

Employment & Appeals Committee – Meeting held on Monday, 7th April, 2014.

Present:- Councillors Rasib (Chair), Plenty (Vice-Chair), Brooker, Chohan, Davis and Sharif (arrived at 6.40pm).

Apologies for Absence:- Councillors Coad, A S Dhaliwal and S K Dhaliwal

PART 1

39. Declarations of Interest

None.

40. Minutes of the Meeting held on 23rd January 2014

Resolved - That the minutes of the last meeting held on 23rd January 2014 be approved as a correct record.

41. Reducing Sickness Absence - Performance Update

The Committee considered a report with an update on progress with reducing the Council's sickness absence.

The average full time equivalent (FTE) of days lost over the year from 1st February 2013 to 31st January 2014 was 7.8 days, an improvement over the 10.4 days for same period in the previous year. However, this amounted to an average monthly figure of 0.76 FTE days lost over the last 3 months, slightly above the average of 0.70 FTE for the 4 months from July to October 2013.

A South East Employers survey comparing Unitary, District/Borough and County Council sickness information reported an average of 10.22 days lost per employee in Unitary Authorities compared to 7.54 days in District/Borough Councils and 8.61 days in County Councils. A Labour Market report (covering all sectors) showed the average days lost in 2013 was 4.4 days. The Committee concluded that while Slough sickness days lost has improved, it remained well above the national average but below the Unitary Authority average.

The sickness absence balanced scorecard has continued to be reported at CMT and DMTs, enabling managers to report on absence and the action being taken. The process is kept under review to ensure that data is reported in a timely fashion, that the reporting of sickness is accurate and that the correct reasons for absence are reported. The Committee was pleased to note that employee attendance at Occupational Health appointments was improving, and with virtually no missed appointments in the last six months (save for two missed in December 2013).

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The report set out the three most common reasons given for sickness absence for the period April 2013 to February 2014, broken down to department level. Mental health problems such as stress, depression and anxiety accounted for a significant number of days lost in three of the four directorates. Infections such as coughs, colds and chest infections, although typically a shorter term absence, also contributed to a significant number of days lost. This profile was in line with that reported by many other local authorities.

With reference to previous questions raised by the Committee, it was noted that employees and managers were being encouraged not to accept 'not stated' as an appropriate reason to enter on a sickness form, but the removal of this category was subject to ongoing investigation. With regard to 'hospital or GP appointments' the Council's leave policy allowed for employees to agree to take such time as either annual leave, flexi or sickness.

The Committee noted with satisfaction the continuing success of the sickness policy now operating and was pleased to acknowledge the co-operation of the Trade Unions in achieving this. Having regard to the overall sickness management score, which showed some fluctuations in the monthly scores, it was requested that an exception report be made at the next meeting for any directorate where the score had fallen below 60 – 65. Members also requested for the next report an indication of the breakdown of sickness absence by gender and the performance on training of managers on the sickness policy against the target of 90%.

Resolved –

- (a) That the report be noted.
- (b) That the report to the next meeting include further information on the matters outlined above.

42. Temporary Agency Staff - Progress on Implementation and Baseline Monitoring

The Committee considered a progress report on the contract with Matrix SCM to supply temporary agency staff for the Council, which had been in operation since January 2013.

The implementation of the new contract had a savings target for 2013/14 of £250,000. Expenditure on agency staff from March 2013 to February 2014 amounted to £7,434,205, giving a saving of £504,780 against the previous contract.

There were currently 112 agency workers (not employed on a sessional basis) which continued to remain fairly stable and below the baseline of 123 set under the previous contract. 77% of agency workers were travelling less than 20 miles to their place of work (slightly up from the 74% reported at the last meeting). The number of staff travelling from within SL1-SL6 post codes continued to remain around 58%.

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Data for the length of tenure of temporary staff, the directorate they were engaged by and the job titles held by those temporary staff were reported. The Committee was pleased that the contract with Matrix was continuing to save the Council money but at the same time expressed concern that overall expenditure was not coming down and the total number temporary staff had reduced only a little.

Resolved –

- (a) That the report be noted.
- (b) That in order to keep downward pressure on the number of temporary staff engaged, a RECOMMENDATION be made to CMT to re-instate the monitoring process of reasons why a temporary agency staff member was being used.
- (c) That a progress report be provided for the next meeting.

43. Workforce Issues Arising out of Ofsted Inspection

Consideration was given to a report produced in response to a request for an update on recruitment and retention issues that were detailed in the final Ofsted report published in February 2013.

The Committee was reminded that the recent Ofsted inspection of services for children in need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers highlighted that there was a need for priority and immediate action to 'develop and put into operation a comprehensive workforce strategy to attract and keep high quality, experienced permanent staff in Slough'. Officers had reacted by drafting an action plan (attached to the report as an appendix) and setting up a working party of key personnel from across the Council to ensure that the recruitment and retention of permanent staff is co-ordinated and acted upon as a matter of urgency.

The Committee acknowledged that there were a number of reasons why Slough had experienced difficulties in attracting good quality permanent staff in the past, including:

- The national shortage of Child and Family Social Workers.
- The geographical location of Slough, with fierce competition from surrounding authorities for a finite pool of workers.
- Poor reputation and profile stemming from previous Ofsted reports deeming the Authority as 'inadequate'.
- Poor market profile compared to competitors.

The Committee noted the broad range of initiatives either underway or planned to attract new workers and retain existing staff. It was clear there was no easy, 'quick fix' solution to the recruitment and retention problem but rather it was necessary to build an attractive, comprehensive package that could be offered to potential applicants and staff.

Members were very pleased to see the progress on developing an ongoing annual Newly Qualified Social Work scheme that ensures a regular stream of social workers for the future. There were currently five newly qualified staff in

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their Assessed and Supported Year Employment (ASYE) and a practice mentor was to be recruited to develop this year on year and manage an academy for new workers. Links with local Universities had been established to improve channels for recruitment. When further progress had been made on improving the overall package, it was planned to hold sessions with the locum staff so they could explore individually the benefits of becoming a permanent member of staff.

The Committee considered that access to housing for new staff was a significant benefit and further efforts should be made to make this happen.

Resolved –

- (a) That the report be noted.
- (b) That the Cabinet be RECOMMENDED to explore the offer of key worker housing as part of the package offered to assist recruitment of Child and Family Social Workers.
- (c) That this work should be completed as soon as practicably possible.

44. Approach to Business Change - Future Role of Employment & Appeals Committee

The Committee considered a report proposing changes to the current process whereby staff appeals against dismissal are heard by a Member Panel.

As part of the Council's 'Fit for the Future' Organisational Development Strategy, a review of the policy framework for performance management of staff including matters around capability, disciplinary and grievance procedures had been undertaken. Staff had a right of appeal against dismissal under disciplinary, redundancy and sickness policies and at present the Constitution provided for that appeal to be heard by the Employment & Appeals Sub-Committee.

At a previous meeting the Committee had nominated Cllr Brooker to work with HR staff to examine proposals arising from the review. A specific proposal had now been made that the Sub-Committee should be replaced with an officer panel to hear appeals against dismissal. This was in line with the current guidance from the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS) which envisaged appeals being heard by senior manager(s). Members accepted that an appellant had the right to a fair hearing by competent Panel Members who had been trained for the purpose. Given the infrequency of appeal hearings, it was difficult for Members to bring the necessary degree of professionalism required.

An appendix to the report set out details for the necessary changes to the Constitution and the introduction of arrangements for appeals against dismissal to be heard by a Panel of three comprising a minimum of one Strategic Director/Chief Executive and one/two Assistant Director(s). It was noted that an appeal by a Strategic Director or one of the three statutory officer appointments would be heard under separate arrangements governed by Regulation.

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The Committee noted also that HR were also examining the process for formal warnings in line with ACAS recommended guidance for managing employee misconduct.

Resolved - Subject to the concurrence of the Member Panel on the Constitution, to accept the proposal for a Strategic Director/Chief Executive and Assistant Director Panel as the final appeal against dismissal, and to RECOMMEND the Council to amend the Constitution accordingly.

45. Attendance Record

The Committee received a report setting out Members' attendance over the past year.

Resolved - That the report be noted.

46. Date of Next Meeting

The date of the next meeting was confirmed as 24th June 2014.

Chair

(Note: The Meeting opened at 6.30 pm and closed at 7.45 pm)