

People Select Committee

A meeting of People Select Committee was held on Monday, 18th September, 2017.

Present: Cllr Mrs Jean O'Donnell (Chairman), Cllr Eileen Johnson (Vice-Chairman), Cllr Sonia Bailey, Cllr Gillian Corr (for Cllr Kevin Faulks), Cllr Lynn Hall (for Cllr Elsi Hampton), Cllr Di Hewitt, Cllr Stefan Houghton, Cllr Barbara Inman.

Officers: Paul Diggins (F&BS); Beccy Brown, Jill Douglas, Liz Purdy (HR&L); Gary Woods, Annette Sotheby (DCE)

Also in attendance: Dee Carty-Burland (Tees Active Ltd); Carrie Pearson-Loughlin (Unison), Mike Routledge (Unite)

Apologies: Cllr Kevin Faulks, Cllr Elsi Hampton, Cllr Mrs Sylvia Walmsley

PEO 17/17 Evacuation Procedure

The evacuation procedure was noted.

PEO 18/17 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

PEO 19/17 Minutes of the Meetings held on 24th April and 22nd May 2017 - For Approval

The minutes of meetings held on 24th April and 22nd May 2017 were approved by Members and signed by the Chairman.

PEO 20/17 Welfare Reform Monitoring

An update was given on the latest Welfare Reform Report (Q4 2016-17) which is produced on a six-monthly basis – this had been presented to Cabinet in July 2017. The report sought approval to create an additional class of local discretionary Council Tax discount of up to 100% for care leavers up to 25 years of age using statutory opportunities of the Local Government Finance Act.

Some of the achievements of the small Council team (Welfare Rights Unit) involved were highlighted and recognised. Over £2.6m additional benefits was paid in 2016-17 to some of the Borough's most vulnerable people.

Of the 454 families contacted by Welfare Rights Unit:-

- 122 families gained exemption from the Benefit Cap
- 39 families have moved out of the borough
- 188 families have decided not to engage with the Unit
- 4 families are still working with the Unit, and
- 101 families received Discretionary Housing Payment

In addition, 104 successful claims for unclaimed benefits totalling £400,170 have been made to date.

Attendance Allowance for over 85s – last year, successful claims were made for

combinations of Attendance Allowance, Pension Credit, Council Tax Support, Housing Benefit and Carer's Allowance. A total of £525,830 (annualised) in extra benefits has been claimed for this very vulnerable group of people.

Tees Credit Union has had a prominent High Street presence in the Love Stockton Café, and had been given an extension until December 2017 to remain in the premises until a new building could be found. Alternative premises in the High Street are being looked at.

Negotiation ongoing with Moneywise Credit Union (Newcastle) about a possible amalgamation with Tees Credit Union. Although operation would still continue from the current location, amalgamation would give improved back office services.

Discretionary housing payments – 102% of DWP budget was spent in 2016-17.

There is a requirement to make those associated with care leavers aware of what they are entitled to.

Crisis payments – responsibility moved from central government to local authorities to organise their payments. 26 local authorities have closed their schemes (out of 142), a further 41 have reduced provision by 60% and some were on the brink of closure (locally Redcar and Cleveland and Newcastle).

Most claims are in the "less than £50" category for fuel cards to be recharged and a large amount of small grants for crisis payments for gas and electricity.

Universal Credit full service roll-out scheduled for the Stockton area from April 2018, which will significantly expand the customer base. More detail to follow before end-December 2017.

Council Tax Collections – 98.5% of the annual debit collected after three years.

Members asked if any trends had been identified in relation to the data on rent arrears. It was explained that the number had actually reduced from around 4,000 in 2015-16 to 3,257 at the end of this financial year, a positive step compared to previous years. Figures from the Ministry of Justice also included private housing.

Members reported that Stockton and District Advice and Information Service (SDAIS) receive a large number of enquiries for financial and housing advice from the public. It was noted that a major change had taken place in the payment and delivery of benefits. The amount of outstanding debt (up to £13m) was shown.

Members discussed Universal Credit and some concerns associated with this, in particular the reported six-week gap to process benefits when people move onto Universal Credit (a time when people turn to the Council's social fund). Members expressed concern that some councils are withdrawing crisis support.

The Chair expressed thanks and appreciation of the positive work and progress carried out around benefits.

AGREED – that the information be noted.

**PEO
21/17**

Scrutiny Review of Sickness Absence

TEES VALLEY ATTENDANCE MANAGEMENT COMPARISONS

Comparison data on sickness absence across other Tees Valley Local Authorities had been requested by the Committee. It was noted that all organisations had similar policies, although Middlesbrough Council offered MRI scans to their employees. SBC were the only authority with an in-house Occupational Health service.

Members noted the different triggers for long-term absence - 21 days in Redcar and Cleveland. It was also noted that they reported on a different basis and excluded maternity related absence and contracts under one year.

Regarding short-term absence triggers, Members questioned if a formal meeting is always required should an individual meet this threshold. Officers informed the Committee that an amendment is being proposed as part of future policy which will mean a formal meeting is not always necessary (managers to make a judgement call).

TEES ACTIVE LTD

An overview was given by Tees Active Ltd, focusing on employee health and wellbeing, the main points as follows:-

- Over 2m visitors annually to 5 venues at Billingham Forum, Splash, Thornaby Pavilion, Thornaby Pool and Tees Barrage.
- Attendance and absence data was initially (2004-05) almost 14 days per FTE – this year was 6.5 days.
- A graphic from the Chartered Institute of Personnel Development was shown on how an organisation can work with its employee health and wellbeing – this was broken down into 5 areas:-
 - Health
 - Work
 - Values/principles
 - Collective/social
 - Personal growth
- One of the key starting points of attendance management was the prevention of ill health - encouraging staff to become more active, promoting and building strength and resilience and looking at rehabilitation packages after a period of absence.
- Sexual health promotions had been carried out with younger staff, the emphasis being on prevention – this had a positive impact.
- Early intervention was crucial to ensure staff remain or return quickly to

the workplace.

- Line Manager awareness played a vital role in shaping employee experience in the workplace and their personal development and growth.
- Support given to employees with disabilities in the workplace.

Members discussed staff attending work with a transferrable health condition and the responsibility of management to recognise this and discuss with staff, sending them home if inappropriate to be at work.

Members asked if staff were given information about NHS promotions, for example the flu jab. It was noted that no details had been given regarding this, although work had been previously carried out where an NHS funded organisation worked with staff on welfare rights, financial planning and health promotions, offering Tesco vouchers for financial hardship cases.

TRADE UNIONS

Input was given from Unison and Unite representatives, the key points as follows:-

- In the past not all services in the Council had dealt with sickness absence in the same way, leaving some people feeling singled-out. However, the approach was now much more consistent and members viewed welfare meetings and counselling services as more supportive and positive. The muscular-skeletal service can often speed up return to work if physiotherapy begins earlier. The new policy enables managers to issue warnings rather than a formal hearing to issue that warning in terms of long-term absence. The Occupational Health Nurse had received very positive feedback from members.
- An increase in mental health issues was evident and it was felt that line managers should be better trained so that early intervention could take place to hopefully alleviate long-term sickness in this area.
- It was stressed that pregnancy/maternity should not be recorded as sickness absence.

Members asked if pregnancy-related illness was included in sickness absence. It was noted that a particular category was used for this reporting and in the current policy, disability and pregnancy absence would be discounted.

Members asked if changing from Alliance to Insight in April 2016 had been beneficial, particularly now with early telephone intervention. It was noted that manual workers were sometimes fearful of technology and the one-to-one appointment was often preferred by them.

The Chairman asked Union representatives how they felt Stockton compared to other authorities - the response was positive, although it was felt that there was always room for improvement.

BETTER HEALTH AT WORK

The Council won the Better Health at Work Gold Award last year, and as part of the work towards the Continuing Excellence level, colleagues had been invited to attend focus group sessions to gather feedback on experiences around mental health and musculoskeletal issues. Key points were as follows:-

- Feedback very positive from musculoskeletal focus groups and accessing Body2Fit, although manual workers were often shy in coming forward. Staff generally accessing Body2Fit services whilst at work.
- There was a lack of awareness around DSE assessments and programmes.
- Work group looking at how to improve communications.
- A running group had been set up, with pilates planned for the New Year and back care programmes forthcoming.
- Mental health training of managers was crucial, and this was being looked at.
- Communication important around when people should access the services – sooner rather than later.
- Health advocates could promote this to wider Council.
- Stress not always work-related.
- Macmillan coffee morning to promote other health issues in addition to cancer.

Members asked if there was any local training available for mental health. It was noted that MIND delivered in-house training some years ago. Currently all courses full locally and nationally, therefore other options to be explored.

HIVE

In July 2017, the HIVE software platform asked Council staff the question - “are there any factors within your workplace environment which may be increasing the risk of staff becoming absent due to sickness?”

The response showed that there were issues around the workplace, for example facilities management – heating, lighting, ventilation, kitchen facilities and cleanliness. Some of those could be passed on and dealt with quickly, whereas other issues could take longer. The Smarter Working Team were looking at new ways of working across all directorates and results would be passed on to look further at those areas.

Members discussed heating and ventilation and asked what the short-term solution was for this long-term problem? It was noted that many surveys had been carried out in Municipal Buildings and other Council buildings and the Smarter Working Team were working on this. There were some large problems that were not easy to fix and work was ongoing to focus on investment to make the buildings as good as they could be.

Members asked if infection control was included as part of employee induction, in particular hand-washing. It was noted that hygiene programmes were carried out periodically, for example giving out hand sanitisers and recap on hygiene standards at Setting the Standards. This could be included in E-induction in addition to personal induction for staff.

Another communication package around infection control was about to be launched, linking in with the flu programme. Occupational Health would be offering vaccinations at work which would hopefully vaccinate more employees than the previous voucher system, where only 74 out of 200 vouchers were used for the flu jab in Boots.

Members commented on the feeling of guilt felt by some staff when not at their desk working, however it was acknowledged that there was a need to keep getting the message across that home working, where possible, should be encouraged.

Members also raised the issue of open-plan offices, and the increased potential of infection that such workplaces provide. More thought may be required around employee health and wellbeing when considering future moves to open-plan environments.

SICKNESS ABSENCE REPORT - QUARTER 1

There had previously been a trend of increasing absence since 2014-15.

Up-to-date information was provided, with a first quarter improvement of 1.8 days lost per FTE for 2017-18 when compared with previous years Q1 data (2.2 in 2016-17 and 2.1 in 2015-16). The annual target had been set at 8 days lost per FTE for 2017-18. Although difficult to draw conclusions as some quarters were usually better than others, it was a positive start to the year which suggests that staff may be using the leave policies more appropriately.

The same sickness absence patterns were being seen broadly across the organisation, although there had been a rise in days lost per FTE in Culture, Leisure & Events, and work was ongoing to address this.

WORK-LIFE BALANCE & ATTENDANCE AT WORK PROPOSED NEW POLICY

Work ongoing with the Attendance Management Policy and comments taken on board from the Committee and Shaping a Brighter Future Health and Wellbeing Culture Work Streams. A number of policies had been brought together in one place to make it easier for employees and managers to look at the range of support and interventions available. Proposed Draft Policy references employee support and pregnancy and disability related support, flexi-time, leave policy and sickness absence procedure.

The two main changes were:-

- To limit the carry-forward of holidays following a period of sickness to the balance of statutory holiday entitlement (up to 20 days), rather than statutory

holiday entitlement and plus 5 days as now.

- To streamline the attendance management processes to give a sanction, management guidance or a warning, at a meeting with an employee rather than requiring a further meeting to be arranged to do this.

Members asked for clarification around absence reasons, for example if an employee could not get to work due to adverse weather would this trigger the attendance process? It was noted that it would only be a disciplinary issue if the employee had made no effort to get to work. However, if a place of work was closed, this would not be unpaid leave. Flexible options were in place for such situations.

Members asked about the annual leave birthday year. It was noted that this was introduced as too many employees who had holidays left at the end of the financial year in March were on leave at the same time.

TRAINING UPTAKE

The Committee noted training uptake data in relation to Health and Safety courses for 2016-17 and 2017-18 (Q1). With the exception of asbestos awareness training, the Health and Safety Unit do not actively monitor training – this is a responsibility delegated to managers under the corporate health and safety policy.

Members were pleased to note that 67 employees had taken up asbestos awareness training during 2016-17.

AGREED – that the information be noted.

PEO
22/17 **Work Programme 2017-2018**

AGREED – that the Work Programme be noted.