

**THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING**  
**OF THE RESOURCES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**  
**HELD ON TUESDAY 15 NOVEMBER 2005**

Present: Councillor A Burnip (Chair)  
Councillors D Armstrong, A Collinson,  
Mrs E M Connor, C Patching and R Taylor

Also Present: Councillor D Myers – Executive Member for  
e-Government and Scrutiny Liaison

Apologies: Councillors B Burn, Mrs S Mason and P G Ward

- 1 **THE MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING** held on 25 October 2005, a copy of which had been circulated to each Member, were confirmed.

2 **MATTERS ARISING**

**VOID PROPERTIES (Minute No 7 refers)**

The Chair advised that following the last meeting a briefing paper, related to void properties, was circulated to all Members of the Resources Scrutiny Committee for information.

Councillor D Armstrong advised that he had received a response from East Durham Homes which outlined the position in relation to void properties and gave an assurance that the situation in relation to voids would improve.

**RESOLVED** that the information given, be noted.

- 3 **THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE EXECUTIVE** held on 1 November 2005, a copy of which had been circulated to each Member, were submitted.

**RESOLVED** that the information contained within the Minutes, be noted.

4 **PUBLIC QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSION**

There were no members of the public present.

5 **COMMUNICATION AND PUBLICITY**

The Scrutiny Support Manager advised that an article would be submitted for inclusion in the next issue of Infopoint advising of the dates of future meetings and the public question and answer session. Councillor D Myers queried if this information could be included on the Council's web site. The Scrutiny Support Manager confirmed that the information would be included on the web site.

**RESOLVED** that the information given, be noted.

6 **SICKNESS MONITORING**

The Chair welcomed R Gott, Head of Personnel and Payroll who was in attendance at the meeting to provide and update on sickness monitoring.

## **Resources Scrutiny Committee – 15 November 2005**

R Gott reported that regular reports were submitted to the Service Delivery Scrutiny Committee advising of sickness across the authority. A league table of results was produced which identified trends of sickness in each service area to enable managers to monitor and manage sickness.

Members were advised that in 2003/2004 the corporate rate of sickness absence was 14.5 days per employee. In July 2004 the Authority launched a sickness improvement campaign to address the worsening trend in sickness absence and drive sickness levels down. By 2004/2005 this figure had improved to 11.3 days per employee which was the best annual figure the Council had achieved. By the end of September 2005 this figure had further improved to 9.7 days per employee.

It was explained that one of the main contributing factors to this improvement was the introduction of “return to work” interviews and more stringent reporting procedures. In addition the transfer of craft workers to EDH’s Ltd had reduced the figures.

In order to compare the Council’s performance against the Durham and Northumberland Districts details of the Audit Commissions BVPI 12 for 2003/2004 was circulated which listed authorities in the order from “best to worst” and showed that Easington was second worst. By 2004/2005 the authority had improved and was now in the middle of the table.

Nationally the authority was in the medium quartile for sickness and it was the aim to get into the top quartile.

R Gott provided details of courses which had been introduced to help employees deal with stress. To date 57 people had attended the courses and there was currently a waiting list for the next course. All respondents thought the course met their requirements and had rated them overall as beneficial. The authority also offered a professional counselling service by an independent Counsellor through the PCT. The service provided was confidential and the Personnel Unit were not advised of the particulars of any case. They were, however, provided with statistics, which identified the nature of problems being experienced ie if they were work related or personal.

Councillor Mrs E M Connor asked if employees attended the stress courses in their own or work time. R Gott advised that all courses were held during work time.

Members were advised that the Government had introduced a strategy for revitalising health and safety in the workplace and the authority were required to reduce the number of reportable accidents by 30% between 2001 and 2010. The council had taken up this challenge and monitored accidents, targeting particular “hotspots”. The statistics were shown as the number of reportable accidents per 1000 employees. Details of the figures from 2000/2001 to date were outlined in the report. The Council had also introduced a Local Performance Indicator for accidents.

Councillor D Armstrong queried the type of accidents being reported and if there was a distinction between white and blue-collar accidents. R Gott advised that there was no distinction, both white and blue collar accidents were included. However, the figures given did not include EDH’s accidents. Members noted that the Council’s blue collar operations were street cleansing, refuse collection, highways maintenance and horticulture.

Councillor A Collinson queried what percentage of reportable accidents accounted for days lost to sickness absence. R Gott advised that he did not have this figure but it could be provided in future reports.

R Gott advised of new initiatives that had been introduced to drive sickness down even further which included Diagnostic Health Solutions. An example of this was First Response a company with a bank of medically qualified staff who were available 24 hours to provide advice and support to staff. The cost of this service was in the region of £60,000 per year however discussions had been held with Durham City Council and there may be the opportunity to work in partnership.

Councillor Mrs E M Connor queried if the authority rewarded employees with good sickness records. R Gott advised that a letter had been sent to all staff acknowledging their part in the reduction of sickness levels, in addition those with a 100% sickness record had received an additional letter of thanks. It had previously been suggested that the authority do more to reward employees with good sickness records. However, R Gott was not convinced that this kind of incentive helped the situation as it only rewarded those with good sickness records and did not address the problems associated with those with bad records.

The authority had an established employee suggestion scheme which in the past had suggested that the authority offer more incentives. The authority did however have to be careful not to discriminate against employees with disabilities or genuine sickness. Those with long-term health problems could never hope to be rewarded for achieving a good sickness record.

R Gott advised that the authority were introducing a Home Working Policy, which would allow staff to work from home on a temporary basis if they were physically unable to get to their place of work.

**RESOLVED** that the information given, be noted.

7

#### **IDeA MEMBER DEVELOPMENT PROJECT – FEEDBACK REPORT**

Consideration was given to the report of the Head of Democratic Services and Administration which advised of feedback received in respect of the Member Development Project undertaken by IDeA, a copy of which had been circulated to each Member.

Members were advised that the aim of the project was to adopt a sustainable strategic approach to Member development identifying needs linked to the Council's Corporate Objectives and Priorities, Members' community and leadership roles as well as their individual roles within the Council. It also aimed to produce Personal Development Plans for elected Members and a training strategy linked to the Council's Corporate Priorities, Improvement Agenda and Members' own needs.

The Scrutiny Support Manager outlined the findings of the IDeA which were attached as Appendix C to the report. Overall it showed that Scrutiny at Easington was progressing well and it identified general areas of future action for improvement in terms of supporting the take up of Member training and development. Specific areas of follow up work in respect of the development of scrutiny were also highlighted. The Member Development Steering Group would be co-ordinating the production of a detailed Member Development Programme.

Councillor C Patching stressed the importance of access and timeliness of training and the need to look at alternative ways in which training could be provided to

## **Resources Scrutiny Committee – 15 November 2005**

accommodate Members who were in full time employment. The Scrutiny Support Manager advised that this would be considered together with suggestions that could be brought forward for implementation immediately.

**RESOLVED** that the information given, be noted.

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