

Finance Scrutiny Committee – Human Resources Subgroup

Minutes of the meeting held on 26 September 2013

Present:

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

Apologies

Councillor Ollerhead

Councillor S Murphy – Deputy Leader of the Council

FS/HS/13/05 Minutes

Decision

To approve the minutes of the meetings held on the 7 March 2013 as the correct record.

FS/HS/13/06 Attendance Monitoring

The Subgroup considered a report of the Assistant Chief Executive (People) which provided an update on corporate and directorate absence trends and the actions undertaken to increase attendance since the Subgroup last met in March 2013. The Assistant Chief Executive introduced the report. She explained that sickness levels continued in a downward trend, from an average of 10.07 days lost per employee per year in December 2012 to 9.59 in June 2013. She emphasised that it was important to not become complacent and that the aspiration remained to work towards an average of 8 days per employee. Manchester is performing better than other comparable authorities in the North West based on information provided by North West Employers. This information shows a general upward trend in sickness across local authorities in 2012/13. The Assistant Chief Executive summarised a range of activity ongoing to support improved attendance levels across the authority including:

- taking part in a North West Employers led piece of work to share best practice, resources and guidance in this area and explore new thinking on managing absence;
- a new health and wellbeing intranet site for staff has also been launched in support of the Council's Employee Health and Wellbeing Strategy which had, at the time of the meeting, received between 106 and 150 hits a day, more than any other intranet launch;
- a Behavioural Insight Pilot focused on understanding behaviours and attitudes related to absence, aimed at motivating and engaging with staff, to improve attendance;

- ongoing proactive support to managers by both the HROD Service and via the Occupational Health provider.

A member noted that the sickness levels in the Corporate Core had risen as a result of the transfer of Commercial Services from Neighbourhood Services and asked if this was a direct correlation or if there were other underlying issues. The Strategic Business Partner (Corporate Core) confirmed that this was the reason, and noted that sickness levels in Neighbourhood Services had seen a corresponding reduction. She added that targeted work was being carried out across the Corporate Core in those areas of highest absence, and that there remained a particularly high level of absence due to specific problems such as cancer across the Directorate.

The Subgroup discussed the behavioural insight pilot which will test how staff can be engaged to improve attendance. The Assistant Chief Executive explained that national research showed that sickness levels were lower where people were happy and motivated, and the pilot would seek to understand and apply these motivating factors in Manchester. Focus groups would be held in September and October with a range of employees to understand motivations and barriers to attendance. Following this, the intelligence would be used to develop a specific approach which will be piloted. The expectation is that different groups will register different issues, and the pilot would be designed on those findings to take place for approximately 3-6 months. She explained that, performance on attendance in the pilot areas would be assessed against attendance across the authority to see if there was a greater rate of improvement in those areas involved.

A member noted an upward trend for the proportion of days lost attributed to stress and asked if there was a reason for this. The Head of HROD (Human Resources / Organisational Development) Service Delivery noted that as the figures were proportional, the rise in was, in part, due to a greater rate of improvement in other areas such as musculoskeletal issues and anxiety and depression, however he confirmed that tackling stress remained a key priority as this is one of the most significant causes of absence. The Strategic Business Partner (Children and Commissioning) noted that stress was a particular key cause of absence within the directorate. However, steps were being taken to address this. The most critical and prevalent areas of absence in the directorate were social work and residential services. In the Directorate a small number of staff were having a disproportionate impact on sickness levels. Currently 33 members of staff in Children and Commissioning were absent due to stress or anxiety, out of approximately 1500 employed in the Directorate. She explained that within residential services there had been a number of assaults on staff, as a consequence of which specific training on how to de-escalate difficult situations has been delivered. Staff had also been trained as Health Trainer Champions to provide a point of contact for guidance and support for both staff and service users. Sickness in the service had however risen a little in recent weeks with a number of staff due to leave on the VER/VS scheme in the future now not into work due to sickness. HROD are working with managers to support management of these cases. Regarding social workers, the Strategic Business Partner (Children and Commissioning) explained that a key element of reducing absence was ensuring effective support mechanisms were in place for staff and this was recognised as a priority within the Directorate. A survey had recently found that more than half social workers who responded felt they were fully

supported, which was positive. She explained that there had been significant improvements in the last 18 months, particularly in providing effective inductions and support for newly qualified social workers.

A member asked for more detail on how the Council worked with Trade Unions. The Head of HROD Service Delivery explained that a strong and positive working relationship exists around key strategic policy and development issues. The unions are represented within the Management of Attendance Steering Group, which discusses patterns rather than individual cases. The unions also sit on the Health and Wellbeing Steering Group, and have been involved in developing the initial phases of the behavioural insight work. At an individual level the unions have a key role in supporting their members on an individual basis.

The Subgroup then discussed how members of staff who had suffered a bereavement were supported. The Assistant Business Partner (Families, Health and Wellbeing) explained that bereavement was a significant cause of sickness absence within the Directorate. Managers were supported to engage with staff early on and to work with them to support a return to work and make use of both the organisation's flexible working policy and the opportunity for a phased return. The Assistant Chief Executive explained that there were clear policies in place to support staff through the use of, for example, special leave and flexible working to encourage a return to work and not use sickness as a default position. The Subgroup welcomed this approach and recognised the importance of easing people back into work following a bereavement. Some members questioned whether there was any correlation between staff taking special leave and resultant sickness in the remaining workforce. The Assistant Chief Executive explained that there was no evidence of such a trend and that managers had a range of options available and needed to think about both how they support staff who are unwell as well as those who are in work.

A member asked if there was a mechanism to monitor repeated short term absences. The Assistant Chief Executive confirmed it was but new systems being developed would enable the collection and reporting of more up to date results, as currently reported statistics can be up to three months behind. She also explained that the HROD Helpdesk plays a key role in supporting managers and identifying issues early on.

The Subgroup noted that in the revised methodology for reporting month-on-month sickness levels there was a recent increase in Neighbourhood Services. Members asked for more detail on absence within Growth and Neighbourhoods in particular to be provided when the Subgroup next meets. The Subgroup also asked that, in future reports, when separate graphs are being used to make comparisons, the graphs use the same scales so comparisons are easier.

The Subgroup also asked for their next meeting to include a report on the work to support employees' health and wellbeing, with examples of activity underway in Directorates to address issues linked to specific roles.

Decision

1. To hold a meeting in approximately six months time to update on this topic and in particular consider:
 - More detail on the sickness levels in Neighbourhood Services, including reasons for the rise and what work is being done to address this;
 - the work that HROD (Human Resources/Organisational Development) is doing to support employees' health and wellbeing linked to specific roles.
2. To request that in future reports, when separate graphs are being used to make comparisons, the graphs have the same scales, so comparisons are easier.

FS/HS/13/07 Update on the Time Limited Voluntary Early Retirement and Voluntary Severance Scheme

The Subgroup considered a report of the Assistant Chief Executive (People) which provided an update on the time limited voluntary early retirement and voluntary severance (VER/VS) scheme which was open for applications from the Council's employees between 6 December 2012 and 15 February 2013. The Assistant Chief Executive told the Subgroup that there had been 074 full time equivalent applications under the scheme, with 764 decisions having been taken. 675 had been agreed and 88 rejected. There were 237 decisions still to make, with timelines in place connected to ongoing service redesign projects. 577 have so far accepted the offer to leave under the scheme and 61 have rejected the offer. The Assistant Chief Executive said that 423 full time equivalent posts have so far left the authority with an additional 113 set to leave before end of calendar year.

The Subgroup asked to receive a further update on the VER/VS scheme which broke down the information by directorate, and grades within directorates. Members were keen to assess the impact that the VER/VS scheme has on directorates. The Assistant Chief Executive was happy to provide these figures, but reassured members that workforce reductions aligned to the service changes agreed through the budget setting process and succession and skills transfer plans were used to ensure key information was retained and skills passed on. Staff were only released if either their role could be disestablished or effective skills to replace them already exist in the organisation.

A member asked if there was any particular professional staff group for which applications were not being considered. The Assistant Chief Executive said that all applications are considered, but there were some staff groups for which the skills need made accepting applications difficult. For example solicitors, occupational health therapists and social workers.

A member noted that the decision making process seemed to be slower under this scheme than the previous enhanced scheme with fewer staff leaving at once, and asked if this was because the scheme was being better managed or fewer people were leaving. The Assistant Chief Executive said the scheme was being managed differently this time. She clarified that last time, the Council had been required to make significant savings by the end of the financial year, and therefore needed to support a large number of quick releases. The Council awarded a high number of

staff loss of office payments to compensate individuals leaving within their notice period, which was expensive, but necessary to make the savings. This time leaving dates and decisions were being phased more widely, aligned to the implementation of service changes.

A member asked whether there would be a need for another enhanced scheme in two years time. The Assistant Chief Executive said that standard VER and VS schemes were in place and noted there were no plans to offer a future enhanced scheme. However, any future decision would depend on the level of workforce savings required by the organisation as part of a future budget.

The Subgroup asked for a further update on the VER/VS scheme in six months, and for it to include an assessment of the impact of the loss of older staff members and whether the loss of experience was having an impact on services.

Decision

To receive an update on VER/VS in six months. To include:

- Figures on the number of people leaving by directorate with a further breakdown by grade;
- An assessment of the impact of the loss of a significant proportion of staff members and whether the loss of experience is having an impact on services.

FS/HS/13/08 Work Programme

Decision

To note the work programme the Human Resources subgroup.