

DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL

At a Meeting of **Human Resources Committee** held in Committee Room 2, County Hall, Durham on **Friday 20 November 2015 at 10.00 am**

Present:

Councillor S Iveson (Chair)

Members of the Committee:

Councillors D Bell, J Brown, J Clark, K Dearden, O Gunn, K Henig, D Hicks, J Hillary, I Jewell, S Morrison, J Shuttleworth, M Stanton, A Surtees, K Thompson and A Turner

Also Present:

J Kemp – HR Advice and Support Manager, Resources
N Orton – Pensions Manager
J Walt – HR Business Lead, Children and Adults Services
S Weston – HR Business Lead, ACE, RED and Resources
K Lough – Occupational Health and Safety Manager

1 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors J Robinson, J Armstrong, A Bonner, T Henderson and B Moir.

2 Substitute Members

Councillor D Bell substituted for Cllr A Bonner.

3 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

4 Minutes

The Minutes of the meeting held on 16 October 2015 were agreed as a correct record and were signed by the Chairman.

5 Update on the Health and Safety Service

K Lough, Occupational Health and Safety Manager was in attendance to give an update on the Health and Safety Service for Quarter 2.

He advised that for 2015/2016, reportable accidents and new cases of work related ill health was at its lowest since 2012. This compared to 57 in 2014/2015.

The main causes of accidents were slips, trips and falls which accorded with national statistics and figures tended to rise in the winter months. The total days lost as a result of accidents had reduced and the Team had been working with the Occupational Health Service to help employees back to work more quickly. Interventions included physiotherapy and counselling sessions.

The total number of accidents reported had also reduced this year, although he acknowledged that there was still some under-reporting. There had been 126 Statutory Health surveillance appointments and the Team had carried out work to reduce non-attendance rates which were now down to 16%.

There had also been a reduction in non-employee accidents with 2 RIDDORS to date in the current year, compared to 13 in 2014/2015.

K Lough continued that a new asbestos management procedure was in place across the Council. Mandatory training had been introduced in schools and around half who had signed up to date had completed the course.

With regard to open water safety in Durham City, the Officer advised that the actions agreed by the Durham City Safety Group were nearing completion. The Team were now focussing on education and awareness among students in particular, and the RNLI's 'Don't Drink and Drown Campaign' was an example of further campaigns being introduced. A county-wide risk analysis had identified 250 locations as high priority from 1500. Over 110 of those had been assessed and agreed actions had been completed. He hoped that the remaining assessments would be completed by mid 2016.

In relation to Council construction activities, the Team would focus on health issues such as noise, vibration and manual handling, and recently highlighted links between cancer and shift work. Recent evidence had also found that silica dust was as dangerous, if not more so, than asbestos. Noise roadshows were being carried out with 1000 employees expected to attend.

Employee mental health and well-being was also a key priority. The Officer was Chair of the Task and Finish Group which had looked at guidance, advice and support for employees. A new webpage was being created which would include links to the support that was available and an e-learning course was to be launched in the near future.

Coal mining legacy work was ongoing. Working closely with the Coal Authority, 1600 locations across the County required assessment. As at the end of December 2015, 75% of site inspections should be completed. Any signs of subsidence were reported to the Coal Authority who then carried out investigatory work.

There had been two arson attacks on disused Council buildings in quarter 3 and Members were asked to report any vacant premises in their own divisions where there were known anti-social behaviour problems or trespass.

Members were invited to ask questions of the Officer.

Councillor Clark expressed concern about non-attendance rates for non-statutory interventions such as physiotherapy sessions, and was advised that this service was outsourced 2 days a week and employees were referred for treatment by Managers. The Officer advised that he would examine the statistics for non-attendance and take on board the Members' concerns.

Following further questions from the Member the Committee was informed that the emerging medical evidence which found a potential link between cancer and shift work was recent, and therefore the potential future implications for employers were currently unknown.

In response to a question from Councillor Hillary the Officer confirmed that the Health and Safety Executive had not investigated any of the RIDDOR reportable accidents and this may have been attributed to other more significant priorities elsewhere in the region.

The Member also asked if the areas identified as high risk in terms of open water safety could be shared with Councillors who may be aware of additional sites within their own divisions. The Officer agreed to share this information adding that an article had appeared in County Durham News requesting the public to inform the Council of any areas they considered to be of potential danger.

With regard to open water safety in Durham City, Councillor Gunn noted that agencies were working with Durham University but she hoped that the Students Union had also been involved in educating and protecting students. K Lough confirmed that the Students Union was represented on the Durham City Safety Group.

Councillor Gunn commended the work on employee mental health and well-being and was pleased to note that employees would also be supported in non-work related matters such as financial problems, and suggested that the Council explore the potential for liaising with the Citizens Advice Bureau on this.

Councillor Jewell asked if there was any correlation between the reduction in accident statistics and a reduction in the workforce. The Member was informed that accident rates were tracked against workforce numbers, and any reductions were taken into account when reporting the statistics.

In response to a further question from the Member regarding the use of face masks, K Lough advised that face fit testing was carried out on all employees required to wear a mask as a result of their work activity exposures. Each employee therefore had a face mask that was unique to them and replacements provided.

Resolved:

That the information give be noted.

Councillor Thompson left the meeting.

6 Exclusion of the Public

That under Section 100A(4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the public be excluded from the meeting for the following item of business on the grounds that it involves the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in paragraph 1 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Act.

7 Applications for Early Retirement and/or Voluntary Redundancy for Council Employees

Consideration was given to the joint report of the Corporate Directors, Children and Adults Services and Resources, and the Head of Human Resources (for copy see file of Minutes).

In response to comments from Councillor Shuttleworth regarding payback periods in respect of applications at paragraph 2 in the report, Members were advised that although they were higher than average, significant savings would be realised at the end of these payback periods. The reasons for the longer payback periods were addressed in the report.

Following questions from Members, Councillor Brown advised that under the policy the payback period should normally be no more than 2.5 years. Guidelines did not include a maximum payback period but each application had to be supported by a Business Case from the Service before it could be considered. Granting these applications would avoid a compulsory redundancy situation. The Member also made the point that in terms of costs, there was no difference between Voluntary Redundancy and Compulsory Redundancy.

At this point Councillor Shuttleworth left the meeting.

The Committee considered the application at paragraph 3 in the report, and a lengthy discussion ensued about the future of the Service in the light of new legislation.

Councillor Brown responded that the roles of employees within the Service would become more generic following a full restructure of the Team and a reduction in customer demand. The new legislation was very specific and was unlikely to impact greatly on the workload of the Service.

Members were concerned about the potential impact of the reduction of the Service which they felt provided a very valuable role to customers in need of help and advice. If customer demand had reduced the Committee asked what type of services the Unit would provide in the future. It was suggested that a presentation be given to the Committee on the work of the Unit, with an invitation extended to all Members of the Council.

Whilst Members remained concerned about the future of the Service, they accepted that the application under consideration was supported by a Business Case and may avoid a compulsory redundancy situation.

However the comment was made that to assist Members, ERVR reports should provide more detail about the structure of services under consideration. The suggestion was made that reports should include existing and proposed service structures but Members acknowledged that this was not always possible when restructures were either ongoing or had not yet commenced at the time an application was under consideration.

The HR Advice and Support Manager, in response to a comment from Councillor Jewell, advised that expressions of interest for ERVR were invited from employees which were then considered by Managers as part of a Service restructure to meet MTFP savings, and to avoid potential compulsory redundancies in the longer term.

Resolved:

That

- a) the cases of Early Retirement and Voluntary Redundancy be noted and agreed with effect from the dates shown in Appendix 1.