

POLICY SCRUTINY PANEL

31st October, 2006

Present: Cllr. Simmons (in the Chair) and Councillors Freeman, Gibbon, Norman, Pitts, Syer, Walker and Wynn.

Also Present: Councillors Howarth, Kellett, Lodge, Marsden, Robinson, Stoddart, Turnbull, Van Zwanenberg and Young.

Apologies for Absence: Apologies for Absence were received from Councillors Cowper and Gill.

Bullet Points from the Meeting held on 3rd October, 2006

The Bullet Points from the Meeting held on 3rd October, 2006, were approved as a correct record.

BULLET POINTS

Review of Sickness Absence

- The Head of HR was in attendance to give Members an update on progress with regard to the implementation of Recommendations made by the Panel in relation to their Scrutiny of Sickness Absence.
- The Recommendations had been agreed by Cabinet in October, 2005.
- The availability of the Independent Counselling Service and the Internal Welfare Network had been brought to the attention of staff through the production of "Communication Matters". Options were also highlighted by Diagnostic Health Solutions, whose medically trained staff now act as the first point of contact for employee sickness absence.
- The Internal Network had been more problematic, due to Officers acting as Welfare Counsellors moving on and a tendency for individuals to opt out of the Internal Network.
- Contact details for the Counselling Service were now available independent of management. Again, Diagnostic Health Solutions would assist.
- The Council's Sickness Absence procedures had been re-launched with the employment of Diagnostic Health Solutions and the options for Return to Work had again been highlighted. A medically trained person would advise and discussions would take place with Line Managers. The Head of HR indicated that the new system was now more comprehensive.
- Training of Managers continued, and Sickness Absence Procedures were now included in, Induction, Manager's Refresher Training, ongoing interaction with Diagnostic Health Solutions and the PDR Process.
- Re-categorising of specific cases of long term sickness had proved more difficult, as most of the categories were nationally set, however further work was being done on Benchmarking with other Authorities.
- Sickness Absence figures were now reported on a monthly basis to Middle Managers, automatically, via Diagnostic Health Solutions. This enabled Managers to be given details of individual instances of sickness, of trigger points reached by individuals which may require action, and of any pattern of Employee Sickness. Sickness Absence Figures were reported to OMT on a quarterly basis.

- Due to the implementation of the new Sickness Absence Procedures with Diagnostic Health Services, the further Employee Attitude Survey, requested by the Policy Scrutiny Panel had not been carried out. The Head of HR indicated that it was hoped that the Survey would be carried out, either late this year or early next.
- The Head of HR further indicated that the implementation of the new Sickness Absence Procedures, utilising the services of Diagnostic Health Solutions, was expected to show substantial savings for the Authority. It would be reconsidered after a year.

Telephone Communications System – Progress Report

- The Head of Community Services and the Deputy Customer Services Manager were in attendance to give Members an update on progress in relation to the Telephone Communication System.
- The Progress Report had been requested by Members at the Panel Meeting in July, 2006.
- Handouts showing Monthly Call Handling Statistics were circulated, for the benefit of Members.
- Members were informed that 106,000 calls had been dealt with over a six month period with the average wait time being 1minute 36 seconds. Current figures showed that 70% of calls had been responded to at first point of contact.
- The Head of Community Services indicated that although the system was normally reliable, a number of technical problems had been experienced which the supplier had been requested to investigate.
- Members were informed that staffing arrangements continued to be looked at in relation to cover for the “peaks and troughs” of calls, normally following mass mailings, although new administrative arrangements recently introduced to pre-empt such problems, had also proved useful.
- It was likely that consideration of staffing would be ongoing.
- New developments were also being considered, including the utilisation of a Consultant to look at current traffic handling procedures and the future possibilities developing through the Durham E Government Partnership.
- The Head of Community Services indicated that Customer Services had now developed from the initial level and more sophisticated Call Handling software may be required.
- There were also concerns over the technical problems which had been experienced and it was possible that alternative providers would be looked at in the future.
- Members were informed that only a handful of formal complaints had been received regarding Telephone Communications.
- The Panel requested that Performance Indicators, in the form of target figures for responses to calls be developed, to allow for future comparison with actual figures.

The Meeting Terminated at 6.17pm