

HUMAN RESOURCES COMMITTEE

Minutes of the meeting of the
HUMAN RESOURCES COMMITTEE held
in the Fire and Rescue Headquarters,
Barmston Mere, Sunderland on MONDAY 9
JULY 2012 at 10.30 am

Present:

Councillor Bell in the Chair

Councillors Hayley, Mole, Waller, and Renton

Part I

Apologies

Apologies for absence were submitted to the meeting on behalf of Councillors Stephenson and Wright.

Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

Minutes

1. RESOLVED that the minutes of the Human Resources Committee held on 13 February 2012 (copy circulated) be confirmed as a correct record.

Attendance Management

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

(For copy report – see original minutes).

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer stated that in the last reporting year, the average level of employee absence in all sectors remained steady. However, whilst absence levels remained reasonably static across all the main sectors, absence in public and non-profit sectors was notably higher than the private sector.

Absence was lowest in the private sector, particularly in manufacturing and production organisations, where levels had reduced in comparison with previous years.

The most common cause of absence was illness, in particular minor illness such as colds, flu, stomach upsets, headaches and migraines for both manual and non-manual employees. The next most significant caused of short-term absence for manual workers was musculoskeletal injuries and back pain followed by stress, home/family responsibilities and recurring medical conditions such as asthma, angina and allergies. Among manual workers, stress, musculoskeletal injuries, back pain and recurring medical conditions were ranked, behind minor illness, as the most significant causes of short-term absence.

Members were referred to a graph which demonstrated indicative sickness absence rates showing a downward trend since 1997/1998 to date.

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer then drew Members' attention to a separate graph showing retirement statistics. In doing so he stated that the chart 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. Last year was the first year in four whereby ill health retirements occurred from the operational workforce. It was expected that medical retirements may increase, particularly due to the organisation shrinking thus there being a reduction in potential redeployment opportunities for operational staff that were no longer able to undertake the full role of a firefighter due to health problems.

Councillor Mole commented that he was aware that people go to work when they are ill, because they are too afraid to call in sick. Councillor Mole enquired if that occurred at the Fire Authority. The Deputy Chief Fire Officer responded advising that sickness was managed at line management level, and there had been occasions when staff had been sent home because they were obviously too ill to be at work. Members were advised that the Fire Authority could not afford to have unfit workers on site.

Councillor Bell commended the work undertaken by the Occupational Health Unit stating that the downward trend in sickness absence was testament to the work they

did. The Human Resources Committee expressed an interest in visiting the OHU facility which the Deputy Chief Fire Officer agreed to arrange.

Councillor Haley enquired how the performance of the Tyne and Wear Fire and Rescue Authority compared with other authorities. The Deputy Chief Fire Officer responded advising that he was unable to obtain the figures, however from his knowledge he expected that Tyne and Wear were near the top.

Councillor Bell thanked the Deputy Chief Fire Officer for his informative report.

Consideration having been given to the report, 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

CIPD 2012 Award Winners

The Chief Fire Officer, Clerk to the Authority, the Finance Officer and Personnel Advisor submitted a joint report (copy circulated) informing Members of the Service's recent success at the CIPD North East of England HR&D Awards.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer explained that the CIPD North East of England hold an annual awards ceremony which provided an opportunity for businesses and organisations to be recognised for notable practice in the field of HR and Development.

The awards were the biggest of their type in the region and demonstrated how businesses and organisations had worked hard in order for their staff to become more qualified, talented and happier in the workplace.

In terms of the nominees, there were three entries this year, namely Diversity and Inclusion in the Workplace Award, Engagement and Well-being Award (focus on Engagement) and Engagement and Wellbeing Award (focus on Well-being).

Members were advised that the Service was shortlisted under the Diversity and Inclusion in the Workplace Award for the work of the EAGD. This Award was to recognise that the Service value and develop equality and/or a diverse workforce. Entrants had been required to demonstrate how initiatives had engaged employees and delivered positive results.

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer stated that the judges had been so impressed with the work of the EAGD, that they came to visit group members to find out more. Then, following their visit the judges praised the group for their enthusiasm and passion and the excellent progress that they had made in relation to diversity and inclusion.

For the Service to have won the award was a great testament to the work that the EAGD and group members had undertaken.

Members were advised that winning the award had positive implications for equality and fairness within the workplace, and that it was pleasing to see that the work of the organisation had been recognised.

Councillor Bell remarked that for the Service to receive the award was a fantastic achievement and in doing so congratulated all those that been involved.

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

3. RESOLVED to:-

- (i) endorse the actions taken;
- (ii) congratulate all those involved; and
- (iii) 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 2011 to 31 March 2012.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer advised that the Occupational Health Unit had been in operation for nineteen years and continued to develop.

The Services and activities provided by the Unit were outlined within the report. Health surveillance remained the core activity of the Unit, which worked to seek to detect early changes in health due mainly to workplace processes and protect health.

Members were advised that in the current year the Unit had collected more comprehensive data from operational Health Surveillance in order to establish the effectiveness of the process. The data represented approximately one third of the operational staff, and a table detailing the outcomes was included within the report.

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer explained that stress, anxiety and depression had slightly increased, and that these were split 50:50 in terms of whether it was caused work related or non-work related. Members were advised that this could be due to a

change of back office work arrangements where roles are uncertain and the organisation is changing as it moves forward.

The staff within the OHU were involved in a number of other functions throughout the year, including Provision of Occupational Health Services to Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service and providing support to the Regional Recruitment / Occupational Health Group, North East Occupational Health Nurses Group, Employee Advisory Group on Disability and Medical Records Audit.

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer reinforced that a comprehensive Occupational Health System was in place to monitor sickness to get people back to work when they are deemed fit enough. The mission statement "Your Health Matters" reaffirmed that the Authority was committed to investing in the organisations most valuable asset, the health and well-being of the individual.

Councillor Mole commended the report.

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

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

Pension Autoenrolment

The Chief Fire Officer, Clerk to the Authority, the Finance Officer and Personnel Advisor submitted a joint report (copy circulated) updating Members of the latest pension scheme from Government.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer introduced Area Manager Robson to present the report.

Members were advised that according to the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) around seven million people were not saving enough for their retirement. The new, rather complex legislative provisions requiring auto-enrolment by employers of the great majority of employees into a work-based pension scheme of a specified standard was intended to combat that problem.

The start date for auto-enrolment was to be staged, however all employers would need to commence the process at some between October 2012 and September 2016. It was reported that the actual start date for the Authority would be based upon information held by the regulator at April 2012 on the number of employees and was likely to be September 2013.

Area Manager Robson explained that employers would be able to choose which pension scheme they automatically enrol jobholders into, however the scheme must meet a quality test. In the Authority's case, it was likely to be the Local Government Pension Scheme for non-operational staff and the new Firefighters' Pension Scheme for operational staff.

Information was provided to Members' in relation to eligibility and monitoring compliance.

Councillor Haley enquired if someone did not want to join the approved scheme, would the Authority pay contributions to a pension scheme of their choice. In response Area Manager Robson confirmed that the Authority would only pay contributions towards its chosen scheme, not the scheme chosen by an individual.

Councillor Bell sought clarification regarding whether the Authority would auto-enrol employees onto a chosen scheme, to which Area Manager Robson confirmed that indeed it would.

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer added that the Authority would automatically enrol jobholders and that individuals did not have the option to ask not to be enrolled. However, there was an opt-out facility. If an opt-out occurs in the first month of being enrolled the member and the employer receive a refund of their contributions.

Upon consideration of the report, it was:-

5. RESOLVED to:-

- (i) note the contents of the report;
- (ii) endorse the actions taken by the Chief Fire Officer; and
- (iii) receive further reports as appropriate

Firefighters' Pension Schemes – Heads of Agreement

The Chief Fire Officer, the Finance Officer and the Personnel Advisor submitted a joint report (copy circulated) setting out the parameters to govern scheme design for the Firefighters' Pension Scheme in England to be introduced from April 2015 ('the 2015 scheme').

(For copy report – see original minutes)

Members were advised that following the publication of the Independent Public Services Pensions Commission Report led by Lord Hutton, the potential implications for employees of the Authority who were members of either the Firefighters' Pension Scheme (FPS), the New Firefighter's Pension Scheme (NFPS) or the Local Government Pension Scheme (LGPS) had been considered.

In particular, a key recommendation that was expected to impact on all public sector employees who were members of pension schemes, was to move the final pension from being based on final salary, to a pension based upon career average earnings and known as Career Average Related Earnings (CARE). This measure would potentially have the single biggest impact on employee expectations but would also in terms of cost to the Exchequer, deliver the biggest cost savings over the lifetime of the pension payment.

Members were advised that there would be full protection for the accrued rights of existing scheme members, and that there would also be transitional protections for qualifying existing members. These were fully outlined within the report.

The main parameters of the scheme were set out as follows: -

- A pension scheme design based on career average re-valued earnings;
- A provisional accrual rate of 1/58.7th of pensionable earnings each year, subject to further agreement on outstanding issues;
- No cap on how much pension can be accrued;
- A revaluation rate of active members' benefits in line with average weekly earnings;
- Pensions in payment and deferred benefits to increase in line with Prices Index (currently Consumer Prices Index);
- Average member contributions of 13.2% from April 2015, with some protection for new entrants. However, Government would review the impact of the proposed 2012-13 contribution changes, including the effect of membership opt-outs, before taking final decisions on how future increases would be delivered in 2013-14 and 2014-15, and in the new scheme;
- Flexible retirement from the scheme's minimum pension age of 55, built around the scheme's normal pension age of 60, with members able to take their pension from minimum pension age as follows:
 - For all active members aged 57 or more at retirement, 2015 scheme benefits taken before Normal Pension Age would be actuarially reduced with reference to the 2015 scheme's Normal Pension Age, rather than the deferred pension age;
 - All other members would have their 2015 scheme benefits actuarially reduced on a cost neutral basis from the scheme's deferred pension age;
- The Normal Pension Age would be subject to regular review;
- Authority initiated early retirement for members of the 2015 scheme, from age 55, to be in accordance with the arrangements set out in Part 3, Rule 6 of the New Firefighters' Pension Scheme 2006
- Abatement to continue;
- Optional lump sum by commutation at a rate of £12 for every £1 of pension foregone.

Councillor Mole in referring to paragraph 6.1 of the report enquired who would carry the burden of the increased contribution rates, to which Area Manager Robson stated that this arrangement had not yet been confirmed. It could be an increase to employees, employers or shared between both groups.

Councillor Bell enquired what would happen if the pensionable age changes. Area Manager Robson explained if that were to occur then there may be further financial implications, which could have a dramatic effect on employee contributions.

Upon consideration of the report, it was:-

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

Equality Strategy

The Chief Fire Officer, the Clerk to the Authority, the Finance Officer and the Personnel Advisor submitted a joint report (copy circulated) advising Members with regard to the new Equality Strategy 2012-2016 for the Authority.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

Area Manager Robson referred Members to the Equality Strategy 2012-2016 which had been tabled for Members' information. In doing so, he advised Members that the document had been produced to comply with the requirements of the Equality Act 2010 and replaced the Authority's Single Equality Scheme and Corporate Equality Plan.

Members were reminded that under the Equality Act 2010, the Authority must have due regard to the need to:-

- Eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation;
- Advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not; and
- Foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.

Members were advised that the Authority had consulted widely on equality information contained within the Equality Data Report and that during the process a great deal of feedback was provided, which had been included as an appendix to the Strategy.

The Equality Data Report would be reviewed annually and progress on the objectives in the Equality Action Plan would be reported on each year.

Furthermore, the Equality and Human Rights Commission would carry out an assessment of the equality information published, and a report on the findings of that was expected to be available by mid 2012. At which point, a further report would be brought before the Human Resources Committee.

Following a suggestion from staff, an overview of the Strategy had been produced as a pull-out document. This set out the Authority's vision, objectives and key achievements and outcomes. Overleaf, there was a diagram which provided a pictorial view of how the Strategy worked.

Councillor Mole commented that he felt the Authority were moving in the right direction and that everything appeared to have been taken into account. It was evident that the Equality Strategy was a priority for the Authority and he looked forward to reviewing progress over forthcoming years. Councillor Mole encouraged Members to express their views.

Councillor Haley commented that equality was all about external engagement with the community, however it also worked integrally to contribute towards maintaining a healthy workforce. Area Manager Robson concurred and stated that the Authority was very committed to working to prevent sickness absence.

Councillor Bell appreciated that the Strategy was a working document stating that it was very easy to read and clearly demonstrated the Authority's commitment to equality.

Councillor Mole enquired if the Authority looked at best practice regarding equality with other EU countries. The Deputy Chief Fire Officer responded advising that Tyne and Wear were leading other EU countries in this regard. Nonetheless, one of the first things Tyne and Wear did when pulling the Strategy together was to review other best practice. This would be discussed at the Stonewall Conference.

The Chief Fire Officer stated that equality and diversity focused on what was best for the organisation, the workforce and the communities that the Authority serves.

Councillor Mole was happy to share with others the good work that the Authority did.

Councillor Bell concurred stating that the Authority should carry out more promotional work to celebrate its achievements.

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

7. RESOLVED to:-

- (i) note the contents of the report
- (ii) endorse the actions of the Chief Fire Officer;
- (iii) comment as appropriate on the Equality Strategy; and
- (iv) 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.