

POLICY SCRUTINY PANEL

28th May, 2008

Present: Councillors Wilkes (in the Chair), Cowper, Freeman, Kellett, McDonnell, Martin, Simmons, Simpson, Walker, Wolstenholme and Wynne.

Also Present: Councillors Colledge, Kelly, Marsden, Robinson, D. Smith and Stoddart.

Apologies for Absence: Apologies for Absence were received from Cllrs. Lightley and Thompson.

Bullet Points from the Meeting held on 1st April, 2008.

The Bullet Points from the Meeting held on 1st April, 2008, were approved as a correct record.

BULLET POINTS

EQUALITIES ISSUES – DRAFT REPORT

- The Panel were presented with a Draft Report on the Scrutiny of the Council's Equalities Policies. Members considered the Report and made a number of observations.
- It was pointed out to the Panel that not all Members had received Equalities Training as part of the Corporate Training Plan. It was also noted that this years Corporate Training Plan which was effective until December 2008 had already been circulated to all Councillors and included a 1 day session covering Equalities Training and a further 1 day session on Disability Equality.
- It was felt by the Panel that opportunities for Equalities Training generally should not be restricted to two 1 day sessions and that all Staff and Elected Members who have not yet received Equalities Training should do so before the end of December 2008.
- The Panel suggested that the HR Section should therefore review the Corporate Training Plan as circulated and it was agreed that the Draft Recommendations be amended to reflect this. Members also suggested a number of further amendments to the Draft Recommendations.
- Subject to the incorporation of the suggested amendments to the Draft Recommendations it was agreed that the Draft Report be forwarded to the Scrutiny Committee for consideration.
- It was further agreed that the Policy Scrutiny Panel review progress against the remaining Staff/Member Equalities Training in October 2008.

ANY OTHER BUSINESS

- Cllr. Robinson raised the issue of the lack of Progress Reports made available to Members regarding the Swimming Pool Project.
- The Chairman agreed to raise this issue at the next meeting of the Scrutiny Committee.

The Meeting Terminated at 6.00 pm

POLICY SCRUTINY PANEL

DRAFT REPORT

REVIEW OF SICKNESS ABSENCE 2008

BACKGROUND

1. The Policy Scrutiny Panel has reviewed the Council's Sickness Absence levels on an ongoing basis. The Panel submitted a Report to Cabinet in 2007 and the aim of this Review was to consider progress against the implementation of the Recommendations contained in the Report and agreed by Cabinet.

ACTIONS

2. The Director of Corporate Services attended the Policy Scrutiny Panel Meeting on the 1st April, 2008, to brief Members on progress.

OUTCOMES

3. General Progress

3.1 Current figures for Sickness Absence levels were encouraging and showed that the general trend was down. The Council was now on track to achieve its target figure for the year of 10 Working Days per employee. This contrasted with a figure three years ago of 13.98 days and showed a decrease from last year of 2.3 days.

3.2 Whilst acknowledging that the general trend was down it was also noted that the national average was 8.2 days per employee.

3.3 The introduction of the services of Diagnostic Health Solutions and the consistent application across the Authority of the corporate Sickness Absence Procedures had assisted in the reduction of the Sickness Absence level. The regular examination of Sickness Absence figures, the raising of the profile of Sickness Absence and the further training of Managers had also contributed to the reduction.

3.4 The Panel noted that a reduction in Sickness Absence levels had been seen across all Council Services.

3.5 It was acknowledged that the LGR transitional process may also affect levels of Sickness Absence in the forthcoming year with issues such as lowered morale, possible loss of staff and the impact on those left behind all being possibly significant.

4. Implementation of previous Recommendations

4.1 The Employee Viewpoint Panel has been formed and has met. Further meetings have been scheduled to discuss specific issues such as LGR.

4.2 The Staff Attitude Survey questionnaire has been reviewed by the Viewpoint Panel and further input from the facilitators, Northumbria University, was still awaited. In view of LGR Members must consider the value of conducting a Staff Attitude Survey for 2008.

Recommendations

- 1) That the efforts of all Staff in reducing the rates of Sickness Absence be acknowledged.
- 2) That in view of LGR, the proposed Staff Attitude Survey for 2008 be not undertaken.
- 3) That the Policy Scrutiny Panel review the Council's Sickness Absence levels at its meeting in October, 2008.

POLICY SCRUTINY PANEL

DRAFT REPORT

TELEPHONE COMMUNICATIONS SYSTEM UPDATE APRIL 2008

BACKGROUND

1. The Policy Scrutiny Panel has carried out regular reviews of the Council's Telephone Communications System following initial concerns raised by Members. The Panel submitted a Report to Cabinet in 2007 and the aim of this Review was to consider progress against the implementation of the Recommendations contained in the Report and agreed by Cabinet.

ACTIONS

2. The Director of Corporate Services attended the Policy Scrutiny Panel Meeting on the 1st April, 2008, to brief Members on progress.

OUTCOMES

3. Implementation of Previous Recommendations

3.1 Members noted that the modifications to the current system needed to facilitate the short term improvement measures previously requested by the Panel had been activated within the current system capabilities.

3.2 A review of staffing resources also requested by the Policy Scrutiny Panel had taken place and some minor changes have been made involving staff relocation.

3.1 Members were advised that the Revenues and Benefits Section had installed an automated response line which has taken much of the call burden from front line staff.

3.2 Members reconsidered the Panel's previous request to Cabinet to prioritise the review and replacement of the current Telephone Communications software and identify associated future staffing requirements. It was considered that due to LGR, this would no longer be appropriate.

3.3 It was noted that the Panel's previous request to OMT to instruct Heads of Service to require all staff to respond to Voicemail messages within 24 hours and to keep up to date Voicemail greetings had been carried out. All staff have been issued with the instruction and it was agreed that Members would monitor the situation.

3.4 It was also noted that the proposed new Telephone Communications Project Plan would be now unlikely to be progressed due to LGR. The Panel were informed that an LGR Workstream is currently looking at the general subject of communications.

3.5 It is acknowledged that the system still has limitations, mainly in relation to Cityinfo call traffic and "Hot Spots" of particularly heavy call traffic relating to specific issues. The Panel was informed that the present system had been the most cost effective available at the time of purchase however since that time the demands on the software has increased considerably due to the expansion of the Council's Cityinfo facilities. Clearly, replacing the existing system would require a major new financial commitment and any proposals to do so would have to be submitted to the new Unitary Authority.

Recommendations

- 1) That in view of LGR no further action be taken to replace the current Telephone Communications System.
- 2) That Members continue to note from their own perspective responses by Staff to Voicemail messages and that any further individual problems occurring are reported to the appropriate Director/Head of Service.