

Finance Scrutiny Committee – Human Resources Subgroup

Minutes of the meeting held on 3 March 2016

Present:

Councillor Ollerhead – In the Chair
Councillors Collins, Connolly and Siddiqi

Apologies: Councillor Russell and the Executive Member for Finance and Human Resources

Councillor Reid, Chair of Young People and Children Scrutiny Committee

FS/HS/16/05 Minutes

A member requested that the sentence 'A member suggested a checklist of actions and list of useful phone numbers be provided to managers' (minute reference FS/HS/16/02 paragraph 6) be removed as this was already done, to which members agreed.

Decision

To approve the minutes of the meeting held on 4 February 2016 as the correct record subject to the above amendment.

FS/HS/16/06 Attendance Management Update

The Subgroup received a report of the Head of HROD (Human Resources and Organisational Development) Service Delivery which provided an update on sickness absence levels across the Council and ongoing and developing activity to prevent and manage attendance both corporately and within Directorates. Specific information in relation to a number of areas of inquiry identified at the March 2015 meeting where managing attendance was previously considered by the Subgroup were also included. Members were issued with updated copies of 'Appendix B: Return to Works Incomplete by Service in Children's and Families' and 'Appendix C: Special Leave by Service'. The updated Appendices included the addition of Full Time Equivalents (FTE); and reflected further progress in the Children and Families Directorate in carrying out Return to Work (RTW) Interviews.

The Head of HROD Service Delivery introduced the report across its main themes. He advised that whilst absence levels remained high there had been a lot of work, particularly over the past few months to address this. He said that the data within the report reflected this; but added that it should be treated with caution as managers' now logged absence directly onto the mi people ICT system and it was possible that some absences had not yet been recorded. He said that an average of 13 days absence per annum per employee was too high but that a small number of long term absences skewed the figures overall. He explained that within HR work had been undertaken to strengthen the managing attendance framework and improve the absence data and information provided to directorates. He described efforts to

promote the awareness of mental health issues and advised that a revised 'Managing Attendance Policy' had been drafted which was provided to the Group for comment. He added there was a strong emphasis on managers accountability and ownership and stressed the role of HR was to support managers in this.

The Chair of the Young People and Children Scrutiny Committee requested more detail on the reasons for high levels of absence within the Children and Families Directorate. She asked whether stress, mental health and high caseloads were contributory factors. The Programme Lead, Adult Social Care advised that of 21 long term absences within her area of Adult Services (Business Units) only 4 or 5 of the long term absences were stress related. She explained that much of the long term absence in Adult Services was due to musculoskeletal problems which were more common given the age profile of the workforce. Other absence reasons included Cancer, Pneumonia, Psychotic Episodes, Arthritis, Broken Tibias, Pluracy, Knee Injuries, Broken Ankles, Bereavement, and Back Injuries.

Officers agreed that reducing social workers caseloads was key to enabling managers to robustly manage and improve attendance. A member welcomed the principles outlined in the report which underpinned the approach to improving attendance within the Children and Families Directorate.

A member queried whether the Council was addressing the stigma around Mental Health and whether counselling such as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) was offered. The Head of HROD Service Delivery responded that managers could refer employees to counselling including CBT via Occupational Health; and that HR were planning to introduce mental health awareness training. A member proposed a 'buddy system' be adopted and officers advised that they were exploring the use of mental health champions. A member enquired why sickness levels decreased during school holidays. The Strategic Lead for Children and Social Care responded that more employees took planned leave during the school holidays; adding that some services experienced less demand during those periods.

The Chair of Young People and Children Scrutiny Committee expressed concern at the length of time some employees were absent from work; referring to Employee Appeals where in some cases individuals had been absent for several years. She added that this was too long and said other employers, even within the public sector did not tolerate this. The Strategic Lead for Children and Social Care agreed that length of absence needed to be addressed. She responded that employees did not receive any pay after a maximum of twelve months; but confirmed that some posts had been kept vacant for longer. She added that HR was supporting managers in Children's Services to reduce the numbers of long term sick.

The Chair of Young People and Children Scrutiny Committee stressed the role of the Council in supporting employees, particularly in respect of cancer. Officers responded that in such cases managers would work closely with HR to ensure appropriate policies and processes were followed. Members were told of an employee who was supported back into work whilst receiving chemotherapy treatment. The Chair of Young People and Children Scrutiny Committee added that if the Council could not demonstrate the individuals were supported at the outset this would lead to problems when instigating capability proceedings against employees.

The Head of HROD Service Delivery agreed explaining that where procedures had not been followed processes had needed to be repeated in order to ensure they were managed correctly. The Head of HROD Service Delivery referred members to Appendix 1 of the revised Managing Attendance Policy which detailed the process to be followed by managers when managing attendance. He added that with some illnesses such as Cancer interventions could not follow a set timescale as recovery periods varied.

In response to members' queries the HR Directorate Lead for Adults described the ways new measures were having an impact; explaining that each case had an action plan and that since September 2015 absences had reduced and interventions made quicker. The Programme Lead, Adult Social Care added that the Council was holding managers to account and individual action plans were reviewed fortnightly. She said that this included costs and managers were attending regular meetings to discuss the impact. She explained that many employees who were absent long term were placed on restricted duties; and that sometimes it took time to identify alternative roles that they could be placed in. She advised that HR were supporting managers to put development plans together which may include training employees requiring alternative employment on medical grounds in new skills such as ICT. He added that monthly meetings were held between HR Business Partners and Directorate Management Teams to discuss key cases and resolve. The Chair expressed disappointment in the amount of Return to Work interviews still outstanding and requested that a qualitative sample of Return to Work paperwork and associated actions be undertaken by Audit. The Head of HROD Service Delivery undertook to liaise with the Head of Audit and Risk, and added that reports on incomplete Return to Work interviews were provided to managers on a regular basis and where information was missing they were asked to complete it.

Members discussed the Council's mi people ICT system for recording absence. Officers agreed it was difficult to confirm whether absence information was complete since managers were now required to record absence themselves. The Head of HROD Service Delivery explained that the system was based on structures; some of which needed to be updated. He added that the system was not intuitive and HR had planned a workshop for managers around data quality and management information.

Members discussed special leave and noted that some directorates granted more paid special leave than others. The Strategic Business Partner (Corporate Core) explained that the figures for catering may appear disproportionate as employees in this area tended to work fewer hours over more days. The Chair requested that further information, including a breakdown of special leave, unpaid and paid, in Corporate Core Business Units, be provided to the Group prior to the next scheduled meeting. The Strategic Lead for Children and Social Care said that the Children Safeguarding and Locality Teams granted one day paid special leave in exceptional circumstances; but agreed the policy should be applied more consistently Council wide. The Chair said he felt managers should have more flexibility to grant special leave where required. He also said further clarity was needed between unpaid and paid special leave and emergency leave. The Chair of Young People and Children Scrutiny Committee said that the Work and Families Act allowed carers five days unpaid emergency leave and asked whether managers and employees were aware

of this. The Head of HROD Service Delivery confirmed that this information was communicated and he could demonstrate this to members via the Intranet Demonstration that would be held after the meeting.

Members discussed incentives for good attendance. The Chair said that all employees achieving 100% attendance over the year should receive a letter from their Strategic Director, but that this was not always done and should be monitored. An officer added that other incentives such as employees' awards could also be used.

Members discussed the benchmarking within the report and expressed disappointment that Manchester City Council did not rank higher. The Head of HROD Service Delivery responded that the data was not always directly comparable since some local authorities counted long term sickness as leave or unpaid leave instead. An officer confirmed that in her previous employment Time off in Lieu (TOIL) was frequently used instead of sickness absence.

The Chair of Young People and Children Scrutiny Committee asked that her disappointment that no Executive Members were present at the meeting be placed on record.

Decision:

1. To request that a sample audit of Return to Work Interview forms be supplied to the Head of Audit and Risk; and include details of any related actions from start to finish.
2. To request that officers investigate the flexibility of managers to grant paid and unpaid special leave and emergency leave across directorates.
3. To encourage officers to promote the requirements of the Work and Families Act amongst employees.
4. To request that Strategic Directors ensure all employees achieving 100% attendance receive recognition of this.
5. To request a further update on issues with the mi people ICT system.
6. To request that information regarding ethnicity and disability be provided in a future update.

FS/HS/16/07 Managing Attendance Policy

The Subgroup received a report that sought comments from the HR Sub Group on the draft revised Managing Attendance Policy. The policy had been updated to include recent developments in legislation, organisational changes, incorporate recommendations from a recent Audit report and best practice in relation to management of attendance. The Head of HROD Service Delivery introduced the report across its main themes. He explained that since the policy had last been

updated there had been some legislative and terminology changes, benchmarking of practice with other organisations had been carried out, there was increased emphasis on health, wellbeing and prevention, and clearer information regarding timeframes and reasonable adjustments. The Employee Relations Manager added that Equality Impact Assessments had been carried out and the information regarding how disability related sickness should be treated had been improved.

A member noted that the line manager's role in managing attendance was key; and stressed the importance of the first conversation and how quickly the return to work interview was carried out. The Chair asked how the Council could be confident that managers were doing this and asked officers to explore whether this could be monitored through the appraisal process. He also noted that where employees did not have access to the Council's ICT systems the only way of communicating to these employees was via their manager and assurance was required that managers were passing the information on. In response to a query the Employee Relations Manager confirmed that employees were granted facility time to attend health and wellbeing events; but agreed that awareness needed to be promoted amongst all employees. The Head of HROD Service Delivery said that he would raise these issues with managers in Business Units.

The Employee Relations Manager advised that HR were exploring with ICT and Communications, the introduction of good practice videos including how to carry out a return to work interview. A member suggested that this also include how to carry out a good conversation when an employee first reports that they are unwell. The Head of HROD Service Delivery advised they would like to introduce good practice examples for all the key stages. He added that they were also considering the introduction of Mental Health Champions and an Employee Assistance Programme.

The Chair of the Young People and Children Scrutiny Committee said she did not feel that a supportive culture for those employees who were genuinely sick was consistent throughout the Council. She said that some managers needed further training. The Head of HROD Service Delivery described some of the management training on offer currently which included courses delivered by the Institute of Leadership and Management (ILM).

A member asked whether information on ethnicity and disability could be provided in a future update.

The Chair re-iterated that he wanted officers to review the special leave policy. He said that some employees may choose to take sickness rather than apply for special leave as it was unclear whether they would be paid or not. He stressed the importance of employees being aware of what they may be entitled to.

As this would be the last meeting of the municipal year members agreed to delegate to the Chair responsibility for approving the draft terms of reference and work programme for the Subgroup for the municipal year 2016/2017 which would be provided to the Finance Scrutiny Committee at its meeting on Thursday 26 May 2016 for comment and approval.

Decision:

1. To ask officers to explore whether managers ability to manage attendance could be monitored through the appraisal process.
2. To welcome proposals to explore good practice videos for managers for every stage of the managing attendance process including how to carry out a Return to Work Interview.
3. To welcome proposals to introduce Mental Health Champions.
4. To request that officers review the special leave policy and ensure that employees were aware of the process and entitlements for this.
5. To note that a draft terms of reference and work programme for the 2016/2017 municipal year would be provided to the Finance Scrutiny Committee on 26 May 2016 for comment and approval.