

Durham County Council

Human Resources Committee

At a meeting of the Human Resources Committee held at the County Hall, Durham on **Friday 14 November 2008 at 10.00 am.**

Present:

Councillor S Iveson in the Chair

Members of the Committee:

Councillors J Armstrong, J Blakey, M Campbell, J Chaplow, P Charlton, R Crooks, B Harrison, N Harrison, A Hopgood, G Huntington, N Martin, E Mavin, D Myers, J Nicholson, B Ord, E Paylor, M Plews, J Robinson, K Thompson and M Williams

Other Members:

Councillor R Ord

Apologies were received from Councillors A Bell, J Brown, R Crute, M Hodgson, A Savory, E Tomlinson, Andy Turner, A Willis and A Wright

A1 Minutes of the Meeting held on 8 August 2008

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 8 August 2008 were confirmed by the Committee as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

A2 Sickness Absence: Quarterly Performance Monitoring

The Committee considered a report of the Acting Head of Strategic Human Resources providing an ongoing review of the County Council's overall performance in relation to sickness absence (for copy see file of Minutes).

Councillor Thompson referred to point 23 of the report which mentions that private sector organisations are more likely to use disciplinary procedures in managing sickness. He requested that a costing be provided of the savings that could be gained by improving the level of sickness absence by one day. In response, the Acting Head of Strategic Human Resources agreed to look into the issues surrounding the costing of sickness absence. Councillor Thompson referred the reduction in the level of sickness absence over the past three years and asked whether the Authority would qualify for a Gershon Efficiency Saving as a result of this. The Acting Head of Strategic Human Resources agreed to investigate this.

Councillor Hopgood referred to the high level of sickness absence during school holiday times and asked whether the flexible working policy offers more flexibility during school holiday times. The Acting Head of Strategic

Human Resources replied that services are more flexible where they can be and staff have the opportunity to take Emergency Leave if necessary. Linda Thornton, Human Resources Manager from Service Direct, highlighted a particular problem that affects Service Direct in that the majority of school building work takes place during school holiday time which is also the peak time for staff holidays. When agency staff are employed to cover holidays, this can lead to increased costs.

Councillor Hopgood asked whether action is taken against staff who are refused annual leave and then take sick leave as an alternative. The Acting Head of Strategic Human Resources informed the Committee that, if there is evidence that a member of staff is not genuinely ill, disciplinary procedures may be commenced.

In response to a question from Councillor Martin, the Acting Head of Strategic Human Resources informed the Committee that the Efficiency and Improvement Partnership includes District Councils. Councillor Martin referred to the new sickness absence procedures used by Durham City Council which seem to be producing a reduction in sickness absence levels and asked if there is scope for the Authority to learn from the experiences of the District Councils. The Acting Head of Strategic Human Resources replied that the Authority is looking at examples of good practice, whilst taking into account the costs of the procedures together with their long-term impact. Councillor Martin emphasised the importance of having a figure on the cost of sickness absence in order to determine whether alternative procedures such as these are likely to be cost-effective.

Councillor Myers referred to Appendix 9 and expressed concern that one of the findings of the Audit Commission's Report is that policies are not being applied consistently across the Council. The Acting Head of Strategic Human Resources assured the Committee that Managing Sickness Absence training continues to be an integral part of all managers' development.

Councillor Campbell asked whether the current system is robust enough, for example, whether there is a thorough examination of staff who are absent due to stress at work and whether they should remain in their current post. The Acting Head of Strategic Human Resources replied that the policies are robust enough, the key is ensuring that the policies are applied robustly.

In response to a request from Councillor Armstrong, the Acting Head of Strategic Human Resources agreed to provide figures, to a future meeting of the Committee, on the number of Occupational Health staff together with details of any issues regarding the recruitment and retention of Occupational Health staff.

Councillor N Harrison referred to paragraph 63 of the report saying that it is essential that sickness history is available to managers as a matter of course, in order that developing trends can be identified and sickness referrals be made if appropriate.

Councillor Plews suggested that staff may return to work earlier if they were required to ring their line manager on every day of sickness absence rather

than the current system which only requires staff to ring their line manager on their first day of absence.

In response to a question from Councillor Campbell as to whether the line manager is the most appropriate person to contact to report sickness absence, the Acting Head of Strategic Human Resources replied that line managers are the most appropriate initial point of contact as they are appropriately trained, have direct responsibility for managing the service and must arrange appropriate cover for the absent member of staff. Advice is available to managers from Human Resources staff.

Councillor B Harrison commented that sickness absence trigger points can be a very useful tool for managers and referred to the advantages of using external Occupational Health Services which may provide a different perspective.

Councillor Charlton emphasised the importance of focussing on the positives in order that staff feel valued, which, in turn may improve levels of sickness absence.

Resolved:

That the report be noted.

A3 Any Other Business

The Committee received a presentation from the Acting Head of Strategic Human Resources and the Assistant Head of Legal Services entitled "The Equal Pay Challenge for Local Government" (for copy of presentation see file of Minutes).

Signed by

Chair of the meeting held on Friday 13 March 2009