

Employment & Appeals Committee – Meeting held on Monday, 20th October, 2014.

Present:- Councillors Brooker (Chair), Chohan, Coad, Dhaliwal, N Holledge (Vice-Chair), Plenty, Sandhu, Sharif and Zarait

PART 1

13. Declarations of Interest

None.

14. Minutes of the Meetings held on 24th June 2014 and the Special Meeting held on 11th August 2014

Councillor Zarait advised that he had submitted his apology for the previous meeting through Councillor Sharif. Councillor Sharif arrived late at the meeting and apologies had already been taken. The Democratic Services Officer advised that she would amend the attendance record for the previous meeting to indicate that Councillor Zarait had submitted an apology.

Under matters arising it was noted that at the previous meeting the Committee had considered a report on Workforce issues for the year ahead and it was suggested that the next meeting be held at St Martin's Place so that Members could view new office layouts and furniture. This was not possible due to ongoing works but Kevin Gordon invited all Committee Members to view the new furniture and seating arrangements on Second Floor West with a Member of the Facilities Team. (Members were requested to email Teresa Clark to arrange).

Resolved – That the minutes of the Meeting held on 24th June 2014, and the Special Meeting held on 11th August 2014, be approved as a correct record subject to an amendment to show that Councillor Zarait had submitted an apology for the last meeting held on 11th August.

15. Recruitment in Children Services Update and Step up to Social Work Programme

With the approval of the Committee, the report detailing Recruitment in Children's Services and Step up to Social Work Programme was taken first. Karl Davis, Head of Service- Child Protection & Looked After Children outlined the report.

Recruitment in Children Services

The Officer advised that following an Ofsted inspection it was 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

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quality, experienced permanent staff in Slough'. Following a request by the Committee at its meeting in April a progress report on what had been achieved so far was provided.

Members were informed that the actions taken included:

- A regional benchmarking exercise, together with developed and agreed proposals for recruitment and retention incentives for social workers and managers in front line social work teams.
- Re-designed recruitment and promotional materials and a national recruitment campaign, resulting in 14 candidates being offered and accepting posts including 3 experienced and 6 newly qualified social Workers.
- A comprehensive 12 month programme of support (including 'restricted' case loads) and development for newly qualified social workers. It was confirmed that the current cohort of 5 would complete this programme in February 2015, whilst the second cohort of 7 newly qualified social workers had been recruited and had commenced employment in September 2014.
- A re-designed working environment for social work teams, to ensure teams and managers could sit together.
- Children, Young People and Family Services now had a stable senior management team covering the Early Help and Social Care services.

The impact of the above actions was discussed. It was predicted that the target of 80:20 permanent to agency social work staff would be reached by October 2016, ahead of the February 2017 target. It was anticipated that 8 of the 11 front line social work teams would have permanent first line managers in post before December and it was felt that morale was good, due to permanent staff feeling valued. The Committee was advised that the two cohorts of newly qualified social workers were being well supported whilst they learned to be 'good' social workers. By September 2015, assuming all remained working with Slough, there would be 12 'grown' permanent social workers who would be working towards becoming experienced practitioners.

It was highlighted that the overall aim of saving the authority money, and providing consistency for children through the avoidance of overreliance on agency staff, would not be a 'quick fix'. Instead, it was believed that only through a concerted effort on a number of fronts would such objectives be realised.

Step Up to Social Work Programme

The Officer advised that the Step Up to Social Work initiative was a government incentive to encourage graduates from other professions to come into Social Work on a fast track programme. Members were informed that the programme's recruitment process was robust and rigorous, to ensure that the selected applications would be of high quality. This scheme, and supporting recently graduated social workers through the Assessed Year in Practice Scheme, helped to enable Slough to 'grow its own' social work staff.

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It was confirmed that Slough currently had 2 students on the Step up to Social Workers scheme as well as recent social work graduates being supported through their AYSE.

It was hoped that many of these students would choose Slough as a place for permanent employment at the end of their placement

Moving forward, the Step Up scheme would continue throughout 2015, and consideration was being given to increasing the number of students within the programme.

In the following debate Members asked a number of questions. The Officer clarified that Qualified Social workers had to fulfil a year on the job before receiving a job offer and that a market supplement would be paid after one year followed by a bonus at 18 months.

In response to a Member question it was confirmed that high levels of agency staff in a team could increase sickness levels of the remaining permanent staff, though it was hoped that the filling of permanent vacancies would reduce sickness levels. It was highlighted that in the Protection in Care team (high levels of permanent staff and managers) the sickness levels were Nil for the last 2 months.

A Member questioned why the performance target set for a ratio of 80:20 permanent to agency social work staff had not been set at 100 %. He was advised that the target was set by Cabinet and was thought to be a realistic one. The Member also reminded the Officer that the Committee had previously suggested that the availability of Key Worker accommodation be explored. The Officer advised that flats were available through two Housing Associations and new build flats would be reserved for key workers. They would also be able to access part-buy schemes. It was confirmed that the lack of take up could be attributed to the fact that the workers already lived locally and were not in need of accommodation.

The Officer was asked why it had taken so long for the new social worker scheme to be established. The Officer advised that an alternative programme of advertising was not successful and he was confident that this new more creative approach with a reward scheme would be more effective.

A Member questioned whether the newly appointed Commissioner would make any changes to the Social Worker Scheme and was advised that this was unlikely.

Members welcomed the new measures to improve the recruitment and retention of Social Workers.

Resolved - That the report be noted.

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16. Sickness Absence Performance Update

Kevin Gordon, Assistant Director, Professional Services, updated the Committee on the Council's performance in reducing sickness absence, which the Committee had requested should be reported to all future meetings. It was noted that the average full time equivalent of days lost over the year from 1st August 2013 to 31st July 2014 was 8.6 days, a figure above the target of 6.8 days which the Council had hoped could be achieved by September 2014.

The Committee considered a summary of the balanced scorecards by Directorate over the last year, up to July 2014 which indicated that Slough BC was beginning to positively manage sickness absence. Managers would continue to undertake formal meetings with employees when trigger points were hit and Members were advised that 97.9% of managers and supervisors had attended Sickness Absence Training.

The Officer discussed the most common reasons for absence during the period 1st March 2014 to 31st August 2014, with skeletal, breaks/sprains having the highest levels of absence and this was common in the Wellbeing Directorate. Mental health problems such as stress, depression and anxiety contributed to a significant number of days lost and to tackle this further mechanisms for staff to cope with stress and assistance for managers to address mental health problems were being developed as part of the Employee Wellbeing Project.

In the ensuing debate Members asked a number of questions regarding the sickness statistics including how stress and mental illness were assessed in staff. The Officer advised that patterns of sickness would be monitored and staff would be offered confidential advice and assistance through occupational health with GP involvement. A Member highlighted that on page 16 of the agenda papers the table at the foot of the page detailing reasons for sickness absence was incorrect. The % of days lost column added up to approx 50% indicating that a significant number of reasons had been omitted. Kevin Gordon advised that the reasons for sickness column would be updated for next meeting to provide a fuller picture of absences.

Resolved - That the report be noted.

17. Update on the use of Honorarium Payments

Kevin Gordon, Assistant Director, Professional Services, introduced a report detailing how honorarium payments were awarded to staff. This information was requested by Members at a previous Committee meeting.

The Officer advised that the Council had an agreed honorarium scheme which provided managers with a mechanism to reward individual employees for exceptional contributions to the work of the council which were considered to be above the normal remit of their substantive post. These payments were normally of a temporary nature and included undertaking part of the duties of

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a higher graded post over an extended period or undertaking additional project work.

The Officer confirmed that there were other situations which could arise whereby managers may need to exercise their discretion as to whether an employee should be rewarded in recognition of their contributions for specific work. Members were informed that honoraria payments were not paid when an overtime payment would be appropriate. It was also confirmed that the Council employed a strict authorisation process and policy to ensure that payments were consistent and fairly reflected the nature of the additional contribution made. The HR professional team provided guidance on what would be a suitable payment, taking into account the nature of the work undertaken, or the level of the post for which additional duties were being undertaken on a temporary, and sometimes extended basis.

The Committee was referred to data which showed a breakdown of the honorarium payments made for the period 1st March 2014 to 31st August 2014. The Officer confirmed that Finance and HR scrutinised the award of honorariums and Finance ensured that payments were covered within departmental budget allocations.

Members raised a number of questions of detail including what was considered to be 'an exceptional contribution' and the Officer advised that this could be for example where someone covered work which was well beyond their job description. It was confirmed that there was no specific budget set aside for the payment of honorariums.

Resolved - That the report be noted.

18. Member's Attendance Record

Resolved - That the report be noted.

19. Date of Next Meeting - 22nd January 2014

The date of the next meeting was confirmed as 22nd January 2014.

Chair

(Note: The Meeting opened at 6.35 pm and closed at 8.00 pm)