

Employment & Appeals Committee – Meeting held on Wednesday, 3rd April, 2013.

Present:- Councillors Sharif (Chair), Plenty (Vice-Chair), Chaudhry, Chohan, Coad, A S Dhaliwal and S K Dhaliwal

Apologies for Absence:- Councillor Aujla

PART 1

25. Declarations of Interest

Councillor Chaudry declared a personal interest as his son worked for the Council.

26. Minutes of the Meeting held on 24th January 2013

Resolved – That the minutes of the last meeting of the Committee held on 24th January 2013 be approved as a correct record.

27. Temporary Agency Staff progress on implementation and baseline monitoring

The Committee considered a progress report on the new contract with Matrix SCM to supply Temporary Agency staff for the Council, and the monitoring information available so far.

The implementation of the new contract had a savings target of £250,000 for 2013/14. The report indicated that expenditure on agency staff from the commencement of the contract on 7th January until 24th February 2013 was £826,382.93 with anticipated savings of £36,994.31 under the formula agreed with Matrix. The Committee noted that if this rate of savings was sustained over a full year, the savings target would be achieved.

There were now 103 agencies fully enrolled and accredited to supply temporary staff via Matrix with additional agencies in the accreditation stage. It was pleasing to note that 51% of the agencies were within a 10 mile radius of Slough which helped to ensure that local people could take advantage of the temporary employment opportunities at the Council. A spot check of temporary staff on 24th February showed that 82% had travelled less than 10 miles to their SBC work location.

An appendix to the report provided a breakdown of the number of agency staff per Directorate, together with their roles and a commentary as to their usage. It was noted that in some areas such as planning, trading standards and environmental health, qualified professional officers were difficult to recruit even where market supplements had been applied. As a result the Council had to rely on the use of some temporary staff in these technical disciplines. Of particular concern was the high number social workers engaged as

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temporary staff, although it was noted that the position had been exacerbated by holding posts open pending some restructuring. The Committee was pleased to note that as a result of a recent recruitment campaign, 12 permanent social workers had been appointed. With regard to the high number of temporary administrative staff engaged across all Directorates, a suggestion was made about considering the introduction of a 'bank' of employed administrators for deployment as and where needed.

In answer to a question, it was confirmed that the next progress report would contain information about the duration of temporary staff placements together with the results of further work being done with Matrix to obtain data on average costs and the frequency of placement.

Resolved – That the report be noted.

28. Update on Wellbeing Strategy

The Committee considered a report providing an update on progress made on the Wellbeing Strategy since the report to the last meeting in January.

The Wellbeing Project Group was now holding monthly meetings to arrange and co-ordinate activities on behalf of the Council. The following activities and events either held or planned were highlighted:

- A healthy eating staff survey coinciding with some fun display stands in the canteen
- Smoking Support Groups running in SMP, Landmark Place and the Centre
- A competition "Pace along with your Pedometer" was being planned, using pedometers donated by the counselling services team.
- Initiatives to improve morale such as an "It's a knock out" competition (May/June) and a Slough Treasure Hunt (summer) with promotional "Healthy, Happy and Here" t-shirts.

Training on the new absence policy was continuing (due for completion in July 2013) and a new sickness absence balanced scorecard had been designed and introduced. Combined with an absence tracker sheet for recording and a comprehensive scorecard, management was now much better informed about sickness absence. Details were given on how the new policy was communicated to staff. A recent 'mystery shopper' phone survey of staff about the new policy showed good levels of awareness and understanding. The Committee received some tabled statistics showing sickness days lost (per fte) for each of the 6 months to February 2013 (compared with the equivalent month of the previous year). Although it was too early to confirm a sustained trend, there was certainly a noticeable reduction in absences. Members received answers to a number questions about how the new sickness management procedures were working in practice. As regards attendance at an Occupational Health appointment, while the number of appointments overall had reduced, the number of non-attendees had

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increased. A check was being made to ensure the procedure to withhold pay for non-attendees was being implemented satisfactorily.

The Committee was pleased to note the Wellbeing Project Group approach to focus on enjoying being at work and to improve the morale of staff in addition to their general health and wellbeing. A suggestion was made that this could be combined with incentives for staff, to recognise good attendance and outstanding performance and generally help with motivation.

Resolved -That the report be noted.

29. Accommodation and Flexible Working

The Committee considered a report setting out the aims and objectives of the accommodation strategy, including new flexible ways of working, in response to a request made at the last meeting with particular reference to office accommodation at St Martin's Place (SMP).

Implementation of the accommodation strategy had been designated as a Gold Project of the Council and its successful delivery was being progressed through four separate workstreams:

- Document scanning and secure accessible storage
- Developing suitable, flexible accommodation
- Community hubs
- Communications

The Committee was informed that the upgrade required to the air conditioning system at SMP would lead to some teams being temporarily relocated to other sites while the work is carried out to each wing. An opportunity was presented on re-occupation of the building to redesign the layout and usage of space, to create more meeting space and break out areas and provide more user friendly, flexible and functional accommodation. Linked to this was an opening to allow staff who offer community based services to be remotely located at various community hubs and it was proposed to trial this initially at the Chalvey Community Centre. There was potential for accommodating, through the provision of drop-in and log on facilities, Community Wardens and/or staff from the Environmental Health, Social Care or Planning teams.

The Committee considered that it would be helpful and informative if the Director of Customer and Community Services, who was leading the Project Team responsible for the implementation of the Accommodation Strategy, could give further details and provide plans of the proposals for SMP.

Resolved - (a) that the report be noted; and
(b) that the Director of Customer and Community Services be requested to attend the meeting of the Committee in June to explain plans for optimising the use of space at St Martins Place through re-organisation of the accommodation and more flexible working.

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30. Use of Suspensions - Update

The Committee considered a report with the additional information requested on how the suspension process is applied in disciplinary cases.

Statistics were given for the two year period February 2011 to January 2013 showing that 14 employees had been suspended during the period. The shortest period of suspension was 10 weeks and the longest 32.5 weeks, with an average of 23 weeks. The Committee recognised that in cases where the investigation was carried out by an external agency, the suspension period tended to be more protracted. However, there had also been a delay in some cases where it had taken 4 – 5 weeks to convene the Disciplinary Panel after an investigation had been completed and steps were being taken to reduce the time taken to arrange hearings.

With reference to the suspension outcomes, the statistics showed that 5 of the 14 cases had yet to be resolved being still at the investigation stage or awaiting a disciplinary hearing. Of the 9 cases that had been resolved, 3 had resulted in a warning (final or verbal), 3 had found no case proven, 1 had resulted in redeployment of the member of staff to another location, while 2 had resulted in summary dismissal. The Committee considered that just 2 cases of dismissal from the number deemed serious enough to warrant suspension seemed a low proportion.

The Committee was reminded that suspensions were used in cases where allegations had been made which, if proven, would constitute serious misconduct and potentially lead to dismissal. The process followed, which involved consideration of whether it was in the best interests of the investigation, or the employee, that the employee should be away from the workplace while the matter was under investigation, was explained. The Committee noted that where a complaint involved safeguarding issues, it was essential to suspend the member of staff. If a disciplinary hearing resulted in dismissal, then the employee had a right of appeal (to be heard by the Employment Appeals Sub-Committee).

In order to meet the concern of the Committee about suspensions, a suggestion was made that the officers should look at ways of reducing the effect of suspension on the organisation, with particular reference to timescales, and criteria to assist decision-making at the point of suspension.

Resolved – (a) that the report be noted; and
(b) the procedure on decision-making for suspensions be reviewed, to include consideration of requiring the sign off to be made by two Directors.

31. Attendance Record

Resolved – That the Members' attendance record be noted.

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32. Date of Next Meeting

The date of the next meeting was confirmed as 6th June 2013.

The Chairman thanked the Committee for their work over the past year.

Chair

(Note: The Meeting opened at 6.30 pm and closed at 7.55 pm)