full-time marketing employee was a clear added commitment to that realm and would of itself increase marketing activity.

**The Council approved the surplus budget as proposed; and noted the alternative deficit budget which was presented alongside it and which forecast the effects of Covid-19 on organisational finances for the year.**

#### **11. Chief Executive's Report, July 2020, inc. Curriculum Report**

Kathryn Robson underlined once more the tremendous efforts of the entire workforce, College Management and Senior Management Team members included, during these challenging times. 180 courses had now been converted to being on-line. On the potential return to physical teaching/courses, there was still debate within the Welsh Government and ColegauCymru circles about the 2 metres vs. 1 metre distancing issue; and regarding community educational venues, evolving guidance from central and local government was being followed assiduously, with additional risk assessments to be carried out by AOC|ALW for each location that could potentially come back into operation for our use. The research project should provide evidence of what was required to answer questions raised in minute 3: eleven tender bids had been received for it, with Daryl Leeworthy, Mark Baines and Kathryn Robson to undertake the short-listing exercise.

On the attached Curriculum Report, there was a late summer events programme in place, to boost Welsh medium provision amongst other purposes. There had been improvements in the Adult Basic Education outputs; the potential for branches to become part of the Organisation's blended learning future was there; the health and well-being agenda was being further emphasised by our staff during this time; and the opening of a 'centre of excellence' by us in Newport was a possibility. A question was raised about courses advertised on the AOC|ALW web-site, which did not all have a course descriptor or course fee included. Without such details it was wondered whether potential learners would register their interest up-front, as requested, or whether such limited information might put potential students off.

#### **12. Risk Register for July 2020**

The input from members at the May Council meeting had been assimilated, with a consequent rise in the net risk levels apportioned to three risks: 1.1.1 (government funding), 1.2.1 (financial planning) and 1.2.3 (the financial impact of Covid-19). The issue of a guaranteed rise in teachers'/public servants' salaries was a recent additional policy decision which might well have financial implications for AOC|ALW too.

Two questions were raised: the long-promised training for branches in data protection matters would proceed following receipt of the finalised internal audit report on branch relations; and on risk 2.1.2, namely the non-achievement of the Welsh medium provision target of 5% for a second year running, the net risk of an Amber rating (and score of 9) was retained because only risks that, if they became a reality, would have the potential to close the Organisation down scored Red ratings and the highest risk scores. That was not the case with the Welsh medium educational target, however undesirable its outcome was.

#### **13. Self-assessment of meeting's proceedings by Council members**

Members commented on the remarkably positive input from both of our learners at the beginning of the meeting. One Council member felt frustrated by certain of the comments of the Welsh Government officials, but thought that the meeting had overall been positive in addressing some difficult issues.

#### **14. Council meeting dates for 2020-21**

Each of the six Council meetings was scheduled to commence at 12.30 pm. Physical venues would be confirmed subsequently, should meetings move from virtual video events to actual enclosed gatherings.

- 2020 - Thursday 24 September
- Wednesday 25 November
- 2021 - Monday 25 January
- Thursday 11 March
- Tuesday 30 March (AGM and Strategic Planning Day)
- Tuesday 18 May
- Thursday 27 July

## ACTION POINTS

Reference	Minute name	Action agreed	Action by whom	Action by when
Minute 5	Matters arising from the minutes of the Council meeting of 20 May 2020	The task and finish working group on branch futures would react to the TIAA internal audit report on branch relations with the Organisation.	MB / Cathy Clark / Daryl Leeworthy / Tim Palazon	Sept. 2020
		The Council members' diversity survey would be circulated within the coming few weeks.	CH / ST	Aug. 2020
Minute 8	Proposed changes to AOC ALW Staffing Structure, 2020	The Council confirmed that it was content for the restructuring proposals to go forward for formal consultation, and was reassured that compulsory redundancies were not intended as a consequence of putting forward these proposals. Should the consultation phase bring about significant change in the proposals, then the Council would receive the revised scheme for approval at its September meeting; should there be little or no change, then there would be a written report on progress at that same meeting.	KR / CH / MB	Sept. 2020
Minute 10	Financial Matters - Proposed budgets for 2020-21 and Potential Impact of Covid-19	The Council approved the surplus budget as proposed; and noted the alternative deficit budget which was presented alongside it and which forecast the effects of Covid-19 on organisational finances for the year.	MB	Aug. 2020