

HUMAN RESOURCES COMMITTEE

Minutes of the meeting of the
HUMAN RESOURCES COMMITTEE
Held in the Fire and Rescue Headquarters,
Barmston Mere, Sunderland on MONDAY
8 July 2013 at 10.30 am

Present:

Councillor Bell in the Chair

Councillors Haley, Mole, Price, T. Wright, Mortimer and Renton.

Part I

Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were submitted to the meeting on behalf on Councillor Stephenson.

Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

Minutes

1. RESOLVED that the minutes if the Human Resources Committee held on 11 February 2013, Part I, be confirmed as a correct record.

Attendance Management

The Chief Fire Officer submitted a report providing Members with the outcomes of the Sickness and Absence Management Policy for the last reporting year.

DCFO Hindmarch explained the national situation. In doing so he stated that in the last reporting year (2011/2012), the average level of employee absence in all sectors had fallen compared with the previous year from 7.7 days per employee per year (2010/2011) to 6.8 days of working time.

The private services and public sector reported the largest reductions, however there were high variations across organisations. Public sector absence had fallen to the lowest level since 2002 with a figure of 7.9 days per employee per year, a decrease of 1.2 days from the previous year.

Members were advised that on average, public and non-profit employees had approximately two days more absence per year than their private sector counterparts. Manual workers had one more day absence, on average, than non-manual workers. Absence levels also tended to increase with organisational size.

The most common cause of absence was illness, in particular minor illnesses such as colds, flu, stomach upsets, headaches and migraines for both manual and non-manual employees. Musculoskeletal injuries, back pain and stress were the next most common causes of short-term absence. Stress was more common for non-manual workers, whilst musculoskeletal injuries and back pain were more common for manual workers.

Fewer employers ranked absences not due to genuine ill health among their top five most common causes of short-term absence compared with last year. Non-genuine absence was reportedly most common in private sector organisations.

The most common causes of long-term absence were stress, acute medical conditions (for example stroke, heart attack and cancer), musculoskeletal injuries, mental ill-health and back pain. Musculoskeletal injuries and back pain were particularly common for manual workers, whilst stress was more common for non-manual workers. Stress and musculoskeletal injuries were particularly common causes of long-term absence in the public sector.

Members noted that the Chief Fire Officer had monitored the application of the absence management policy and confirmed that the policy, robustly applied throughout the Authority, was helping to reduce sickness absence and ill health retirements. It also further supported and enhanced the current provision of health services such as Occupational Health, which was available to all staff.

Members were referred to the graphs contained within the report which demonstrated that the Service's performance over the years had improved.

The overall performance absence rate was 5.93 days/shifts lost which was almost 2 days less than the average for public sector organisations. However, this represented an increase of 0.33 days/shifts on the previous year, perhaps symptomatic of the massive organisational change the Service had just been through.

The graphs showed a substantial increase in medical retirements up to 2000/2001, with medical retirements accounting for over 70% of all retirements from the wholetime service. However, due to the pro-active approach taken by senior management assisted by the dedicated efforts of the Occupational Health Team, since 2000/2001 the number of medical retirements had been decreasing year on year, culminating in a radical reversal of the trend whereby there was now proportionately less medical retirements than ordinary retirements.

Members were advised that overall, in terms of sickness absence, the trend continued on a downward trajectory with the present year seeing the second best results for the last sixteen years. All efforts continued to be focussed maintaining these reductions in this and future years.

Councillor Price commented that it was pleasing to see no retirements on medical grounds.

The Chair commended the Authority for redeploying staff on medical grounds and commented that she hoped that this could continue in to the future.

Councillor T. Wright stated that the report was very pleasing. However, drew attention to the fact that employees were being asked to take on additional work, therefore the Authority was not to rest on its laurels and keep a close eye on staff stress levels.

Councillor Haley stated that changes in retirement age would be an issue to look for in future, especially if the Authority planned to ask employees to work longer.

Upon consideration, it was: -

2. 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.

Equality Peer Challenge Results

The Chief Fire Officer and the Personnel Advisor submitted a joint report informing Members of the results of the Authority's Equality Peer Challenge against the 'excellent' level of the Fire and Rescue Service Equality Framework.

Area Manager Robson advised that the FRS Equality Framework was designed to enable fire and rescue services to measure their performance in relation to equality. It had three levels: 'developing', 'achieving' and 'excellent'.

Members were informed that a formal assessment was required in order to achieve 'excellent' status. Therefore, in August 2012 the Authority undertook a mock challenge and recommendations from this exercise had been progressed further in February 2013. A narrative was submitted together with a self assessment and case studies which presented a case for 'excellent'.

A Peer Challenge, organised by the Local Government Association had subsequently been carried out between 26th and 28th March 2013 by trained peers and involved an assessment of the Authority's own self-assessment.

Area Manager Robson was able to report that following a rigorous and intensive process, the peer team had awarded the Authority 'excellent' status. A certificate had been received and the FRS Equality Framework 'excellent' logo could now be used to promote the Authority's success and further demonstrate its on-going commitment to equality and inclusion.

A report summarising the findings of the challenge had been drafted by the peer team and was currently in the process of being finalised.

Members were informed that as well as identifying some areas for consideration to assist the Authority to improve further, the Peer Team highlighted some examples of innovative projects and initiatives.

Next steps involved the production of an improvement action plan to include the areas for consideration identified by the Peer Team. A presentation of the results would also be provided to managers and key employees to assist in shaping the plan.

Members were informed that the 'excellent' level of the FRS Equality Framework demonstrated the Authority's on-going commitment to equality for all. The Authority would now be recognised as an ambassador for equality, on a journey of continuous improvement, promoting equality and inclusion in all areas of its business. The improvements that would be achieved through further development around the equality and inclusion agenda, steered by the Peer Challenge results, would benefit the diverse communities of Tyne and Wear and all employees of the Tyne and Wear Fire and Rescue Service.

Councillor Haley commended the Authority on its achievement and stated that it was good to see that it had stood up to the challenge. He added that the Chair of the Fire Commission supported the peer challenge.

3. RESOVLED to:-

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

Firefighter Pension Scheme Consultation Responses

The Chief Fire Officer, the Clerk to the Authority, the Finance Officer and the Personnel Advisor submitted a joint report updating Members on the Firefighter Pension Scheme Consultation Responses.

DCFO Hindmarch introduced the report. In doing so he explained that Members would recall that the Coalition Government commissioned Lord Hutton to chair the Independent Public Service Pensions Commission to review public service pensions and to make recommendations on how they could be made sustainable and affordable in the long-term and fair to both public sector workers and the taxpayer.

Area Manager Robson stated that on 29 November 2012 the Government published a consultation paper setting out proposals to increase the level of employee contribution rates in the firefighters' pension schemes by 1.28 percentage points, on average, from April 2013.

At its meeting held on 11 February 2013 Members of the Human Resources Committee approved that the Chief Fire Officer submit a response to the consultation.

Since the statutory consultation on contribution increases closed, it was confirmed that the Department had considered the responses and evidence had been received. On the 26 March the Department published its response to the consultation and these were outlined within the report.

Members were advised that the necessary amendments to the legislation had been made and details of the contribution rate increases were attached for information. Councillor Haley enquired if 'abatements' could be explained. In response, the Personnel Advisor stated that the context was about people drawing high profile pensions from jobs and then continuing to do the same in future jobs.

DCFO Hindmarch added that Abatement going forward would be decided by the Authority, however some finer details were still awaited from DCLG. Lord Hutton's proposals were to discount abatement, however DCLG was very keen to pursue it. It was confirmed that currently the Authority did not abate and that a future HR Committee report would be submitted requesting Members to consider using their discretion regarding abatement.

Councillor Mole stated that he would discourage abatement and was of the view that employees work hard for their pension and that they should be free to do as they please when they leave the Authority.

Councillor Wright enquired how the numbers were looking of employees opting out of the pension scheme. DCFO Hindmarch stated that at the present time the Authority was not seeing large numbers of opt-outs. However, should contribution rates continue to increase, then it was expected that a firefighter would pay 13.2% by April 2014, therefore this may create more opt-outs.

Councillor Price raised concern regarding employees' pension contributions increasing, particularly when costs of living were rising and wages were pegged.

DCFO Hindmarch confirmed that further details regarding pensionable pay, abatement rules and proposed increases in contribution rates would be available by September 2014.

4. RESOLVED that:-

- (i) consideration be given to the report; and
- (ii) receive further reports as appropriate

Occupational Health Unit – Annual Report

The Chief Fire Officer submitted a report providing Members with a summary of the services provided by the Occupational Health Unit (OHU) and its staff over the period 1 April 2012 to 31 March 2013.

Area Manager Robson explained that this was the twentieth year of operation for the Occupational Health Unit. It was becoming increasingly evident that the face of Occupational Health was changing. Members were advised that for many years the sole focus had quite rightly been the prevention of work related ill health, however there had been a steady change in the workplace in recent years and along with that the role of Occupational Health and associated staff had had to move forward in terms of direction, practice and attitude.

It was confirmed that the OHU was now fully Nurse led with the nurses being the first point of contact for all clients. The vast majority of clients' issues were resolved at this point with only certain cases being referred for Service Medical Advisor (SMA) opinion.

The Unit had achieved the Silver Better Health at Work award in January 2012, which was a regional Public Health initiative headed by Gateshead College with support from employers, PCTs, Trade Unions etc. aimed at improving the health of the North East workforce. Members were advised that there were three stages to the award, Bronze, Silver and Gold, with each stage taking a year to achieve. It was not intended to undertake the assessment for the Gold award until 2014/2015 in order to pursue the Faculty of Occupational Medicines Occupational Health Accreditation scheme.

A list of services and activities offered by the OHU was contained within the report.

In terms of health surveillance data, this year the OHU had collected more comprehensive data from operational Health Surveillance in order to establish the effectiveness of the process. A table was included within the report detailing the outcomes from the data collected for 2012/2013.

It was confirmed that the outcomes when viewed alongside the ever improving accident figures as well as the attendance it did suggest a healthy workforce as well as safe practices. Further work was required to provide a more accurate profile of the health of employees and it was anticipated that a computer based medical records system would allow this work to be completed.

Members were informed regarding health and fitness promotion, including vaccinations, physiotherapy and accelerated medical scheme.

In terms of counselling and welfare support, Area Manager Robson advised that counselling services were provided to Authority staff through an internal specialist Welfare Officer, who happened to be specifically trained in psychological problems associated with the workplace.

Members were advised that the annual total number of new referrals appeared to have stabilised over the last five years. Hopefully, with the increased awareness of self-care, self-monitoring and early intervention, the figures may reduce.

Moving on to training, Members were informed that Occupational Health staff had undertaken a variety of training and updating during the year. These were individually outlined within the report.

Area Manager Robson referred Members to the chart showing the retirement profile of the Service from 1997. In doing so, he advised that this clearly showed a substantial increase in medical retirements upto 2000/2001, with medical retirements accounting for over 70% of all retirements from the wholetime service. However, since 2000/2001 the number of medical treatments continued to fall. Members were advised that current thinking would suggest that organisations that successfully manage ill health retirements should look to having no more retirements than 3 for every 1000 employees.

Councillor Wright referred to the chart detailing the number of clients who had received counselling and welfare support. In doing so he drew attention to the fact the figures had been miscalculated. Councillor Haley requested that an amended version be submitted to the next Committee meeting.

The chair commended the OHU for all of their efforts, particularly given the present challenging times.

5. It was RESOLVED:-

- (i) that the actions taken by the Chief Fire Officer be endorsed; and
- (ii) further reports be received as appropriate

2013 CIPD Awards

The Chief Fire Officer and the Personnel Advisor submitted a joint report informing Members of the Authority's recent success at the prestigious CIPD North East of England HR&D Awards.

DCFO Hindmarch advised Members that the CIPD NE awards was the largest of its kind in the region and allowed organisations the opportunity to showcase the impact innovative HR initiatives had on their employees and business success.

Members were informed that the Authority had supported the CIPD Awards by participating annually since the Awards had been launched seven years ago, and had been finalists in each entry.

The Authority's lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (lgbt) network group had been entered into the Diversity and Inclusion Award Category, the reasons for which were accompanied at Appendix A of the report.

DCFO Hindmarch was pleased to announce on behalf of the Chief Fire Officer that the Authority was successful in achieving the Diversity and Inclusion in the Workplace Award for the second year running. This meant that the Authority had been recognised once again for outstanding practice by leading organisations and HR professionals.

Members of the Network Group had clearly demonstrated their commitment to diversity and inclusion. Furthermore, winning the award recognised the work that they undertake to promote lgbt inclusion in the workplace.

The Chair expressed thanks on behalf of the Human Resources Committee to all those involved.

6. It was RESOLVED to: -

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

Assisted Car Purchase Scheme, Withdrawal of Scheme

The Chief Fire Officer, the Clerk to the Authority, the Finance Officer and the Personnel Advisor submitted a joint report regarding the withdrawal of the Assisted Car Purchase Scheme.

The DCFO explained that the Authority currently had in place a provision whereby any person who was conditioned to the Essential, Casual or Occasional Car User Schemes and

wanted to change their vehicle, could seek the approval of the Chief Fire Officer to apply for a loan under the Authorities' Assisted Car Purchase Scheme.

The scheme had been in place for a number of years, however over time the scheme had become less viable for several reasons as follows: -

- The scheme had become very unpopular with only one individual accessing the scheme in the past year. There were no records of anyone accessing the scheme in previous years;
- There was a cost to the Authority as repayment interest rates were charged at less than the current market rates: and
- There was a degree of additional workload attached to administering the scheme at a time when departments were shrinking.

It was therefore proposed by the Chief Fire Officer to withdraw the scheme as it was not in the Authority's interest for it to continue.

The Chair enquired if the withdrawal of the scheme would adversely affect the person who was currently under the scheme. In response, DCFO Hindmarch explained that the Authority would see that particular employee through the scheme whilst not accepting any future applications.

Councillor Price enquired if there was any reason why the scheme was not popular. DCFO Hindmarch explained that originally the scheme was set up to allow an operational officer to buy a suitable vehicle which they could use to respond to an incident. Since then, other schemes had come onto the market and private lease schemes were becoming more popular and cost effective.

Councillor Price enquired further what would happen if an employee currently under the scheme moved to another authority. In response DCFO Hindmarch advised that by agreement, usually the other authority would take over the scheme.

7. RESOLVED to:

- (i) approve the withdrawal of the 'Essential/Casual Care User Assisted Car Purchase Scheme' Admin Procedure 3:2; and
- (ii) receive further reports as appropriate.

Local Government (Access to Information) (Variation Order) 2006

At the instance of the Chairman, it was:-

8. RESOLVED that in accordance with Section 100(A)4 of the Local Government Act 1972, the public be excluded during consideration of the remaining business as it was considered likely to reveal the identity of an individual, or the disclosure of exempt information relating to any consultations or negotiations, in connection with any labour relations matter arising between the Authority and employees of the Authority (including the

Authority holding that information) (Local Government Act 1972, Schedule 12A, Part I, Paragraphs 1, 2 and 4).

(Signed) J. BELL,
Chairman.

Note:-

The above minutes comprise only those relating to items during which the meeting was open to the public.

Additional minutes in respect of other items are included in Part II.

