

Employment & Appeals Committee – Meeting held on Wednesday, 16th February, 2022.

Present:- Councillors Brooker (Vice-Chair, in the Chair), Basra, Bedi, Carter, Dhaliwal, Gahir (from 6.40pm), Qaseem (from 6.50pm) and Smith

Apologies for Absence:- Councillor Ali

PART 1

15. Declarations of Interest

None were declared.

16. Minutes of the Meeting held on 19th October 2021

Resolved – That the minutes of the meeting held on 19th October 2021 be held as a correct record.

17. Pay Policy Statement Update 2022/2023

The Associate Director, Customer provided the Committee with an overview of the Pay Policy Statement for 2022/23. Local authorities were required under the Localism Act 2011 to publish a statement covering matters such as the pay of the authority's staff and Chief Officers. The salary scales in the document were the current scales set for 2020/21, and did not yet include a pay award for 2021/22 as this had not yet been agreed at national level. The Committee was asked to recommend approval of the Pay Policy Statement to Council.

(Councillor Gahir joined the meeting)

The Associate Director confirmed that the Council was committed to complying with the obligation to pay the National Living Wage. Members raised questions on a number of issues including honoraria payments, market supplements, secondments and travel expenses. It was explained that honoraria payments were made in recognition of outstanding work over and above the normal scope of duties and was subject to approval by the relevant Executive Director, as well as Finance and HR. Market supplements were paid in exceptional circumstances for critical or 'hard to fill' jobs and would each be subject to a benchmarking exercise. Members asked for details of the number of market supplements in the next report. Secondments during Covid times had mainly been in the form of temporary re-deployment of staff according to need and maintaining essential services in response to Covid-19. On travel expenses, a member asked if these were on a par with other Borough Councils and it was confirmed that these followed nationally recognised rates.

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Some Members raised questions and concerns over the structure and salary levels of senior level positions in the Council given the financial and governance issues the authority had identified in the past year. The Committee was informed that the Council was working on a recovery, renewal and improvement plan which would review the future shape of the organisation, including the top tiers of management. It was expected this plan would be in place by the end of May 2022.

(Councillor Qaseem joined the meeting)

A member asked if the Chief Executive was still being paid in full. The Associate Director confirmed that the Chief Executive was currently on sick leave and any payment made would be in accordance with the terms and conditions of the role.

At the conclusion of the discussion, the Committee agreed to recommend approval of the Pay Policy Statement to Council, subject to the incorporation of the final pay award into the pay scales when national agreement was reached.

Resolved – That the Pay Policy Statement 2022/23, as appended to the report, be approved.

18. Temporary Workers

The Employee Relations and Policy Manager outlined the key points of the Temporary Workers report, highlighting that spend in Quarter 3 (October – December 2021) had increased by £232,729 from the previous quarter. This increase had resulted from a higher number of leavers during Q3, which had required engaging more temporary workers. On recruitment, vacancies were usually advertised internally first and then externally if they could not be filled by internal candidates or where there were skills shortages. A number of advertised positions had attracted no applicants, and some roles such as qualified social workers and planners were consistently hard to fill on a permanent basis. The Council's position in this was not unique, as there were widespread difficulties currently with local authorities struggling to recruit into these specialist roles. There were workforce plans in plan in social care in particular to try to address the recruitment and retention issues.

A minor error in Table 3 in the report was noted, where the percentage figure for October 21 should read 16% and not 22% as given.

Members commented on the accuracy of the recorded reasons for staff leaving and raised concern about the impact the financial issues had on staff morale. It was acknowledged that staff leaving numbers had been relatively high in the quarter covered by the report, and statistics on reasons for leaving were taken from feedback from staff and exit interviews. The Employee Relations and Policy Manager confirmed that all staff including temporary workers were included in staff surveys, and that another survey should be due in the near future. The Committee recognised that it was a natural feature of

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the workplace that staff would leave for other positions, but Members highlighted the importance of trying to retain skilled staff wherever possible and ensure recruitment programmes emphasised the many positive aspects about working for the Council, including the benefits of the professional challenge and personal development opportunities employees coming to work in Slough would receive.

Suggestions from Members also included having plans to attract people into Council roles on apprenticeships or similar schemes, and outreach in schools or universities to offer career progression. The Employee Relations and Policy Manager expressed support for these suggestions and reported that there were currently 24 apprenticeships across the Council with hopes to increase this number, and also several networks and partnerships with local educational and other borough partners.

Members requested further statistics or details on the following points:

- The number of current agency-filled posts which were covering long-term sickness absences
- The cost difference of employing an agency staff member in a role as opposed to a permanent staff member
- Further detail and information on how the current ratio of agency staff (at 20% of the total workforce) compared with previous years at Slough Borough Council and with other local Councils
- Further details and statistics on the agency workers employed in specialist roles (which were omitted from Chart 2 of the report)

This information would be collated and provided in future reports to the Committee.

At the conclusion of the discussion, the report was noted.

Resolved – That details of the report be noted.

19. Workforce Profile Report

The Employee Relations and Policy Manager introduced the Workforce Profile report. The purpose of the report was to present the Committee with workforce profile details for the Council, based on data collected in mid-January 2022.

Members' main concern on the report was the relatively low numbers of staff who had disclosed their ethnicity or any disability. 6.3% of the workforce (68 staff members) had a declared disability, but 716 staff members had not disclosed their status, and similarly on ethnicity data 634 staff members had not disclosed their status. It was explained that HR were making efforts to encourage staff members to provide this information, and the improved Agresso system would lead to better reporting on HR issues and statistics, but this was also a sensitive issue for some individuals and ultimately a self-declaration process.

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A question was asked about sickness, as it accounted for 54 of the 71 cases being taken through the Council's HR Policies and Procedures. The Officer highlighted the wider context that SBC had a sickness absence rate of 4.2% against a national average of 5.4% for the same period so the overall sickness absence rate compared with the other authorities. Nevertheless, addresses the HR issues for the relatively small number of staff with sickness absence issues was a key area of policy and focus for the Council, and a new 'stress and wellbeing' programme was being rolled out. In answer to a question on sick leave related to disciplinary proceedings, it was explained that an occupational health assessment was arranged where appropriate, and based on the results of this assessment virtual or in-person meetings could be arranged to enable the disciplinary process to continue.

In answer to a question on employment tribunals, it was explained that out of 13 cases cited, 7 had been responded to. Figures were not available for how many cases had been settled by an employment tribunal and this information would be provided at the next Committee. It was confirmed that unions were always involved in tribunal cases, as HR needed to work in partnership with the unions to reach a solution.

In answer to questions on how many staff were currently working from home, it was explained that the Council had a home working policy, in line with national guidelines, during Covid lockdown. In terms of staff returning to the office the Council were working on a phased approach, with emphasis on how teams could best operate effectively, rather than setting a number of days per week to be worked. The situation would be reviewed again in approximately 6 weeks time, and an update on this would be provided at a future Committee.

In future, the workforce profile would be updated annually and reported to the Employment and Appeals Committee in April each year.

The report was noted.

Resolved – that details of the report be noted.

20. Members Attendance Record 2021/22

Resolved – That details of the Members Attendance Record 2021/22 be noted.

21. Date of Next Meeting - 12th April 2022

The date of the next meeting was confirmed as 12th April 2022.

Chair

(Note: The Meeting opened at 6.30 pm and closed at 8.40 pm)