

# People Select Committee

A meeting of People Select Committee was held on Monday, 7th November, 2016.

**Present:** Cllr Eileen Johnson(In the Chair), Cllr Kevin Faulks, Cllr Lisa Grainge, Cllr Di Hewitt

**Officers:** Garry Cummings (Director - Finance and Business Services), Beccy Brown (Director - HR, Legal and Communications), David Bond (Proper Officer), Ian Miles (Assistant Director - Xentrall Shared Services, Margaret Waggott (Assistant Director - Administration, Democratic and Electoral Services), Peter Mennear, Jenna McDonald (DCE)

**Also in attendance:** Cllr Bob Cook (Leader of the Council)

**Apologies:** Cllr Mrs Jean O'Donnell, Cllr Stefan Houghton, Cllr Mrs Sylvia Walmsley

**PEO 39/16 Evacuation Procedure**

The evacuation procedure was noted.

**PEO 40/16 Declarations of Interest**

Cllr Bob Cook declared an interest as a Director of Durham Tees Valley Airport.

AGREED that the declaration be noted.

**PEO 41/16 Minutes for signature - 26th September 2016**

The minutes of the meeting held on 26th September 2016 were signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

AGREED that the minutes were signed by the Chair.

**PEO 42/16 Overview of Corporate Services**

The Committee considered the annual overview reports for the following services:

- Administration, Democratic and Electoral Services
- Exentrall Shared Services
- Finance and Business Services
- HR, Legal and Communications
- Monitoring Officer

Members noted the Overview of Administration, Democratic and Electoral Services and raised the following points/questions:

- With regard to high numbers of ballot papers where electors did not always take up their full allocation of votes and also doubtful ballot papers, it was asked what action could taken to raise awareness in terms of different types of voting methods. In response, it was noted that educating the electorate was a challenge. Members heard that ballot papers included instructions on how to vote however, limitations were in place in terms of notices which could and

could not be displayed in polling stations and on polling screens. Ultimately it was up to electors as to how many votes they marked when asked to mark more than one candidate.

It was noted that the local authority were lobbying nationally through the Association of Electoral Administrators (AEA) in order to make instructions to voters as clear as possible. Members suggested that political parties should provide education on election material within their newsletters.

- The Committee commended the service on the number of people registered to vote, however, concerns were raised around the disappointing number of attainers. It was noted that the Assistant Director of Administration, Democratic and Electoral Services was working towards influencing the Electoral Democratic Participation Board around encouraging the Government to issue data to Electoral Registration Officers across the country when issuing National Insurance Numbers to 15/16 year olds which would make registering attainers more affordable and more accurate. It was explained that an exercise was carried out in 2015 through the school roll which highlighted that whilst numbers had improved, targets had not been met.

Members noted the Overview of Xentrall Shared Services and raised the following points/questions:

- The Committee commended the work carried out by the service, it was noted that changes had been made to around 500 systems during which staff had not noticed that they were underway.

It was noted that future savings would be in large part due to the way in which other service areas were configured and their ICT and HR demands.

Members noted the Overview of Finance and Business Services. Additional points and questions were raised as follows:

- It was heard that Finance and Business Services engaged with other directorates on a wide range of projects, changes and initiatives.

- With regard to the merge of the Council Tax office and the Revenue office, Members were keen to understand numbers around redundancies and savings. It was explained that there were currently around 112 members across both teams which was expected to decrease to 100. The Committee was assured that the decrease in staff was expected to be managed by voluntary redundancies over a three year time period. Members were informed that both teams would relocate to the offices at Bayheath House. It was noted that due to changes in relation to benefits including the introduction of Universal Credit, the service would remain under review,

- Members were pleased to understand that internal recharges within SBC would cease in 2017/18.

- It was noted that the Housing Options team was likely to be largely affected by the recent Benefit Cap, as by law the only benefit that could be removed was Housing Benefit and so this may place people's homes at risk.

- The Committee commended the work of the Audit Committee.
- Members were made aware of the current challenges around the Council's treasury management position and lower return on investments.
- The service had been heavily involved in the Combined Authority work and was dealing with a complicated financial framework.
- The Council was examining the implications of the changes to business rates. The Council would become a top-up authority rather than a tariff authority under the business rate revaluation process. Locally, some companies had been asked to pay higher rates, however the majority would see smaller bills. In addition, the Council would still need to see further detail on the proposals for 100% business rate retention by local government. This proposal would see a retention of rates within the local government sector on a national basis, and so there would still be some element of redistribution.

Members noted the Overview of HR, Legal and Communications and raised the following points/questions:

- Given the current financial pressure on the Council and its staff and cuts on services, the Committee was not surprised by the high level of sickness absence.
- With regard to long term sickness impacting general sickness levels, it was asked whether long term sickness could be removed from the Council's general sickness figures for those circumstances which were deemed serious. In response, it was noted that sickness was reported in a number of ways including long, medium and short term cases, but the headline figure would continue to include all types. Sickness was also reported based on age of staff, pay grade, service area and length of employment. Members heard that a report was shared with the Local Joint Consultative Panel twice per calendar year which could also be circulated to Members of the People Select Committee.
- Members asked whether trends were followed up around the most common sickness days e.g. Monday's and Friday's. It was explained that trends were monitored and a recent analysis identified that the sickness levels on Mondays and Fridays were not as high as anticipated.
- In terms of the management of sickness absence, it was asked whether the council's policy was based on a points or a percentage system. In response, it was heard that there were three rules taken into account which were; the number of days per year, the number of incidents per year and the period over 7 days. It was also noted that whilst the 3 rules were monitored, earlier/later monitoring could take place dependent upon a manager's level of concern.
- With regard to legal cases, it was asked whether the Council continued to employ Barristers. Members noted that whilst the Council continued to employ Barristers it was on a less regular basis than previous years as Solicitor Advocates were used when circumstances allowed. It was explained that Barristers were often used in complex cases when the Council was confident that costs could be recovered.

- Members were pleased to see that SBC had recently employed two trainee solicitors.
- The number of open child protection cases was at record high levels.
- The Committee agreed that it was unusual for an employer of SBCs size to experience zero employment tribunals in the space of 12 months. It was asked whether this position was a result of good relationships with trade unions. In response, it was heard that it was likely due to a combination between good relationships with trade unions and also the cost of a tribunal to the appellant.

Members noted the Overview from the Monitoring Officer and raised the following points/questions:

- Members were keen to understand the Monitoring Officer's role with Durham Tees Valley Airport. It was noted that it was a partial legal advisory role and also a facilitating role in ensuring that specialist legal advice and support was provided where required, for example; concerning company issues. The Monitoring Officer also explained that part of the role was to regularly monitor and protect the interests of the six shareholding authorities in the airport. The other authorities paid Stockton Council for this work on their behalf.
- It was noted that some elements of work in support of Town and Parish Councils (aside from statutory involvement in elections for example) was often on a goodwill basis, and that might be a case for reducing or not doing this in future if resources were not available.

Members thanked officers for their presentations and input into the Overview reports.

The Leader and Committee expressed their thanks for the hard work of all Council staff.

AGREED that;

1. the Overview reports be noted.
2. that the Committee submit Sickness Absence as a topic for the 2017-18 scrutiny work programme.