

HUMAN RESOURCES COMMITTEE

Minutes of the meeting of the
HUMAN RESOURCES COMMITTEE held
in the Fire and Rescue Headquarters,
Barmston Mere, Sunderland on MONDAY
12 JULY 2010 at 10.30 a.m.

Present:

Councillor Charlton in the Chair

Councillors Boyes, M. Forbes and T. Wright.

Part I

Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were submitted to the meeting on behalf of Councillors N. Forbes and D. Trueman.

Declarations of Interest

Councillor Boyes declared a Personal Interest in relation to Item 4 – Fire and Rescue National Framework 2008-11 – HR Issues, Item 6 – Attendance Management and Item 8 – Occupational Health Unit – Annual Report.

Minutes

1. RESOLVED that the minutes of the Human Resources Committee held on 1 March 2010 (copy circulated) be confirmed and signed as a correct record.

Fire and Rescue National Framework 2008-11 – HR Issues

The Chief Fire Officer and the Personnel Advisor to the Authority submitted a joint report (copy circulated) on the Fire and Rescue Service National Framework 2008-11 which included fire and rescue staff issues. The report informed Members of the progress made and the future work programmes in respect of 'people' issues.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

Members were advised that while the intention was that the framework should remain in force for the three years of the comprehensive spending review period, this would be reviewed at the 2-year point. This was to ensure the National Framework remained relevant and continued to properly reflect the Government's performance expectations. CLG had confirmed that there would be no mid term review and that the 2008-11 Framework would run to 2011.

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer drew Members attention to the 'traffic light' system within the report, and in doing so highlighted the three actions categorised as 'yellow' meaning that risk had been mitigated to an acceptable level although further work was ongoing to further reduce risks. All other risks had been identified as green, meaning that risk had been mitigated to the lowest possible level.

Consideration having been given to the report, it was:-

2. RESOLVED to:-
 - (i) endorse the actions outlined in the report; and
 - (ii) further reports to be received as appropriate.

Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (RoSPA) Occupational Health and Safety Gold Award

The Chief Fire Officer submitted a report (copy circulated) advising Members that the Authority had been awarded the prestigious RoSPA Award for the fifth consecutive time.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

The Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (RoSPA) Occupational Health and Safety Achievement Awards was considered as an ultimate testimonial to an organisation's commitment to health and safety.

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer advised that the RoSPA awards were not just about reducing the number of accidents and cases of ill health at work, they also helped to ensure that organisations had good health and safety management systems in place.

The Authority's achievement was an excellent reflection of the commitment and team approach to the positive health and safety culture that existed within all levels throughout the service.

As the winner of the RoSPA Gold Award for the fifth consecutive time, the RoSPA Awards Adjudication Panel had also recommended that Tyne and Wear Fire and Rescue Authority be awarded the RoSPA Gold Medal Award for Occupational Health and Safety.

David Rawlings, RoSPA Awards Manager, had said "Tyne and Wear Fire and Rescue Authority continue to show a commitment to protecting the health and wellbeing of its employees and others. We hope other businesses and organisations will follow its lead and strive for continuous improvement of health and safety management."

Councillor Wright commended the Authority on their achievement.

Consideration having been given to the report, it was:-

3. RESOLVED to:-

- (i) recognise the accolade given to the Authority in achieving the RoSPA Gold Medal Award; and
- (ii) agree that the Chief Fire Officer convey congratulations and thanks to all staff and their representative bodies for their contribution to a safe working environment.

Attendance Management

The Chief Fire Officer, the Finance Office and the Personnel Advisor to the Authority submitted a joint report (copy circulated) advising Members of the outcomes associated with the approved sickness and absence management policy.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

In order to better inform the decision-making process, the national picture with regard to sickness absence was briefly outlined to Members.

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer went on to state that in the last reporting year (2008/09), the average level of employee absence had decreased by 0.2% to 3.3% of working time, equating to 7.4 days per employee. In the public sector the rate was 9.7 days, which was a decrease from 9.8 days in the previous year.

The report explained that the Chief Fire Officer had monitored the application of the absence management policy and confirmed that the policy was robustly applied throughout the Authority and was securing overall reductions in sickness absence and ill health retirements.

Members were advised that effective monitoring of absence enabled identification of:-

- the point at which specific management action was required based upon an individual's cumulative absence from work;
- the points at which specific management action was required was based upon an individual's continuous absence from work; and
- the point at which a review of an individual's absence was to be undertaken.

Members noted that the Occupational Health Scheme introduced in 1994 had helped to reduce absence within the Authority in recent years. The Deputy Chief Fire Officer advised that absence rates were 7.33 shifts/days lost for operational staff and 7.65 shifts/days lost for all staff which showed an overall reduction of 0.51 shifts lost from the previous year.

In relation to retirements, since 2000/01 the number of medical retirements had decreased year on year. Furthermore, after the last two years the Authority had seen no ill health retirements from the operational workforce. This was credit to the proactive approach taken by senior management assisted by the dedicated efforts of the Occupational Health Team.

Councillor Boyes in referring to paragraph 4.3 complimented the Authority on the early intervention of medical treatment and support given to firefighters.

Councillor Boyes then went on to enquire if a record was kept detailing every accident and injury in order to determine where the dangers lay. In response the Deputy Chief Fire Officer explained that a record was kept by the Authority's Health and Safety Department, he also stated that most accidents occurred on the premises, such as slips, trips and falls and that very few accidents occurred at operational level out on the job due to the vigorous training that firefighter staff received.

Councillor M. Forbes enquired how many senior managers had primary responsibility for managing absence as opposed to line managers. The Deputy Chief Fire Officer stated that all senior managers had primary responsibility for absence management through the Functional Management Team and that messages were communicated at Functional Management meetings and cascaded to other staff.

Councillor M. Forbes raised concerns regarding the cost and impact absence has on the staff who pick-up the extra work and responsibility when someone is off. The Deputy Chief Fire Officer agreed that other staff did have to pick-up the work of those on sick leave and that this was agreed at team meetings. However he reaffirmed that the Authority continued to try to reduce sickness absence and that data on sickness absence was circulated regularly to Managers to raise awareness.

To prevent sickness, a counselling service was available for Fire Authority staff. Members were informed that this was used mostly by employees to address issues affecting them in their personal lives i.e. outside of the job.

A debt counselling facility had also been made available for staff. All of this was being implemented in order to keep sickness absence figures down.

Consideration having been given to the matter, it was:-

4. RESOLVED to:-

- (i) endorse the actions taken;
- (ii) consider whether or not to make further reviews/recommendations in respect of absence management; and
- (iii) receive further reports as appropriate.

National Equality and Diversity Report

The Chief Fire Officer and Personnel Advisor to the Authority submitted a joint report (copy circulated) providing Members with an overview of the Community and Local Government (CLG) Fire and Rescue Service Equality and Diversity Report published in March 2010.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

Members were informed that the National Strategy required that Fire and Rescue Authorities provide information to CLG on their annual performance on equality and diversity.

Following publication of the first annual report in 2009, the National Equality and Diversity Delivery Partnership (NEDDP) recommended that future reports should include qualitative and quantitative data to further evidence progress.

Members were informed that in accordance with requirements, the Authority completed a questionnaire at the end of 2009 highlighting progress on equality and diversity issues for inclusion in the national report. As a result, the national report was more detailed and comprehensive in comparison to the 2009 report, with the report now being divided into six sections.

The national report also included updates and information regarding several national initiatives, national conferences and seminars.

The report referred to the National Action Plan for 2009, whereby details of the activities, initiatives and commitments being made by the NEDDP were included within the report. Details regarding the 2010 National Action Plan were also included.

Progress towards the National Strategy in 2009 was discussed, including workforce composition, recruitment, progression and retention.

Councillor T. Wright stated that the report was very pleasing. He also drew Members' attention to the fact that they had signed up to stretch targets for recruitment, therefore in order to monitor this he suggested that sessions be arranged to look at performance in relation to this topic.

Consideration having been given to the matter, it was:-

5. RESOLVED to:-

- (i) note the contents of the report; and
- (ii) receive further reports as appropriate.

Occupational Health Unit – Annual Report

The Chief Fire Officer submitted a report (copy circulated) providing Members' with a summary of the services provided by the Occupational Health Unit and its staff over the period 1 April 2009 to 31 March 2010, marking the seventeenth year of the operation of the Unit.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

Members were advised that the role of the OHU had evolved dramatically over the past three decades and had developed to add another dimension to health, safety and welfare by taking a holistic view of the workplace.

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer updated Members that the Unit had continued to support the broad aims of the Government health initiatives whilst primarily addressing specific areas of concern within the working environment of all employees of the Authority.

Services provided by OHU were outlined within the report. Members were informed that OHU consisted of three professional qualified nurses who provided good advice, clinics, health screening, health and fitness promotions, vaccinations and physiotherapy.

Members' attention was drawn to retirements, during which the Deputy Chief Fire Officer reported that from 1997, there had been a substantial increase in medical treatments up to 2000/01. Since then, work had continued to be undertaken to try to reduce these numbers and he was happy to report that for the last two years in succession the Authority had not had any ill health retirements in operational staff.

Councillor Forbes in referring to paragraph 3.5 relating to vaccinations and how they were once administered by individual's GPs but that guidance from the GPs General Practitioner Committee made it clear that the responsibility now lay with the employer, enquired had this been investigated. The Deputy Chief Fire Officer responded advising that as an employer, the Authority felt that they had no other option than to take the responsibility and associated costs on board. He added that all staff had been appropriately trained and that costs would reduce in future with firefighters who had already been immunised only needing booster vaccinations.

Councillor Forbes raised concern that the issue had not been fought by the Unions and requested that activity surrounding vaccinations and costs be monitored. The Deputy Chief Fire Officer confirmed that monitoring was being undertaken, nonetheless he would ensure to feedback Councillor Forbes' concerns.

Councillor Wright enquired as to who administered vaccinations, to which the Deputy Chief Fire Officer responded that administration was conducted by all four Occupational Health Unit staff, who he reiterated were professional qualified nurses.

Councillor Charlton in referring to the Accelerated Medical Scheme enquired how many firefighters utilised the facilities at Penrith to gain appropriate treatment for medical problems. The Deputy Chief Fire Officer advised that the facility at Jubilee House in Penrith was an excellent facility for those suffering with burns or muscular skeletal problems and that approximately thirty people per year visited the facility. He explained that those who visit the facility work very hard with the qualified staff focusing 100% on their injury. Members were informed that the facility was funded by the Firefighters Charity, which was sponsored by the Fire Authority employees.

Consideration having been given to the matter, it was:-

6. RESOLVED to:-

- (i) endorse the actions taken by the Chief Fire Officer; and
- (ii) to receive further reports as appropriate.

Stonewall Workplace Equality Index

The Chief Fire Officer, the Clerk to the Authority, the Finance Officer and Personnel Advisor to the Authority submitted a joint report (copy circulated) informing Members of the results of the Stonewall Workplace Equality Index (WEI) Top 100 Employers 2010.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

Members were advised that Stonewall was an organisation which worked to achieve equality and justice for lesbians, gay men and bisexual (LGB) people. The National WEI was a benchmarking exercise showcasing Britain's top employers for the 1.7 million LGB people in Britain.

The Authority had been a member for four years which demonstrated a commitment to LGB colleagues, service users and future employees.

Taking part in the WEI involved the Authority completing and submitting a questionnaire with supporting evidence demonstrating how the Service supported LGB people.

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer advised that in 2009 the Authority had been ranked 126th and in 2010 was ranked 101st, just 5% short of being in the top 100 list.

Since then, a Stonewall WEI Action Plan had been produced which accompanied the report for Members attention. The Action Plan detailed the areas for improvement where 68 points had been lost in the 2010 submission.

Councillor Forbes enquired if there were any financial implications involved, to which the Deputy Chief Fire Officer advised that the costs were very low and were primarily made up of staff time in taking the issue forward.

Councillor Wright took the opportunity to inform Members that a Pride Parade, organised by Northern Pride was scheduled to take place on Saturday 12 July 2010 starting at 12 pm at Newcastle Civic Centre and he encouraged Members' to attend.

Consideration having been given to the report, it was:-

7. RESOLVED to:-

- (i) endorse the content of the report;
- (ii) approval be given to the WEI Action Plan;
- (iii) continue to support the Service in working towards becoming a top 100 employer; and
- (iv) to receive further reports as appropriate.

Employee Advisory Group

The Chief Fire Officer, the Clerk to the Authority, the Finance Officer and Personnel Advisor submitted a joint report (copy circulated) informing Members of the launch of two Employee Advisory Groups (EAGs) within the Authority.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

Members were advised that following the publication of the Single Equality Scheme there was a need to establish EAGs within the Authority to further explore issues across six strands of equality and diversity (disability, race, gender, religion or belief, age and sexual orientation).

In terms of progress two groups had been set up. The sexual orientation EAG launched on 22 April, followed by the Disability EAG launching on 7 May 2010. Group Champions, Councillor Nick Forbes, Vice-Chair of the Fire Authority and Mr. John Hindmarch, Deputy Chief Fire Officer had addressed their respective groups at the initial launch meetings, which were well attended by employees who had volunteered to take part. Both Group Champions had vocalised their commitment to provide support on an ongoing basis.

Members were informed that at the meetings the Groups discussed and agreed Terms of Reference, including roles and responsibilities, group communication methods and themes for communication and marketing.

Next steps included the Diversity and Equality Advisor continuing to work with both EAGs to ensure that their work and progress was communicated effectively to the wider workforce.

It was envisaged that both EAGs would report regularly and provide the Authority with updates in order to widen Members' knowledge and understanding of the feelings of society.

Consideration having been given to the report, it was:-

8. RESOLVED to:-

- (i) note the contents of the report;
- (ii) endorse the creation and development of the EAGs; and
- (iii) receive further reports as appropriate.

Regional Firefighter Recruitment Campaign

The Chief Fire Officer, the Clerk to the Authority, the Finance Officer and Personnel Advisor submitted a joint report (copy circulated) advising Members of the outcomes of the recent Regional Firefighter Recruitment Campaign which commenced on 4 November 2009.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer outlined that all four Fire and Rescue Services in the North East had participated in the campaign and that the report specifically considered the effectiveness of the Positive Action Programme, brand campaign and outcomes of the process relating to the diversification of the workforce.

He went on to describe that from January to October 2009 a Positive Action Programme was implemented which included recruitment process workshops and fitness sessions.

Members' attention was then drawn to some amendments that had been made to the national firefighter selection process, which had been implemented following a review of previous recruitment campaigns, to make the process more efficient and cost effective.

Statistical data was presented within the report detailing a breakdown of the current workforce compared to the previous year's figures. Information regarding the recruitment campaign which commenced on 4 November 2009 was then provided, including the number of applications viewed online and downloaded. The data was then broken down into age profile, gender profile and ethnicity profile.

Members were advised further that from 10,648 potential candidates, 4,379 applicants had submitted a completed application form, equating to a 41% return.

Moving on to the recruitment analysis, Members were advised that 205 candidates who were part of the Positive Action Programme submitted an application form and had been tracked through the entire process. The campaign had also seen a significant increase in the number of female and BME candidates compared to the 2008 campaign.

Further details were then provided on the analysis which could be seen in detail contained within the report.

The data collected indicated that the marketing initiatives, external marketing and positive action had made a significant impact on attracting a higher percentage of under-represented groups to the recruitment process.

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer also stated that it was likely that there would be sufficient candidates within the system from the recruitment process to meet the Authority's staffing requirements for the next two to three years.

Councillor Forbes enquired in relation to electronic testing for candidates what kind of electronic testing this would involve. The Deputy Chief Fire Officer advised that currently written tests were conducted in an exam type environment and were required to go through a marking process afterwards. It was this that was proposed could potentially become an electronic process, with candidates being offered the facility to complete assessments via the Authority's intranet using a personal secure and confidential ID number.

Councillor Forbes responded stating that the integrity of candidates responses was the only reservation she would have, which the Deputy Chief Fire Officer confirmed would certainly be something that the Authority would consider.

Councillor Boyes then went on to enquire if explanatory answers could be provided in an electronic test, to which the Deputy Chief Fire Officer advised that as part of the research that was undertaken by the Authority that would certainly be one of the issues to be considered.

Councillor Wright in referring to the personal data collected from those that had applied enquired do the Authority simply asked the question 'Do you consider yourself to have a disability?' He explained he was asking the question because he was aware that some people do not consider themselves as having a disability when in fact they sometimes do. The Deputy Chief Fire Officer advised that guidance from Government was that a disability was self declared and that candidates were also asked do they have dyslexia, because the Authority work to target this.

Councillor Boyes raised that some sufferers of dyslexia were not aware that they had the condition and there were others that do know but ignore it. The Deputy Chief Fire Officer stated that the Authority go so far as to raise awareness of dyslexia and work alongside the Dyslexia Foundation in doing so. The Authority also ensure that

individual's recognise this and steps are taken to make sure that they are fairly assessed.

Consideration having been given to the matter, it was:-

9. RESOLVED to:-

- (i) note the contents of the report;
- (ii) endorse the actions of the Chief Fire Officer instigating a full review of the process;
- (iii) support the development of an enhanced Positive Active Programme, build successes and include specific areas highlighted within the report; and
- (iv) to receive further reports as appropriate.

(Signed) D. CHARLTON,
Chairman.

