

Finance Scrutiny Committee - Human Resources Subgroup

Minutes of the meeting held on 7 March 2013

Present:

Councillor Flanagan – In the Chair
Councillors Andrews, Clayton, Gillard, Hitchen, Ollerhead, Siddiqi and Watson

Councillor S Murphy – Deputy Leader of the Council

FS/HS/13/01 Minutes

Decision

To approve the minutes of the meetings held on the 31 July 2012 as the correct record.

FS/HS/13/02 Update on Attendance Monitoring and Developments in Human Resources

Attendance Monitoring

The Subgroup considered a report of the Assistant Chief Executive (People), which provided an update on progress with corporate and directorate absence trends and the actions undertaken to increase attendance. The report also included an assessment of the feasibility of the introduction of a staff flu vaccination programme and details on the work to reduce stress related absence in Children's Services and the Directorate for Adults. The Assistant Chief Executive introduced the report. She told the Subgroup that sickness levels had reduced by 1.6% since May 2012 to an average of 10.07 days per person based on December's figures, a reduction of 0.16 days, with particular reductions in stress and anxiety related absences. She provided an overview of the training being provided regarding the management of attendance and the practical support being provided to managers. The Assistant Chief Executive said the rolling year recording did not always reflect the in year changes and a member asked whether the figures could be presented by rolling year and calendar year. It was confirmed this would be provided in subsequent reports.

A member noted that the average number of sick days taken at the Council had risen from its lowest point in April 2011/12, and asked what the Council was doing to address this. The Assistant Chief Executive provided an overview of the key actions being implemented and confirmed that reducing attendance remained a corporate priority.

The Strategic Business Partner, Children's Services outlined the actions taken to produce the 17% reduction in long term sickness in social work teams. This had involved reviewing work allocation and recording, the implementation of the recruitment and retention strategy and leadership and engagement of management.

She said there had also been a 14% reduction in long term sickness in residential services, which had largely been achieved through a robust focus on managing sickness.

The Strategic Business Partner, Adults explained that there had been a reduction in sickness related to stress, depression and anxiety in the Directorate, although long term sickness had stayed the same. She explained that the approach in Adults was to carry out an in depth analysis of each individual case, in order to provide bespoke support. For example addressing external factors such as bereavement, environmental factors or providing more flexibility through shorter working hours. She added that the HR/OD helpdesk, which provides support, one to ones, and follows up issues had been very useful.

The Subgroup expressed concerns that Council staff were under a lot of pressure, which had built up over the last few years as a result of staff and budget reductions. Members were clear that it was vital to support staff and retain their support through this period of extensive changes, and identifying potential problems early was key to this. The Assistant Chief Executive agreed and provided information on the support to line managers so they could effectively manage and support staff through this period of change.

A member asked whether people who had a high number of instances of short term sick leave were identified and supported in order to prevent them from developing longer term problems. The Strategic Business Partner, Adults, confirmed that when it was possible to identify them, they were supported, but it was not always possible to identify them given the current recording system. She emphasised that line managers were key in addressing this. A member asked if there was evidence that staff who had been turned down for voluntary early retirement or voluntary severance (VER/VS) had subsequent increased levels of sickness. The Assistant Chief Executive said this was not a significant trend and in general sickness dropped in the period after the introduction of VER/VS.

The Subgroup agreed to meet again in six months to revisit the matters raised and monitor the trends in sickness levels, unless any significant trends in sickness levels emerged earlier than that. Members asked that they be notified if any significant trends emerge.

Equalities

The Subgroup received a report which provided an update on the work to embed the Equalities Team within the HROD (Human Resources and Organisational Development) and Transformation Service under the strategic leadership of the Deputy Chief Executive (Performance). A member asked whether the budget of the team would change as part of the transition. The Deputy Leader confirmed that the team's budget would remain the same following the transition.

Decision

1. To request that future reports reflect both rolling year and calendar year attendance to enable in-year trends to be tracked.

2. To hold a meeting of the Subgroup in approximately six months, to monitor trends in sickness levels. To hold the meeting earlier, should any significant trends emerge, and request that the Assistant Chief Executive inform members if this happens.

FS/HS/13/03 Voluntary Early Retirement and Voluntary Severance

The Assistant Chief Executive (People) provided the Subgroup with an oral update on the VER/VS (voluntary early retirement and voluntary severance) scheme. The Assistant Chief Executive told the Subgroup that the VER/VS scheme had now closed and a total of 1076 applications had been received. A third of these were in the final week. The total value of the applications was circa £30m. The HR/OD team was now supporting managers to assess the applications in terms of affordability and business continuity.

Briefings for staff had been carried out throughout the scheme, and the trade unions had been helpful and proactive. So far, applications for the release of 232 full time equivalent posts had been approved. The Assistant Chief Executive stated that the indications were that the achievement of year one savings would be roughly on target based on the current assumptions. She stated that the HR/OD team would need to continue to monitor the progress towards the year two savings.

The Subgroup asked to be provided with the details of the VER/VS releases by grade at its next meeting, in approximately six months. The Subgroup also discussed the potential impact on the composition of the Council's workforce. Members asked whether there was a risk of reducing the diversity through the scheme. The Assistant Chief Executive said that an equality impact assessment (EIA) was carried out following the previous voluntary scheme and there were no statistically significant changes to the diversity of the workforce. A further EIA would be undertaken on this scheme. The Deputy Leader reassured members that if there were any significant trends then appropriate actions would be considered.

A member told the Subgroup that the Personnel Committee had recently taken the decision to establish a number of posts above a grade 12. He expressed concern that this will mean people are being promoted at the same time that others are leaving through VER/VS or restructures. The Assistant Chief Executive explained that the report disestablished more posts above grade 12 than it created and overall the number of posts above grade 12 reduced. As set out in the January report to Personnel Committee, the proposed changes will realise c.£625k of savings.

A member asked whether the Council used ways of reducing pay without cutting wages. The Assistant Chief Executive advised that staff could apply to move into a lower grade, reduce their hours, take a career break or apply for flexible retirement from the age of 55.

The Subgroup thanked officers for their work. Members asked for the follow up report to be written, rather than oral.

Decision

To request that, when the Subgroup next meets, a written report on the VER/VS scheme is provided, which includes:

- a breakdown of the numbers leaving by grade;
- information on the impact the scheme has on the Council's workforce.

FS/HS/13/04 Work Programme

Decision

To note the work programme the Human Resources subgroup.