

POLICY SCRUTINY PANEL

20th October, 2008

Present: Councillor Wilkes (in the Chair) and Councillors Freeman, Kellett, Laverick, Simpson, Walker, Wolstenholme and Wynn.

Also Present: Councillors Kelly, Marsden and Stoddart.

Apologies for Absence: Apologies for Absence were received from Councillors Cowper, McDonnell, Martin and Simmons.

Bullet Points from the Meeting held on 6th October, 2008

The Bullet Points from the Meeting of the 6th July, 2008, were confirmed as a true record.

BULLET POINTS

REVIEW OF SICKNESS ABSENCE

- At the previous Panel meeting Members had been provided with the latest Sickness Absence figures. The Director of Corporate Services was therefore in attendance to give the Panel a strategic overview of the figures.
- An analysis of figures for the last five years had shown a continuous decline in the Sickness Absence Rate for the Authority. The 2007/2008 figure had been under ten working days per employee and it was considered that the figure was likely to further reduce to around eight days which would place it in the Upper Quartile nationally. This compared very favourably to the figure in 2003/2004 which placed the Authority in the Lower Quartile nationally.
- Members noted that there had been a significant drop in the figure between 2006/2007 and 2007/2008.
- The Director of Corporate Services indicated that further progress had been made over the current year. There had been a slight reversal in September, which appeared to have corrected itself but Members were informed that caution was still needed in regard to the next six months as the figure could rise in response to the general uncertainty surrounding the lead up to Unitary Authority Vesting Day.
- The reduction had been due to a combination of factors which included a more consistent application of Corporate Sickness Absence Procedures across the Authority and the introduction of the services of Diagnostic Health Solutions as a mechanism for dealing with Employee Absences.
- A question was raised regarding how the figures were measured and interpreted and whether a more accurate figure could have been obtained through measuring Sickness Absence at different levels of employee throughout the Authority.
- The Panel was reminded that the method of measurement that had been used was the nationally accepted method and that to begin considering individual groups or levels of Employee would constitute an involvement in operational management as this detail of Sickness Absence Figures was available to Managers on a day to day basis.

- Members considered that congratulations were due to the Director of Corporate Services and all staff involved in the ongoing reduction in Sickness Absence Figures.
- Clearly within the Authority there were still certain areas where the average was proportionately higher. However these were areas where the nature of the work may be particularly physical or stressful. However the general reduction in the figures had been seen across all areas of Council activity.
- The Director of Corporate Services informed Members that Durham County Council had in place similar support mechanisms for employees in regard to Sickness Absence though they did not utilise Diagnostic Health Services. The County Council, as the City Council, had already achieved the Silver Award for "Wellness at Work". It was pointed out that the amount of funding the City Council had in place specifically for employee support in relation to Sickness Absence would be directed to the same purpose at the County Council following Vesting Day in April, 2009.
- Panel Members expressed their satisfaction at the improvement in the Sickness Absence Figures and thanked the Director of Corporate Services accordingly.

EQUALITIES TRAINING UPDATE

- The Policy Scrutiny Panel had previously prepared a Report and Recommendations regarding the Councils Equalities Policies, the Report had been agreed by the Scrutiny Committee in June, 2008, and was approved and adopted by Cabinet in July, 2008.
- Recommendations included the training before Unitary Authority Vesting Day of the outstanding employees, who had not yet received Equalities Training and an update on that Training for the Panel in October, 2008.
- Eighty seven percent of employees had already received Equalities Training which was a high figure in relation to some other Authorities and this years Corporate Training Programme had offered Equalities Training for those employees who wished to take advantage of it.
- However it was considered that because of the current pace of LGR work it was no longer feasible to target a hundred percent of employees trained before April, 2009.
- The observations of the Panel had been fed in to the LGR Equalities Workstream whose work was currently ongoing. It was also understood that following Vesting Day the County Council would be ensuring that every employee received Equalities Training as part of induction.
- Members were satisfied that the priority given in the current Corporate Training Programme was to allow access for City of Durham employees to training in the range of key skills necessary for them to have for their transition to the Unitary Authority in April, 2009.
- The Panel thanked the Director of Corporate Services for his attendance and the Chairman indicated that Draft Reports on the Sickness Absence Review, the Equalities Training Update and Working with Parish Councils would be brought to the November Panel Meeting.

The Meeting Terminated at 6.00pm

POLICY SCRUTINY PANEL

DRAFT REPORT

REVIEW OF SICKNESS ABSENCE OCT' 08

BACKGROUND

1. The Policy Scrutiny Panel has reviewed the Council's Sickness Absence levels on an ongoing basis. The Panel has previously submitted its Reports and Recommendations to Cabinet.

1.1 The aim of this Review was again to consider progress against the implementation of the Recommendations previously submitted and agreed by Cabinet and to receive an update on the current levels of Sickness Absence.

ACTIONS

2. At the Policy Scrutiny Panel Meeting on 6th October, 2008, Members were provided with updated Sickness Absence figures. Subsequently, at the Panel Meeting on 20th October, 2008, the Director of Corporate Services was in attendance to give Members a strategic overview of the figures.

OUTCOMES

3. Current figures showed a further reduction in the rate of Sickness Absence. Though there were variations in the rate between Service Areas, the reduction was apparent across all Council Services.

3.1 There has been a continuous decline in the overall Sickness Absence figure over the past five years. From a national Lower Quartile figure of 13.9 days per employee in 2003/2004 it has fallen to a current figure of 9.9 days and as the trend continues to show a reduction it is anticipated that the figure will fall to around 8 days which would place it in the Upper Quartile nationally.

3.2 A slight reversal was noted in September, 2008. This appeared to have corrected itself however the Director of Corporate Services advised Members that caution will still be needed over the next six months as the figure could rise in response to the general uncertainty surrounding the lead up to Unitary Authority Vesting Day.

3.3 The continuing reduction in the figure has been as a result of a number of factors but a significant impact has been made by the consistent application of Corporate Sickness Absence Procedures across the Authority and the introduction of the services of Diagnostic Health Solutions as a mechanism for dealing with Employee Absences.

3.4 It is noted by Members that there continue to be certain areas of Council activity where the Sickness Absence average is proportionately higher. However it is accepted that these are areas where the nature of the work can be particularly physical or stressful.

3.5 The Panel was informed that the County Council had in place similar support mechanisms for employees with regard to Sickness Absence and had, as had the City of Durham, achieved the Silver Award for "Wellness at Work".

3.6 In relation to the Panel's Recommendations contained in the previous Review Report in April, 2008, the proposed annual Staff Attitude Survey had not been carried out due to LGR.

CONCLUSIONS

4. In the Report on the Review of April, 2008, the Panel had Recommended that the efforts of all Staff and Managers in reducing the rates of Sickness Absence be acknowledged.

4.1 Again, Members considered that congratulations were due to the Director of Corporate Services and all employees involved in the ongoing reduction in Sickness Absence Figures.

4.2 It was noted that a different method of measurement and interpretation of the figures may have been utilised and may have produced slightly different results. However the Panel acknowledged that the methods of measurement used were used by other Local Authorities and were nationally accepted for benchmarking purposes.

4.3 Members of the Policy Scrutiny Panel once again expressed their satisfaction at the improvement in the Sickness Absence Figures.

Recommendations

1) That the Policy Scrutiny Panel commend the Director of Corporate Services, his staff, and Employees across the Council for their efforts in reducing Sickness Absence Levels.

2) That following Unitary Authority Vesting Day, Durham County Council direct, for the same purpose, the amount of funding previously held by the City of Durham Council specifically for employee support in relation to Sickness Absence.

POLICY SCRUTINY PANEL

DRAFT REPORT

EQUALITIES POLICIES UPDATE

BACKGROUND

1. The Policy Scrutiny Panel previously considered the content and level of application of the Council's Equality Policies. A Report with Recommendations was subsequently drawn up and submitted to the Cabinet which approved and adopted the Recommendations.

1.1. The aim of the update was to review progress against Recommendations previously made by the Policy Scrutiny Panel and to assess the current and likely proportion of the City of Durham's Elected Members and Employees who will be fully trained in Equalities Issues by April, 2009.

ACTIONS

2. The Panel had previously recommended that the Corporate Training Programme be reviewed in order to ensure that Employees and Elected Members who had not received Equalities Training were given the opportunity to do so before December, 2008.

2.1 The Director of Corporate Services attended the Policy Scrutiny Panel Meeting on the 20th October, 2008, to update Members on the current situation.

OUTCOMES

3. Eighty seven per-cent of City Council employees have already received Equalities Training and the Corporate Training Programme for 2008/2009 included further Equalities Training opportunities for those wishing to take advantage of them.

3.1 The Panel was advised that because of the increasing pace of preparatory LGR work it was no longer feasible to target one hundred per-cent of Employees to be trained in line with the Panel's previous Recommendation.

3.2 It is acknowledged however that relevant work in relation to the harmonisation of Equalities Issues between constituent Councils is currently being carried out in the appropriate LGR Workstream.

CONCLUSIONS

4. Members acknowledged that the priority given in the current Corporate Training Programme was to allow access for City of Durham employees to training in the range of key skills necessary for them to have for their transition to the Unitary Authority in April, 2009.

4.1 It was further acknowledged that the County Council currently had a robust system of Equalities integration across their Service Areas and had already been assessed at Level 3 of the Equality Standard for Local Authorities.

Recommendations

1. That the good practice evident in the Equalities Policies and Procedures at the City of Durham Council, together with further examples of good practice from across the other constituent Councils be incorporated into the work of the appropriate LGR Workstream.

2. That Durham County Council is requested, following Unitary Authority Vesting Day on 1st April, 2009, to ensure that every employee receives relevant Equalities Training as part of Induction or as part of the ongoing Corporate Training process.

POLICY SCRUTINY PANEL

DRAFT REPORT

REVIEW – WORKING WITH PARISH COUNCILS

BACKGROUND

1. The Policy Scrutiny Panel Report “Working with Parish Councils” was originally submitted, along with a number of Recommendations, to Cabinet in September, 2007. The Report and Recommendations were deferred by Cabinet pending the outcome of unitary status developments.

1.1 The Panel agreed to review the contents of the Report together with the original Recommendations in order to establish what, if any, practical measures of assistance the Panel may be able to recommend the new Durham County Council give Parish Councils in light of Local Government Reorganisation, the possibility of devolution of functions and future developments in community governance.

ACTIONS

2. Panel Members were provided with the original Report and the Executive Officer of the County Durham Association of Local Councils was invited to speak to the Panel and advise Members of current developments in relation to LGR.

OUTCOMES

3. Members were informed of a number of current developments.

- The County Association have brought together a Working Group of Parish Clerks of which at least three were from Parishes within the City of Durham area, to look at future developments. Topics being considered include Governance Arrangements, Standards Issues, Charter Development and the possible role of Parish Councils in AAP's. Their findings will be submitted to Elected Members and the County Council.
- It was hoped to establish a small number of Pilot Schemes for Service Devolution to Parishes, perhaps to carry out certain Horticultural, Street Scene and Planning Services. A business case for this is currently under development.
- It is apparent that certain issues remain problematic. How issues such as Double Taxation, Rationalisation of Precepts, Duplication/Amalgamation of Functions etc. are dealt with will be critical.
- The issue of parishing current unparished areas is ongoing. As well as those in the City of Durham area, Chester-le-Street and Crook have also commenced consultations over a Parish/Town Council.
- Future involvement of Parish Councils in AAP's is being considered and there is a possibility of smaller Parish Councils coming together in “clusters” to share resources in order to resolve common individual issues.

- Finance has been made available to Parish Councils by the County Council for expenses in relation to training for Parish Clerks and costs of publications.
- The attainment of Quality Status by Parish/Town Councils is still a major issue. CDALC has made financial assistance available to Local Councils to assist in the necessary training of Clerks and Councillors. It was noted that Brandon and Byshottles Parish Council has attained Quality Status. The City Council has also made finance available to Parish Councils within its area in relation to the production of Parish Plans.

3.1 It is noted that there was a commitment in the County Council's Unitary Bid to eventually parish all unparished areas. However to take advantage of the possible devolution to Local Councils, and therefore local communities, of certain functions together with their respective budgets it would be necessary for Local Councils to demonstrate their ability to properly administer and manage those functions and budgets. Local Councils may therefore need assistance from the Principal Authority to demonstrate this ability.

3.1 The Policy Scrutiny Panel's original 2007 Report highlighted some specific examples of assistance then offered to Parish/Town Councils by Principal Authorities.

- District of Easington had offered to pay the Registration Fees of Clerks beginning training for the CiLCA qualification.
- Bradford Borough Council had paid for a Training Course (£195), for each Parish/Town Clerk in their area.
- Cumbria County Council had established a "Parish Champion", liaison Member.

3.2 The original Report identified that the development of a Joint Charter between Principal and Local Councils would be likely to provide:-

- Enhanced roles for Local Councils
- Improved working relationships between Local and Principal Councils
- Better Community Planning
- Written rights and responsibilities for both partners
- Agreed working compacts
- Proper Consultation and Involvement

3.3 The original Report also identified that the achievement by a Local Council of Quality Status would provide benefits for:

The Local Community – From more responsive services, better communication and discussion about, and access to those services.

The Principal Authority – From evidence of the capacity and ability of the Local Council to deliver services on its behalf or in partnership and from a stronger partnership with a Local Council which is demonstrably representative, competent and well managed.

The Local Council – From greater public credibility leading to enhanced representation of the local community. Greater civic pride and the ability to articulate the needs and wishes of that community. Enhanced partnership working by demonstrating the organisation is properly and effectively managed with suitably qualified staff.

3.4 The original Report identified that Principal Councils are in a position to support and encourage Local Councils to participate in the Quality Status process and perhaps offer practical assistance to Local Councils in relation to facilitating the use of available resources eg Information Technology and Training.

CONCLUSIONS

4. It is noted that previous suggestions for formal agreements between Parish Councils and Principal Authorities have largely come to nothing. The future relationship between Local Councils and the County Council is currently unclear and it is considered that any issue of Devolved Powers to Local Councils must in the future be fully supported by adequate funding.

4.1 The County Council's proposals for promoting Councillors as leaders in their own communities are also at present vague and in need of development and it was suggested that some communities in smaller parishes would only benefit from the new arrangements after formalised partnership working arrangements were adopted.

4.2 It is also noted that issues surrounding Quality Council Status carried with them significant resource implications particularly for the smaller Parish Councils.

4.3 It was acknowledged by Members that both the future development of Area Action Partnerships and the current Boundary Commission study on existing electoral boundaries were likely to impact on the future governance of Local Councils though as yet it was unclear what that impact would be.

4.4 The Policy Scrutiny Panel considers that the following Recommendations will therefore assist in enabling an enhanced level of future partnership working between Local Councils and the Principal Authority.

Recommendations

- 1). That Durham County Council be requested to support in principle the development of a Joint Charter with all Parish/Town Councils.
- 2). That Durham County Council be requested to offer appropriate financial assistance to Parish Councils to support their efforts to attain Quality Council Status.
- 3). That Durham County Council be requested to offer appropriate practical assistance to Parish Councils to support their efforts to attain Quality Council Status.
- 4) That Durham County Council be requested to consider the establishment of a Joint Parish/Town Council Liaison Group made up of Local Council representatives and County Council Members.