

HUMAN RESOURCES COMMITTEE

Minutes of the meeting of the
HUMAN RESOURCES COMMITTEE held
in the Fire and Rescue Headquarters,
Barmston Mere, Sunderland on MONDAY,
7TH JULY, 2008 at 10.00 a.m.

Present:

Councillor Bolland in the Chair

Councillors Boyes, Cooney, Jordan, Woodwark and Wright.

Part I

Appointment of Chairman

1. RESOLVED that Councillor Bell be appointed as Chairman for the ensuing period to the next annual meeting.

Apologies for Absence

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

Appointment of Vice-Chairman

This item of business was to be deferred to a future meeting of the Committee when all Members were in attendance.

Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

Minutes

2. RESOLVED that the minutes of the Human Resources Committee held on 18th February, 2008, Part I (copy circulated) be confirmed and signed as a correct record.

Occupational Health Unit – Annual Report

The Chief Fire Officer submitted a report (copy circulated) advising Members of the services provided by the Occupational Health Unit and its staff between 1st April, 2007 to 31st March, 2008.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer outlined the report, and in doing so highlighted that the role of Occupational Health had evolved dramatically over the past two decades by taking a more holistic view of the work place.

Members were advised that in terms of the services provided by the Unit, health surveillance remained the core activity. It sought to detect early changes in health due mainly to workplace processes.

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer explained that health screening was a fundamental aspect of Occupational Health practice as it establishes a base line of health on which to monitor the effects of the working environment and process on individual employees. The Unit had developed health screening programmes for specific risk categories which were each listed in the report. The Deputy Chief Fire Officer drew particular attention to the fact that the numbers of corporate staff volunteering to undertake the health assessment were increasing which was pleasing to see.

Members were then informed that the Service Medical Advisor continued to operate clinics on four half-day sessions, and that for the second year running, nurse based clinics had been put in place to raise the profile of 'well person' clinics and target a series of less major medical issues such as sun exposure etc.

It was reported that vaccinations would continue as they had done in the past. However, in future they would no longer be administered by the individual firefighters GP, since guidance from the General Practitioner Committee had been issued clearly stating that responsibility for this lies with the employer. Given this advice, work was underway to formulate a plan in relation to the provision of occupational vaccinations.

In relation to counselling and welfare support, Members noted that the majority of cases dealt with non-work related difficulties, and that the Trauma Support Team continued to provide care and assistance to those who required treatment. Members were informed that the results of a recent stress survey were currently being analysed and that these would be reported to a future meeting.

The Authority continued to make reasonable adjustments in the workplace in accordance with the Disability Discrimination Act, for instance the provision of hearing aids, specific chairs, adjustments to work stations and non-standard footwear.

Further updates were provided to Members on issues in relation to Aerobic Capacity Testing, Training and Retirements.

The Chairman commented that the successes achieved by the Authority were worthy of note and commended each and every one of them. However, he remarked that the whole time number of shifts lost per employee due to sickness absence at 8.03 appeared high compared with the private sector. Nevertheless, he congratulated the Authority on its performance and stated that he was aware the Authority were not complacent and that attempts to reduce staff sickness levels would continue to be pursued.

Councillor Wright then drew attention to the percentages of shifts lost due to sickness, and in doing so enquired whether office staff had higher stress rates. In response, the Deputy Chief Fire Officer explained that staff in non-operational posts had a significantly higher rate of sickness. This was believed to be because there was a greater awareness of potential accidents on operational grounds and that staff held a heightened awareness to look for hazards. Unlike office staff who were less aware.

Councillor Woodwark referring to Section 3.5 enquired whether the General Practitioner Committee had made their decision in order to move towards employer liability, and would the Authority be required to pick up any associated costs. The Assistant Chief Officer responded advising that there would be implications in terms of employer liability. He confirmed that any costs incurred would indeed need to be met by the Tyne and Wear Fire and Rescue Authority. He advised that costs incurred this year would be met using existing budgets, however future budgets were being looked at.

Councillor Wright expressed his surprise in relation to the length of time it had taken for the provision of vaccinations to be moved in-house, particularly as Hepatitis B and HIV were becoming increasingly more common. The Deputy Chief Fire Officer explained that over the years firefighters vaccinations had been administered by their GP. However, given the recent advice from the General Practitioner Committee, mechanisms must now be put in place to widen the portfolio of immunisations that firefighters receive.

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

3. RESOLVED to:-

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

Fire and Rescue National Framework 2008/2001 – HR Issues

The Chief Fire Officer and Personnel Officer submitted a joint report (circulated) providing Members with an overview of the progress made and future work programmes in respect of 'people' issues.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

Members were advised that the three year Framework set out what was expected from Fire and Rescue Authorities and that a significant amount of progress had been made to date.

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer drew Members attention to the National Equality and Diversity Strategy which was released in May 2008, and its targets agreed in principle by the Authority on 16th June, 2008.

He confirmed that an Action Plan to accompany the Strategy would be brought to the next meeting of the Human Resources Committee due to be held in September.

Members were advised that the Authority ensured that all members of staff were treated fairly and afforded equality of opportunity, including personal development.

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

4. RESOLVED to:-

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

Cycle to Work Scheme

The Chief Fire Officer, Chief Emergency Planning Officer, Clerk to the Authority and Personnel Advisor submitted a joint report (copy circulated) proposing the introduction of a cycle to work scheme.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer briefly outlined the report and in doing so explained that the scheme would encourage employees to cycle to work, thus create a healthier workforce. It was intended that the scheme would assist employees purchase a bicycle and cyclist's safety equipment to a value of up to £1,000 via the salary sacrifice scheme. He explained that the salary sacrifice scheme had proved to be successful in the past, and that this one in particular would tie in well with the Fire Authority's ethos on Fit for Life.

Councillor Boyes considered this to be an excellent scheme and expected a high number of take ups. She went on to enquire whether the adoption of an appropriate insurance policy had been taken into account. In response, the Deputy Chief Fire Officer stated that this was something that had not been given a lot of attention, therefore would be looked into.

Councillor Woodwark enquired whether suitable storage facilities were available for bicycles at the Tyne and Wear Fire and Rescue Authority Headquarters, and what potential was available to include facilities at fire stations that did not currently have any storage facilities. The Deputy Chief Fire Officer responded advising that all PFI and non-PFI sites already had secure storage facilities. Despite that, there had been instances in the past when thefts had occurred from the stations, which was why as many security features as possible had been put in place to prevent this of happening in future.

Councillor Wright remarked that employees on minimum wage would be the ones who suffer most from this type of scheme, and went on to enquire how many staff were paid minimum wage. In response, the Deputy Chief Fire Officer advised that all Tyne and Wear Fire and Rescue Authority employees were paid above the hourly minimum wage.

Councillor Cooney queried whether staff had been consulted with about the scheme prior to the report being presented to Committee. The Deputy Chief Fire Officer explained that expressions of interest had been sought and that a good number had been received.

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

5. RESOLVED that:-

- (i) approval be given to introduce a Cycle to Work Scheme as detailed in the report; and
- (ii) further reports to be received as appropriate.

Annual Review of Uniform Allowance

The Chief Fire Officer and the Finance Officer submitted a joint report (circulated) advising that a review of the level of uniform allowance had been undertaken in accordance with the policy of the Authority.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

Members having given consideration to the matter:-

8. RESOLVED that:-

- (i) no increase would be given to the existing amount of £379.00 payable to the Chief Fire Officer;
- (i) no increase would be given to the existing amount of £340.00 payable to the Deputy and Deputy Chief Fire Officer.

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

At the instance of the Chairman, it was:-

6. 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 to involve a likely disclosure of exempt information relating to any individual or information which is likely to reveal the identity of an individual, information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the authority holding that information), or any consultations or negotiations, in connection with any labour relations matter arising between the Council and its employees (Local Government Act 1972, Schedule 12A, Part I, Paragraph 1, 2, 3 and 4).

(Signed) D. BOLLANDS,
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.