

Resources and Governance Scrutiny Committee

Minutes of the meeting held on Tuesday, 1 September 2020

This Scrutiny meeting was conducted via Zoom, in accordance with the provisions of the The Local Authorities and Police and Crime Panels (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority and Police and Crime Panel Meetings) (England and Wales) Regulations 2020.

Present:

Councillor Russell (Chair) – in the Chair

Councillors Ahmed Ali, Andrews, Clay, Davies, Lanchbury, Moore, B Priest, Rowles, A Simcock, Wheeler and Wright

Also present:

Councillor Akbar, Executive Member for Neighbourhoods

Councillor Bridges, Executive Member for Children and Schools

Councillor Leese, Leader

Apologies: Councillor Stanton

RGSC/20/32 Minutes

Decision

To approve the minutes of the meeting held on 21 July 2020 as a correct record.

RGSC/20/33 Independent Race Review update

The Committee considered a report of the Director of HR and OD, which provided an update on the Council's response to issues relating to race equality, and in particular to the review carried out last year of race relations and discrimination within the City Council. The report included an update on the work being carried out by a working group established to progress the recommendations, and of consultation with Trades Unions.

The key point and themes in the report included:-

- The review had found that, there were issues that needed to be addressed by the Council in order to ensure fairness and equity for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic staff in the workforce;
- Whilst wanting to make swift progress on the issues identified, it was also identified that the Council lacked a strategic and coherent approach to workforce equalities generally.
- A commitment had been made to produce a Workforce Equalities Strategy for the Council for consideration at the meeting of the Executive in November 2020;
- An overview of the key drivers in taking the recommendations of the Race Review forward;

- The established working group consisted of over 40 employees from across the organisation who were dedicating 1 day per week over a 12 week period to ensure there was adequate resource to give focus to this work and to ensure real impact could be achieved in this initial 3 month period;
- The working group was balanced in terms of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic staff and those staff who had responsibility for creating the systems, policies and culture which enabled progress to be made.
- The 27 recommendations from the original race review have been grouped into 5 broad themes –
 - Monitoring
 - Developing Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic staff
 - Engagement and communications
 - HR policies
 - Leadership
- The parallel role Trade Unions would play in supporting the work of the Working Group; and.
- An overview of key progress to date

Officers from the working group also attended the meeting to update the Committee on the areas of work which they were leading on.

What followed was a lengthy discussion by the Committee on the content of the report and the updates provided by Officers from the Working Group.

Some of the key points that arose from the Committees discussions were:-

- How had the membership of the working group been determined; was the ethnicity breakdown of the whole group known or being monitored and if not why not; and where Elected Members part of the group and again, if not why not;
- What steps were taken to ensure staff of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds had the opportunities to be part of the working group;
- Disappointment was expressed that Cllr Ahmed Ali had not been invited to meetings of the working group, given he was the lead Member for Race Equality within the Labour Group;
- Questions were asked as to whether any Black councillors had been invited to take part;
- Had Trade Union representatives been invited to take part in the working group;
- It was important that the working group included “critical voices” from all levels of the organisation, not just senior officers;
- It was questioned as to how ‘Agile’ was selected as the methodology to progress the work of the working group;
- Clarity was sought as to what would happen once the working group concluded;
- It was requested that all equality leads were provided with quarterly intelligence in order to make appropriate observations;
- Would race awareness training also be offered to Elected Members as well as Officers;
- It was suggested that intersectionality needed to be embedded in all Council policies and procedures;

- Why had a range of equality groups have been re-established
- Were figures kept on the number of staff referred for compulsory equality training;
- Clarity was sought on the governance arrangements of the working group for delivering in the recommendations of the review
- It was hoped that Officers on the working group felt that Elected Members were taking the issue of tackling race inequalities within the Council seriously;
- It was hoped that staff were not made to feel that they were compelled to tell their manager about any protected characteristic they may align themselves to;
- Elected Members needed to ensure that their contribution to addressing race inequalities resulted in actual actions and material difference; and
- whilst acknowledging that the Race Review focussed on the Council and its staff, it was suggested that the next stage should also include a focus on how the council engaged and listened to Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic residents across the city to address inequalities and put in place non-discriminatory policies;

The Director of HR&OD explained that the makeup of the working group had not been formally monitored but the breakdown of ethnicity was approximately a 50/50 split between white and Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic officers. It was explained that that the membership of the group had come from various sources, including publicising in the staff broadcast, staff putting themselves forward and getting permission from their managers and in some cases people had been identified by SMT. It had been considered not appropriate to ask people to complete a monitoring form if they had been approved by their manager to be part of the working group, with no one being excluded because of their ethnicity.

It was explained that as it was an officer working group, no Elected Members had formally been appointed, however, the Executive Members for Neighbourhoods and Children and Schools had attended meetings of the group. The Executive Member for Neighbourhoods advised that Cllr Ahmed Ali would be invited to future meeting of the working group. He added that whilst the important role Elected Members needed to play in holding officers and Executive Members to account in addressing the issues identified by the review was acknowledged, it was reminded that as the issues were staff issues, it was appropriate that the action plan needed to be dictated and set by staff themselves. The City Solicitor added that as it was a staff working group and due to the intensive frequency of meetings, it was felt that the inclusion of Elected Members in the working group would alter how officers wanted the group to work.

The Director of HR&OD advised there was a standing invitation to Trade Union representative to join the working group, however they felt they wanted a parallel consultation process which had commenced by looking at the over representation of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic staff subject to disciplinary proceedings, which was acknowledged as an issue this Committee had raised concerns about previously. An overview of the work being undertaken by Officers with the Casework team in addressing this issue was also given. In light of this, the Chair suggested that the Committee received a further update on the length of suspensions and misconduct process.

The Director of HR&OD advised that she had chosen the 'Agile' methodology based on previous experience. She commented that this type of methodology was good at producing outcomes and it was also felt that it would be a good developmental exercise for staff in the working group and really allowed the voice of others to come through as part of the work. She supported the point raised around intersectionality and advised that if the Committee felt race awareness training would be beneficial to Elected Members this could be arranged. The Leader commented that the equality groups had previously been disbanded at a time between 2010 and 2015 when the Council was facing unprecedented levels of cuts to its services and staff due to lack of funding from government which had also resulted in a link of these groups to an SMT lead.

The Director of HR&OD confirmed that she was the lead officer for the working group and detailed the reporting arrangements to SMT and the Lead Executive Members. All of the work would be captured in a report to Executive in November forming part of a wider workforce equalities strategy. It was also reported that the senior project manager in HR (Lorna Williams) had been recruited to take forward this work over the next 12 months to ensure it was sustained.

The Director of HR&OD acknowledged the point around how the council engaged and listened to Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic residents across the city but reminded Members that this work was around the equality of the workforce and having a workforce equality strategy and the interaction with residents was probably an area that the Equalities and Communities Scrutiny Committee would pick up.

Decisions

The Committee:-

- (1) Requests that all Elected Members be provided with the opportunity to undertake race equality training
- (2) Notes that the Chair will consult with Officers as to how Scrutiny can most successfully continue to support and scrutinise the work undertaken by the Working Group and progress in this area;
- (3) Requests a further report on the length of staff suspensions and the council's misconduct process is added to the Committee's Work Programme.
- (4) Thanks all the Officers for their contribution to this item.

RGSC/20/34 HROD Update

The Committee considered a report of the Director of HR&OD, which provided an overview of the support to staff during the Council's response to the COVID19 pandemic and an update of the work to develop management standards as part of the Our Ways of Working programme.

The key points and themes in the report included:-

- An update on ICT support to enable staff to work from home;
- Communications and engagement with staff;
- Health and Wellbeing support

- The current position of numbers of staff working on site and the work going into prepare for more staff to return;
- An update on those staff classed as vulnerable or shielding;
- Future ways of working based on a maximum 30% of the workforce in the building at any one time; and
- The steps being taken to strengthen accountability

Some of the key points that arose from the Committee's discussions were:-

- Concern was expressed that the 62 staff who were classed as shielding and unable to work from home were being managed under the Council's management of attendance policy;
- Was the ambition to have all staff returning to work by October too ambitious given that most staff felt comfortable working from home;
- Why were staff who were not comfortable working from home, especially BAME and disabled staff, still awaiting receipt of appropriate equipment to enable them to work from home more comfortably;
- How many Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic staff were in the 373 within the 'vulnerable' or 'living with someone that is shielding' categories; and
- Were there any common/predominant issues being raised through the Employee Assistance Programme.

The Deputy Director of HR&OD advised that the 62 staff referred to in the report were not able to work from home due to the nature of their jobs. It was clarified that at present anyone who had been classed as shielding and unable to work from home were not being managed by attendance and all were going through individual risk assessments to look at their specific circumstances, which would include a referral to Occupational Health. The ambition to return all staff to work would be on a much reduced basis (approx. 30%) and would equate to staff having access to work on site approximately one or two days a week. The Committee was also advised that all staff working from home had been provided with the necessary technology to enable them to work (laptop, mobile phone etc), and the provision of equipment for those who had specific medical, such as chairs, was being facilitated.

The Deputy Director of HR&OD agreed to provide a breakdown of the 373 staff that fell within the 'vulnerable' or 'living with someone that is shielding' categories and advised that the Council was informed of themes by the EAP providers but not specific details. This alongside feedback from managers and support groups helped identify predominant areas of concern felt by staff which HR were then able to look at and put plans in place to address.

Decisions

The Committee:-

- (1) Notes the report.
- (2) Places on record its thanks to all staff within HR during the pandemic.
- (3) Request that the Deputy Director of HR&OD circulates the information on the ethnicity breakdown of the 373 staff that fell within the 'vulnerable' or 'living with someone that is shielding' categories to all Committee Members.

RGSC/20/35 Our Manchester Strategy re-set

Decision

The Committee agrees to defer this item to its next meeting on 6 October 2020

RGSC/20/36 Overview Report

The Committee considered a report of the Governance and Scrutiny Support Unit which contained key decisions within the Committee's remit and responses to previous recommendations was submitted for comment. Members were also invited to agree the Committee's future work programme.

Decisions

The Committee:-

- (1) Notes the report;
- (2) Agrees the Work Programme as submitted