

MINUTE EXTRACT AUDIT AND RISK MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE 21 NOVEMBER 2017

41 HR ATTENDANCE UPDATE

The Assistant Director: Human Resources and Organisational Development introduced her report that updated Members on the work undertaken in response to the audit review of Attendance Management (Sickness Absence). The report informed of key items to note concerning the development of Council Attendance Management action plan, activity to date and planned approach, namely:

- Attendance Management action plan – to develop a culture where wellbeing was valued and supported, improve the management of attendance in line with the policy, to target and respond to key issues in order to improve wellbeing and attendance;
- Approach so far – identification of target areas for action and performance management; and
- Future activity – 2017-18 (Quarter 3 & 4) - leadership and communication, further training and support.

The Assistant Director: Human Resources and Organisational Development updated the Audit and Risk Management Committee on the current position reiterating responses to key issues and actions to target the improvement of staff wellbeing and attendance. Members were further apprised on information being provided to managers via desktop and skills based training, to help understand the tools available, and to provide the requisite skills and confidence to deal with matters of attendance giving cause for concern.

Members questioned the Assistant Director: Human Resources and Organisational Development on key points in her verbal and written reports that included not only the cost to the council in financial terms, but as a direct impact on the quality and timeliness of services, already stretched following reductions in budget.

A Member highlighted that disturbingly the most common reason for absence was mental health related illness. He questioned the Assistant Director on what was being done to address this. The Assistant Director responded stating that this term covered absence as a result of stress, anxiety and/or depression. She informed that absences under this category tended to be the result of a specific trigger or response to pressure and management training aimed to help managers identify such issues at an early stage. She further informed that such reasons for absence would automatically generate a referral to occupational health for immediate assessment. The Assistant Director stated that demands placed upon staff within the workplace were changing and that uncertainty for the future both contributed to increased pressures that impacted on wellbeing and attendance.

A Member questioned the Assistant Director on performance management and why the targeted level of 100% completed staff appraisals had not been achieved. He also questioned whether the stress recognition training provided to managers was also provided to those officers 'acting up' into managerial posts, and how many such 'acting up' posts were currently recorded in the staffing structure. The Assistant Director responded, informing that the levels of completed appraisals had now exceeded 90% and training had been targeted at managers in services where the highest levels of stress were being reported.

A Member questioned the Assistant Director further on the subject of attendance management, and points raised in the report about how relatively little formal action was taking place by line managers to address unacceptable levels of attendance in line with the policy. The Assistant Director responded stating that there had been feedback from managers about the problems faced when dealing with 'difficult conversations' about absence i.e. 'feeling intrusive'. She added that manager training had helped in this respect, and figures were reducing slowly, with performance levels improving.

The Assistant Director: Human Resources and Organisational Development went on to inform that the absence targets were also improving, but the cost of absence to the council (£4.4 million) was a serious issue and accountability statements existed for Senior Directors, who in turn would ensure that the objectives of the Attendance Management Action Plan would be cascaded to staff.

Following further questioning from Members the Assistant Director informed that the raising of awareness via the report, combined with better levels of detail regarding sickness reporting would help address issues of culture and leadership that had in the past contributed to the problem faced.

At the Chair's suggestion, consideration was given to a supplementary report on matters arising from the issues raised, to be presented to the Employment and Appointments Committee for review. The Vice-Chair added that he felt the issues raised within the report were particularly alarming, and further suggested that a Task and Finish Workshop might also be appropriate.

Mr Robin Baker, Grant Thornton highlighted that the report had been requested based upon the concerns of Internal Audit and Members of the Audit and Risk Management Committee. He pointed out that the response to the request had informed of the cost and impact to the Council, and that the matter was still 'work in progress' with more to do.

A Member informed that it was important to maintain focus and that the matter be referred to the Employment and Appointments Committee, and that the need for strong support from senior management would suggest that there be merit in asking the Chief Executive (Head of Paid Service) to attend the Employment and Appointments Committee to provide further information on the subject of leadership culture and approach to stress and absence management.

It was:

Moved by Councillor Jeff Green
Seconded by Councillor Christina Muspratt

“That the matter of Attendance Management be referred to the Employment and Appointments Committee for consideration; and that the Chief Executive be requested to provide an update on progress in respect of the Leadership approach to stress and absence management for staff.”

A vote was put and carried (5:2) One abstention.

Resolved - That

- (1) the report be noted;**
- (2) the Attendance Management Action Plan be noted and referred to the Employment and Appointments Committee for further consideration; and**
- (3) the Head of Paid Service be requested to attend the next meeting of the Employment and Appointments Committee to provide a further update on matters regarding council's approach to stress and absence management for its staff.**