

POLICY SCRUTINY PANEL

19th June, 2007

Present: Cllr. Wilkes (in the Chair) and Councillors Cowper, Freeman, Lodge, Martin and Thompson.

Also Present: Councillors: Howarth and Moderate.

Apologies for Absence: Apologies for Absence were received from Councillors Kellett, Lightley, McDonnell, Walker and Wolstenholme.

Member of the Public Present: Mr. Albert Toal, 82 Raby Road, Newton Hall.

Bullet Points from the Meeting held on 6th March, 2007.

The Bullet Points from the Meeting held on 6th March, 2007, were approved as a correct record.

BULLET POINTS

SICKNESS ABSENCE

- The Head of HR was in attendance to give Members an update on the Council's current level of Sickness Absence.
- He reported that figures for the first two months of the financial year had been encouraging but it was noted that full comparison needed to be made on the annual trend.
- The Council's current figure was 12.3 days per employee. This showed an improvement from the figure two years ago of 13.9 days. The current national lower quartile figure was 10.9 days with the upper quartile at 8.2 days. The Council's target for this year was 10 days.
- The Head of HR then gave Members a full background to the Sickness Reporting Procedure, incorporating the services of Diagnostic Health Solutions and the internal reporting procedures that were in place across the Authority, including Return to Work and Sickness Counselling Interviews, carried out by Line Managers.
- It was estimated that since the introduction of the services of Diagnostic Health Solutions on an annual contract of £32,000, savings of between £80,000 and £100,000 had been made by the Authority.
- The Council was also currently in partnership with City of Sunderland for the provision of an employee counselling service and physiotherapy service.
- It was acknowledged that within the organisation there were certain "hot-spots" of sickness absence that were a cause for concern.
- Members acknowledged that detailed figures had been provided by HR for the original Scrutiny of Sickness Absence in 2005 but requested that up to date figures be supplied for the Panel in relation to current Sickness Absence.
- The Panel requested a breakdown of current Sickness Absence Levels by Department/Section, Long/Short Term and cause of sickness.

EMPLOYEE ATTITUDE SURVEY

- The Head of HR gave Members an overview of the results of the Staff Attitude Survey recently carried out in response to a previous request by the Policy Scrutiny Panel.
- The results were presented in relation to the individual questions asked in the survey.
- The Panel considered the individual results and made a number of observations.
- Members felt that the wording or phrasing of certain questions was unclear or ambiguous and that before the next survey was carried out a review should be undertaken of the exact wording of questions asked of Employees.
- It was acknowledged that continuity of questioning was necessary to allow comparison of responses and identification of trends, but Members felt that clarity of the questions asked was critical.
- Members also expressed some concern over the responses to certain questions and requested the Head of HR to provide further breakdowns of those particular responses by Department/Section and Grade.
- Members were of the opinion that in order to better monitor trends and identify possible problem areas, the Employee Attitude Survey should now be carried out on an annual basis.
- The Head of HR informed Members that he had, as part of the Employee Consultation, invited employees to form a focus group, a Viewpoint Panel, in order to engage employees in the discussion of relevant issues. It was suggested that this focus group could be involved in the drafting of revised questions for the next Survey.
- Members of the Panel expressed a wish also to be consulted with regard to the revision in order to assist in producing an Annual Survey with more focussed questions.

MEMBERS ON LINE

- The Panel had been requested to review the Members on Line System and a Scoping Sheet, containing suggested Terms of Reference had been circulated.
- The Panel was given a general background to some of the concerns previously raised by Members.
- It was agreed that initially, as there was a significant number of new Councillors following the election, a survey be done of all Council Members to identify possible individual problem areas and assess any Training/Instruction requirements for Members in relation to the Members Online system. The survey may also identify any further general computer training requirements.

The Meeting terminated at 7.05pm