

**THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE
RESOURCES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

HELD ON TUESDAY 12th DECEMBER 2006

Present: - Councillors A. Collinson, Mrs. E. M. Connor,
Mrs. J. Maitland, Mrs. J. Maslin and R.
Taylor

Apologies: Councillors A. Burnip and Mrs. S. Mason

Due to the absence of the Chair and Vice-Chair, nominations were requested for a Chair for the meeting.

COUNCILLOR MRS J MAITLAND TOOK THE CHAIR.

1. **THE MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING** held on 21st November 2006, a copy of which had been circulated to each Member, were confirmed.
2. **THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE EXECUTIVE** held on 28th November 2006, a copy of which had been circulated to each Member, were submitted.

RESOLVED that the information contained within the Minutes, be noted.

3. **MATTERS ARISING**

Urban and Rural Renaissance Schemes in Deaf Hill and Thornley (Minute No 9 refers)

Councillor A Collinson queried the additional expenditure on the scheme at Thornley which had increased to £300,000. The Scrutiny Support Manager reported that the final cost of the scheme was £300,000 which included additional costs of £15,000 which were a result of delays in bringing the scheme forward.

RESOLVED that the information given, be noted.

4. **PUBLIC QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSION**

There were no Members of the public present.

5. **SICKNESS MONITORING**

The Chair welcomed R. Gott, Head of Personnel who was in attendance at the meeting to provide an update on sickness monitoring.

Members were advised that in 2003/2004 the corporate rate of sickness absence was 14.5 days per employee. In July 2004 the Authority launched a sickness improvement campaign to address the worsening trend in sickness absence and drive sickness levels down.

The campaign included the introduction of return to work interviews, a poster campaign to raise the awareness of sickness absence and the introduction of monitoring of the causes of sickness absence.

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By 2004/2005 the figure was 11.3 days per employee and by 2005/2006 this figure had improved to 8.7 days per employee which was the best annual figure the Council had achieved.

It was explained that one of the main contributing factors to this improvement, was the introduction of "return to work" interviews and more stringent reporting procedures.

Nationally, the Authority was in the medium quartile for sickness absence and the aim was to get into the top quartile with a target of 8.5 days by the end of the financial year.

In order to compare the Council's performance against the Durham and Northumberland Districts, details of the Audit Commissions BVPI 12 for 2003/2004 was circulated which listed authorities in order from "best to worst" and showed that Easington was second worst with 14.5. By 2004/2005 the Authority had improved to 11.3. By 2005/2006 the Authority had improved to such an extent that it was the third best performing Authority with 8.7 days lost to sickness per employee.

R. Gott provided details of courses which had been introduced to help employees deal with stress, the third largest reason for sickness absence. To date, 100 people had attended relax courses which offered practical help for employees dealing with stress, and all feedback received had been positive. The Authority also offered a confidential professional counselling service by an independent Counsellor.

Members were advised that the Government had introduced a strategy for revitalising health and safety in the workplace and the Authority were required to reduce the number of reportable accidents by 30% between 2001 and 2010. The Council had taken up this challenge and monitored accidents, targeting particular "hotspots". The statistics were shown as the number of reportable accidents per 1000 employees. Details of the figures from 2000/2001 to date were outlined in the report and showed that in 2005/2006 the Authority was ahead of target with a figure of 12.3.

In relation to other achievements, R. Gott advised that the Authority had attained the Working for Health Care in County Durham Silver Award for health promotion in the workplace. There had also been recognition at a national level in a report by the Health and Safety Executive in relation to the Authority's reporting of health and safety performance. In addition a Gold Award was achieved under the National Clean Air Awards Scheme for the review of the Smoking Policy and introduction of "no smoking at work rules".

R. Gott advised of new initiatives to drive sickness down even further, which included Diagnostic Health Solutions. Members were advised that Durham City Council were piloting this service which provided a bank of medically qualified staff who were available 24 hours to provide advice and support to staff who were sick, the service was also available to the employees family. The results of the pilot were being monitored and would be reported in future reports. The Head of Personnel was also looking at the sick pay system in relation to the "look back" period which was currently twelve months and entitled an employee to six months full pay and six months half pay. It had been suggested to the Trade Unions that this period be extended to 24 months however this would mean a change to national conditions and would need further consultation and investigation. In January 2006 the Authority introduced a home working policy which allowed staff to work from home.

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Councillor A. Collinson queried if figures related to days lost to sickness through reportable accidents could be provided. R. Gott advised that statistics on days lost to accidents could be provided in future reports.

The Chair queried if sickness absence levels related to stress increased at certain times of the year i.e. budget time. R. Gott advised that the reasons for sickness were monitored on a year to year basis and not month to month, however, this could be provided in future reports.

The Chair asked if sickness levels had been effected by the transfer of staff to East Durham Homes Ltd (EDH). R Gott advised that the transfer of 180 craft workers to EDH's had initially reduced the figures, however, Care Services had recently transferred back to the Authority which had increased the figures.

RESOLVED that the information given, be noted.

6. COMMUNICATION AND PUBLICITY

There were no items to report.