

Employment & Appeals Committee – Meeting held on Wednesday, 6th April, 2016.

Present:- Councillors Brooker (Chair), N Holledge (Vice-Chair), Arvind Dhaliwal, M Holledge, Plenty and Sharif

Apologies for Absence:- Councillor Morris and Zarait

PART 1

32. Declarations of Interest

None.

33. Minutes of the Meeting held on 21st January 2016

Resolved – That the minutes of the last meeting held on 21st January 2016 be approved as a correct record.

34. Matrix Contract Report: Temporary Agency Staff - Progress on Implementation and Baseline Monitoring

Roger Parkin, Director of Customer and Community Services, introduced a report on temporary agency staffing.

Members were informed that as per previous requests, figures relating to Slough Children's Services Trust had been separated from the figures in the report. The total spend on SBC agency staff for the 2015/16 financial year was therefore £5,988,209. However this figure was somewhat lower than the actual spend, due to delayed invoicing for March 2016.

There were 217 agency staff placements across the Council, with the highest number being within the Wellbeing Directorate. Partly, this was due to the difficulty in recruiting the right calibre of staff to certain posts, e.g. social workers. In addition, agency staff within adult social care were often retained for longer than expected due to the importance of providing service continuity to residents.

In addition, agency staff were often required to complete projects on a short-term basis or provide expertise not available within existing staff. An example of this was the recent employment of a Digital Transformation Manager, on a short term basis, who was an external specialist recruited to drive the Digital Transformation project before handing off to regular staff in the longer term. In other cases, agency staff were recruited and retained due to the deliberate choice to keep permanent roles unfilled, in order to provide flexibility for internal redeployments following staff redundancies.

Members were concerned at the number, and length of tenure, of agency workers. It was confirmed that the concerns were shared by senior

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management, and that the Chief Executive had requested a report to the CMT to identify why specific roles had not been filled on a permanent basis. Managers were being asked to justify their agency worker placements, or remove them in favour of permanent staff.

The officer concluded by confirming that the Matrix contract had provided transparency over agency spend, and had made managers more accountable for their spend on recruitment.

Members asked a number of questions, including:

The number of agency staff employed by SBC for 2 years or more had increased. Why was this?

Since the last report, a number of agency staff within adult social care had now been in their positions for over 2 years, therefore skewing the figures. In many cases, highly skilled social care staff were retained to ensure high quality continuity of service and to deal with increasing caseloads.

It was accepted that there was a national shortage of social workers. What was Slough Council doing to incentivise social workers to live and work in Slough?

The OD/HR Business Partner for Wellbeing is working alongside the Adult Services Managers as part of a task group mandated with reviewing the use of agency workers in the service.

Why were temporary agency staff not converted to permanent staff?

Conversion of staff from temporary to permanent often required a 'finder's fee' to be paid to the agency. Through the Matrix contract, this fee was no longer applicable. However, many agency workers choose to remain temporary as they prefer the flexibility that this offers.

Were agency staff workers paid more than permanent staff?

No. Slough retains a pay parity scheme to ensure that agency workers are paid the same as permanent staff, in the same role. However, there were costs particular to agency staff that were not applicable to permanent staff (and vice versa), for example agency fees vs. pension contributions. Because of this, agency staff workers were not necessarily more expensive than permanent staff. A benefit of the Matrix contract was that there was now transparency of agency spend to ensure managers could produce sound business cases to justify the continuing employment of agency staff.

Were many agency workers retained as employees of their own company?

Some agency staff work through their own company in circumstances where specialist skills are required.

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Was Slough working to adopt some of the initiatives employed by the Children's Services Trust to reduce the spend on agency staff?

Yes, SBC and the Trust had forged a strong partnership to share best practice and reduce spend on agency workers.

Resolved - (a) That the report be noted.
(b) That a further report be brought to the next meeting of the Employment & Appeals Committee.

35. Staff Survey - Outcomes and Next Steps

Christina Hefferon, AD Organisational Development and HR, updated Members on the results of the recent Staff Survey.

The Survey was conducted in December 2015, and was available to all staff online and via paper questionnaires. Of the 871 staff employed by Slough as of December 2015, 366 responses had been received (42%). Of the 366 responses, 277 had been fully completed.

Members were informed of the results by level, directorate, location and length of service. Key points from the survey were:

Engagement:

- 88% of respondents said they enjoy their job.
- 59% said they were proud to work for the council.
- 58% rated the council highly as an employer
- 59% would recommend working for SBC.
- 88% felt their work mattered and was worthwhile.
- 90% would go the extra mile to help SBC succeed.
- 73% were inspired to meet their goals

This contrasted positively with the national figures which showed:

- 17% were engaged
- 57% were not engaged
- 26% were actively disengaged

Organisational Integrity

- 94% of respondents said they had a good team relationship
- 48% felt part of the council as a single organisation.
- 72% knew the SBC values
- 61% felt able to challenge inappropriate behaviour and language.
- 27% felt staff were involved in decisions that affect their work
- 32% felt people were recognised and appreciated for their work
- 27% felt the council encouraged open, honest discussion

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Strategic Direction

- 47% knew where their team is headed
- 71% knew about the Five Year Plan outcomes
- 85% understood how their work contributed to the performance of the council
- 37% were familiar with Fit for the Future
- 31% thought staff were provided the right amount of information
- 38% thought staff were told important news quickly
- 30% thought reasons for change were well communicated

Managers

- 71% said their manager was good at communicating the team's priorities
- 67% said their manager gave them the support they needed to be effective
- 75% said their manager listened to them
- 75% said their manager treated them fairly

Feeding views upwards

- 64% of respondents were happy with the opportunities to feed views upwards to managers.
- 50% of respondents were happy with the opportunities to feed views upwards to heads of service.
- 28% of respondents were happy with the opportunities to feed views upwards to SLT.

Outcomes from the survey included:

- Details of the Employee Engagement Forum (EEF) had been added to the corporate induction and the "Lonely planet guide to SBC"
- The EEF had carried out 3 drop-in sessions for staff and managers
- A staff comment box had been provided
- An ongoing programme of SLT visits to teams around the council had been instigated
- Communications had a renewed focus on sharing good news and success stories from around the council, including the SBC heroes awards
- The Staff Conference 2016 was scheduled for April, and would provide staff with the opportunity to ask questions and give input.

In conclusion, Members were informed that both the number of respondees and the majority of results were very positive and compared favourably to similar surveys conducted nationally. However, there remained work to be done, particularly on the visibility of SLT within the Council and the opportunities to feed views upwards to them.

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Members discussed the importance of staff appraisals, both in collecting employee views and measuring performance. It was confirmed that all staff were required to have an annual appraisal. Whilst in previous years, some staff did not have an appraisal, a new mechanism was now in place to ensure that appraisals were completed.

Resolved - That the report be noted.

36. Workforce Savings - Proposed Changes to Mileage Allowance and Pay Protection Arrangements

Christina Hefferon, AD Organisational Development and HR, informed Members of the recently launched consultation on workforce savings.

It was confirmed that, as the council's budget continued to reduce, (while demand for services continued to increase), there was a need to identify cost savings. In an effort to make savings without reducing staffing levels, two areas of potential savings had been identified:

1. Mileage Allowances

Current allowances provided staff a payment of £1,000 for every 1000 miles driven by car. Withdrawal of this allowance could mean a saving equivalent to 4.5 FTE posts (paid at the top of salary level 5). Historically the allowance had been seen as compensation for a car's wear and tear. However, this was already factored into the HMRC recommended mileage rates of 45p per mile for all business mileage undertaken. SBC currently payed this rate and there were no proposals to change this.

It had therefore been proposed to remove the £1,000 mileage allowance with effect from 1st August 2016.

Payment Protection Arrangements

SBC's redeployment policy currently provided 3 years salary protection to staff redeployed into posts one salary level lower than their current post. Benchmarking data indicated this was out of step with other local authorities.

To resolve this, it was proposed to reduce the pay protection period from 3 years to 1 year. Consideration had been given to restructure consultations that may already be underway or scheduled.

Slough was now consulting on the above, with the following objectives:

- to listen to staff comments and suggestions
- to consider alternatives that meet the identified objectives
- to understand where there may be negative impact for staff that has not previously been considered and find ways of reducing that impact to a minimum.

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The consultation began on Monday 21st March and would close on Friday 22nd April.

Members asked a number of questions, including:

Were staff redeployed to a lower grade offered the option of redundancy?

It was a legal requirement to offer redundancy in such an instance, provided that the post into which they are redeployed is considered to be a suitable alternative post, Staff had the right to be offered redeployment, if a suitable role was available, regardless of length of their tenure. However, staff were only eligible for a redundancy payment once they had achieved two years continuous local government service.

Staff morale could be adversely affected by the proposals. How often were staff members redeployed to a lower grade?

Not often. It was expected that the number of staff affected by the proposed changes to payment protection would be small.

Resolved - That the report be noted.

37. Staff Wellbeing Update

Surjit Nagra, HR and OD Business Partner, provided an update on staff wellbeing, the key points of which were:

The overall balanced scorecard showed consistency when compared to the previous report. Overall, the trend was that targets were close to being achieved.

Long term and short term sickness had been separated, as per previous requests. 29.3% of staff had been absent in the short term (0-5 days), vs. 4% absent in the long term (20+ days). Of the 35 long term absentees, 8 remained absent, whilst the others had returned to work. Relevant provision was in place to support an employee's return to work, or to instigate the process leading to dismissal.

The top three reasons for absences remained Not Stated, Infections, and Stress. Previous Member comments relating to the 'not stated' field had been considered, and it was confirmed that there remained a legal obligation to provide this option to employees. By law, employees were not obliged to disclose the reason for their absence.

As part of the wellbeing strategy, the new no smoking policy had come into effect on 1st April 2016. The policy itself had had been drafted into a brief, engaging and easy to understand format.

Members asked a number of questions, including:

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Was sickness absence aligned with performance?

It was recognised that persistent absence would have an effect on performance. Data being collected now meant that issues could be identified and appropriate action taken.

Whilst it was accepted that staff retained a legal right not to disclose the reasons for their absence, 21% of days lost without a reason stated was too high. Was it likely that this was due to staff members simply not being asked?

Managers were required to conduct return to work interviews with all staff members. All managers were being educated in the importance of correctly reporting absence statistics and this included probing for reasons of staff absences.

Was sick pay subject to a qualifying period?

The Council adheres to the National Sick Pay Scheme, which provides sick pay for all staff members from day 1 of their employment. The amount of sick pay would increase the longer an employee was in employment, up to a maximum of 6 months full pay and 6 months half pay.

Resolved - That the report be noted.

38. Member's Attendance Record

The Member's Attendance Record was noted.

39. Date of Next Meeting

The date of the next meeting was confirmed as Tuesday, 21st June 2016, to be held at Chalvey Community Centre.

Chair

(Note: The Meeting opened at 6.33 pm and closed at 8.12 pm)