John Hewitt, Corporate Director of Resources: Since December 2016 the council agreed to a fundamental review of Teaching Assistants responsibilities and roles and what we’ve done is exactly that over the last six months. So we’ve been working really hard in consultation and partnership with trade unions, teaching assistants, head teachers and our colleagues to effectively have a fundamental look at what those roles consist of.

So in that six month we’ve set up a project group which is overseeing the whole process, we’ve also set up a project team which has done some of the detailed work around the review and we’ve involved, at the heart of this, teaching assistants and head teachers in terms of the process that we’ve been through.

It’s a fundamental review, we’ve done exactly what we said we were going to do and there job has effectively been to see exactly the roles and responsibilities they are undertaking in our schools. So that’s involved looking at job descriptions, job record documents and involving everybody in the discussion around what those teaching assistants roles need to look like going forward and into the future.

So that gets us to the point of effectively developing new job descriptions, job record documents. From that position we’ve then visited every single school undertaking a job evaluation exercise and met with every head teacher and then effectively matched every teaching assistant in every school to the new job description and the new grade.

So that has been a fundamental undertaking on behalf of the council, and it’s involved a lot of work from all parties concerned and I would just like to put on record my recognition of the hard work of everybody involved in that process. It’s got us to a position where we’ve done exactly what we’ve said we would do back in December.

It’s been really important to get the views of the teaching assistants in terms of the roles and responsibilities, you know people were saying to us the job record documents don’t reflect what was happening in schools. We’ve got over 200 schools in the county it’s really important being able to bring that together in a way that lets us develop those roles and responsibilities and the new job descriptions and grading structure.

There are a number of elements to the offer including the review of roles and responsibilities and I’ll just run through those. So, first of all there’s a 40 week contract as opposed to a 39 week a year contract, that’s a change from what was previously offered. There also will be a 37 hour a week contract but that will be worked flexibly across our schools. We’ll ask TA’s to talk to their head teachers about how that flexibility works in each school but it may cover for example parents evening, out of school work etc. but that will be negotiated on an individual basis with each school.

Another part of the offer is a two-year compensation, so any teaching assistant that does lose out through this will effectively be offered a two year compensation payment so they’ll be nobody losing any money over that two year period. And another part of this is the
council working closely with teaching assistants and this is really important, over that two year period with the cohort that is potentially losing money at the end of that two years. And we’ll be looking at things like workforce development, working with our trade union colleagues, working with teaching assistants just to see what sort of mitigation we can put in place for those teaching assistants that do potentially lose at the end of two years. But I would stress nothing’s changed in terms of pay at the moment, nothing’s going to change for two year and we’ll work within that two year window with those teaching assistants that do see some loss through this process.

In terms of next steps with the trade unions, we’ll effectively go out to ballot or consult on the offer so we’re expecting that to happen very shortly. Once that ballot result is known, we’ll know whether the offer has been accepted. If it’s accepted by the recognised trade union bodies we’ll have a collective agreement and the offer will be implemented at that stage.

Well we’ve always said as a council we’re prepared to listen and you know we heard more and more that teaching assistants were telling us about things that happened in schools that haven’t previously been picked up. And the complexity of this can’t be sort of underestimated or overregged. We’ve got over 200 schools, there’s different arrangements in each one and this exercise has really pulled everything together I think for the first time in a long time. It’s put us into a position where we’ve had a really detailed look at what’s going on in our schools, revised the job descriptions and the grades and effectively built an offer around that.

The continued partnership work is really important, we do value our teaching assistants so we recognise that there’s a two year compensation package in place. That gives us time to talk around what the other options might be, we might not have all the answers at the minute but it gives us time to talk those through, working in real partnership with trade unions and teaching assistants and we’re all committed to find a resolution to the whole issue through that two year period.

We’ve always said throughout this process that the issue for the council has been the equal pay risk and that risk hasn’t gone away. We’ve actually received a number, over 100 pay equal pay claims at this point in time so that risk is starting to crystallise and we do need to move teaching assistants onto the 37 hour contracts and effectively in terms of the term time work. So we do have to address that, clearly the focus of this has been on looking at the teaching assistants roles and responsibilities and the impact on them. But we do need to address that risk.