

POLICY SCRUTINY PANEL

11th September, 2007

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

Also Present: Councillors Turnbull and Stoddart.

Apologies for Absence: Apologies for Absence were received from Councillors Kellett, Simmons, Thompson and Wolstenholme.

Bullet Points from the Meeting held on 17th July, 2007.

The Bullet Points from the Meeting held on 17th July, 2007, were approved as a correct record.

BULLET POINTS

SICKNESS ABSENCE

- Following a request to the Head of HR at the Panel Meeting held on the 19th June, 2007, Members had been provided with the following Sickness Absence Figures:-
 - Figures by Department/Section
 - Breakdown of reasons for Sickness Absence
 - Percentage of Long/Short term Sickness Absence
- The Head of HR was in attendance at the Meeting to discuss the figures with the Panel.
- Detailed explanations were given to Members in relation to the Sickness Absence Figures for individual Departments/Sections.
- It was noted that the Figures referred to the year 2006/2007.
- The Head of HR informed Members that the current years figures to date showed a marked improvement in that the Council's overall Sickness Absence figure had reduced from 12.3 days per employee last year to 10.3 days this year.
- Members also queried issues apparent from individual responses to questions on the Staff Attitude Survey.
- The Head of HR gave detailed explanations in relation to those responses.
- Members were also informed that development work on the Employee Viewpoint Panel was progressing, with the involvement of Northumbria University.
- It was expected that the Policy Scrutiny Panel would be further consulted, after the review by the Employee Viewpoint Panel of the questions contained in the Staff Attitude Survey questionnaire, and before the next Survey was undertaken.
- Members welcomed the improvement in the Council's Sickness Absence Figures and wished to acknowledge the efforts of Employees and Managers in bringing about the improvement.

- In view of the importance of the issue it was agreed that the monitoring of Sickness Absence be continued.
- It was further agreed that a Draft Report be prepared for submission to the Scrutiny Committee.

The Meeting terminated at 6.10pm

POLICY SCRUTINY PANEL

DRAFT REPORT

REVIEW OF SICKNESS ABSENCE '07

BACKGROUND

1. The Policy Scrutiny Panel reviewed the Council's current Sickness Absence Figures in June, 2007. Members also considered responses to the Employee Attitude Survey which had been carried out at the previous request of the Policy Scrutiny Panel.

AIMS

2. To consider what progress had been made in reducing the Council's Sickness Absence levels and to examine the reasons for highlighted responses to individual questions in the Employee Attitude Survey.

ACTIONS

3. The Head of HR attended the Panel Meetings held on the 19th June and the 11th September, 2007, to discuss Sickness Absence Figures and responses to individual questions on the Attitude Survey.

3.1 Members were initially circulated with a detailed breakdown of responses to questions in the Employee Attitude Survey. The breakdown also gave comparisons with previous Employee Attitude Surveys, carried out in 2001 and 2004. Due to some concern over certain responses, a further, more detailed breakdown by Department/Section was circulated at the September Panel Meeting.

3.2 At the June Panel Meeting, Members were informed of the Council's current overall Sickness Absence level. A further breakdown of Sickness Absence figures by Department/Section was requested by Members and these were circulated at the September meeting.

OUTCOMES

4. Sickness Absence

4.1 At the June Panel Meeting, Members were informed that the national lower quartile figure for Sickness Absence was 10.9 days per employee; the upper quartile figure was 8.2 days. The Council's current figure was 12.3 days per employee which showed an improvement on the figure of two years ago, of 13.9 days per employee, though the Council's target remained at 10 days.

4.2 Figures for the first two months of this financial year were encouraging but it was noted that a full comparison needed to be made on the annual trend.

4.3 At the September meeting the Panel was informed that a subsequent comparison, taken over the last 12 months, shows a significant, 2 days per employee decrease in the overall figure, to 10.3 days per employee, slightly above the Council's target. Members wished to acknowledge the improvement.

4.3 The breakdown of Sickness Absence figures in relation to individual Departments/Sections shows "Hot-Spots" throughout the Authority. Some are in relation to areas of work which by their nature are particularly stressful or involve physical work, or both. Some reflect instances of a small number of Employees absent on long term sickness, disproportionately affecting the overall figure.

4.4 The Head of HR discussed in detail with Members the figures for individual Departments/Sections and confirmed that in some instances of persistent sickness absence, disciplinary action has been pursued and in others the situation is being monitored and managed. Problem areas are highlighted with Heads of Service but in other instances employees formerly recorded as being on sickness absence have since left the Council's employment under the ER/VR scheme or have returned to work.

4.5 The Sickness Absence reporting system, through Diagnostic Health Solutions is now fully functioning and a tightly structured raft of internal reporting procedures is in place across the Authority. It is considered that the key to controlling and improving the level of Sickness Absence is the consistent application of these procedures across all Services.

4.6 Members were informed that it is 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 have been made by the Authority.

4.7 An established counselling/physiotherapy service, in conjunction with the City of Sunderland is in place. This service is available to all employees and is independent of the employee's management structure. As a significant proportion of the Council's Sickness Absence is stress related, Members welcomed the availability of this service.

4.8 Members acknowledged the progress being made in reducing the Council's Sickness Absence figures and wished to express their appreciation to employees and managers for their efforts.

5. Employee Attitude Survey

5.1 Members received an overview of the results of the Employee Attitude Survey carried out in response to a previous request by the Policy Scrutiny Panel and considered in detail the responses to individual questions.

5.2 Approximately 200 responses to 700 Survey questionnaires were received, in comparison with approximately 350 responses to the previous Survey.

5.3 Members had previously expressed some concern over a number of responses to certain questions in the Employee Attitude Survey. A breakdown of those responses was circulated and the Head of HR discussed them in detail with Members in relation to individual Departments/Sections.

5.4 Members felt that the wording and phrasing of certain questions was unclear or ambiguous and suggested that a review of the wording be carried out before the next survey was undertaken.

5.5 The Panel considers that because it is important to monitor trends and quickly identify possible problem areas the Survey should be carried out on an annual basis.

5.6 An employee Viewpoint Panel is being developed to act as a focus group to engage employees in discussions of relevant issues. It was suggested that this Panel be tasked with reviewing the wording of the Employee Attitude Survey questionnaire and the Policy Scrutiny Panel has requested to be involved with them in discussions about the re-drafted questionnaire.

Recommendations

- 1) That the Head of HR update the Policy Scrutiny Panel on the progress of development of the Employee Viewpoint Panel.
- 2) That following the revision by the Employee Viewpoint Panel of the Staff Attitude Survey questionnaire, the questionnaire be submitted to the Policy Scrutiny Panel for consideration before the 2008 Survey is undertaken.
- 3) That from 2008, the Employee Attitude Survey be undertaken on an annual basis.
- 4) That the Policy Scrutiny Panel review the Council's Sickness Absence levels at its meeting in April, 2008.

POLICY SCRUTINY PANEL

DRAFT UPDATE REPORT

TELEPHONE COMMUNICATIONS SYSTEM

BACKGROUND

1. The Policy Scrutiny Panel carried out an initial Scrutiny of the Telephone Communications System during 2006. In October, 2006, the Head of Community Services attended the Panel meeting to brief Members on progress and further address Member's concerns.

1.2 The Panel requested the Head of Community Services to develop Performance Indicators, in the form of target times for responses to calls, to allow comparison to actual response time figures.

1.3 The Head of Community Services was also requested to attend a future Policy Scrutiny Panel meeting, to update Members on progress.

AIMS

2. To review progress of the development the Telephone Communications System and address any further problems identified by Council Members and Members of the Public.

ACTIONS

3. The Head of Community Services and the Customer Services Manager attended the Policy Scrutiny Panel Meeting on the 17th July, 2007.

3.1 Members were presented with performance indicator information in relation to response times for calls. The information related specifically to calls through Cityinfo.

3.2 The Head of Community Services and the Customer Services Manager responded to concerns highlighted and questions asked by Panel Members.

OUTCOMES

4. The Performance Information circulated to Panel Members showed that over 300,000 calls a year are currently being handled. The Head of Community Services indicated that there had been a general improvement in call handling with over 70% of calls answered at first point of contact in 2006/2007. The target for 2007/2008 has been set for 75%. A revised target of 50% of calls to be answered within 1 minute has also been set for 2007/2008.

4.1 It was apparent that the current telephony software which was introduced some time ago to support the initial Cityinfo centres could not now support the expanded system. It is likely that the call demand placed on Cityinfo has outgrown the original software and Members were informed that alternative software is now being looked at.

4.2 The Panel was informed that a “Lean Review” is also currently being carried out, by Community Services, in conjunction with the Business Development Section, in order to identify and eliminate wasteful or duplicated procedures, trim down demand and eliminate unnecessary calls, with a view to streamlining and speeding up the system.

4.3 Members still have concerns about specific instances of lengthy delays in responses, both to telephone calls and to Voicemail messages. It was noted from the figures that some individual calls showed waiting times of well over an hour. Some investigation has taken place into these calls and indications show that the figures may result from technical anomalies.

4.4 Members also expressed concern over the “option” offered to callers waiting for a response, to hold and then leave a contact number. In practice, the caller was automatically cut off after 3 minutes, therefore there was no option. Panel Members requested that the recorded message be amended to give callers a clear description of what would happen. The recorded message has since been amended.

4.5 A considerable number of calls are received via the telephone number issued on the Council’s Website. Members were informed that there was, on average, seven staff to cover calls on that number. It was indicated that more analysis was necessary of demands placed on current staff in relation to peaks and troughs of calls.

4.6 Members were informed that a new project is to be undertaken in relation to the Council’s Telephone Communications. A Project Initiation Document will be agreed and a subsequent Project Plan will be developed in relation to future requirements. Progress on the Telephone Communications Project Plan will be subject to LGR developments.

4.7 The Policy Scrutiny Panel request that the following steps be taken to facilitate short term improvements.

That where, following investigation, it is found that technical anomalies are causing extraneously recorded response times, the issue be taken up under the current software service contract.

That in relation to calls held in the queuing system, if it is not already the case, the longest held calls automatically take precedence for response.

Recommendations

- 1) That subject to the system’s capabilities, the short term measures identified in 4.7 above, be implemented.
- 2) That a review of Cityinfo staffing levels be undertaken, in order to ensure that sufficient numbers of staff are available at all times to respond to incoming calls and therefore reduce call response times.

3) That OMT issue instructions to Heads of Service to require all staff to respond to all Voicemail messages within 24 hours and that staff be required to keep up to date Voicemail greetings.

4) That, subject to the progress of LGR, the proposed Telephone Communications Project Plan, when finalised, be submitted to the Policy Scrutiny Panel for consideration.

5) That the Policy Scrutiny Panel further review the Telephone Communications System at its meeting in April, 2008.

