

HUMAN RESOURCES COMMITTEE

Minutes of the meeting of the
HUMAN RESOURCES COMMITTEE
held in the Fire and Rescue
Headquarters, Barmston Mere,
Sunderland on MONDAY
13 October 2014 at 10.30am

Present:

Councillor Bell in the Chair.

Councillors Haley, Price, Wright, Mortimer and Renton.

Part I

Apologies for Absence

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

Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

Minutes

9. RESOLVED that the minutes of the Human Resources Committee held on 14 July, 2014, Part I be confirmed as a correct record.

Equality Peer Challenge Update

The Chief Fire Officer, the Clerk to the Authority, the Finance Officer and the Personnel Advisor to the Authority submitted a joint report providing Members with an update regarding progress against the Authority's Equality Peer Challenge action plan.

ACFO Baines explained that following the Authority's success in achieving the excellent level of the Fire and Rescue Service Equality Framework, an action plan had been developed to include all areas for consideration. Actions were then subsequently incorporated into the Authority's improvement and departmental plans.

Members were advised that excellent progress had been made against the Equality Peer Challenge action plan and that work had commenced on each of the actions with some elements approaching completion within the next quarter.

ACFO Baines referred the Committee to the action plan and in doing so highlighted the key areas. It was confirmed that all anticipated agreed deadlines would be met.

Councillor Wright congratulated the Authority on making such good progress and stated that it was pleasing to see that all progress against all actions was either complete or in progress of being completed.

Councillor Wright enquired whether the Authority liaised with private landlords in order to work towards raising standards. ACFO Baines responded advising that the Authority did engage and invite private landlords to domestic sprinkler sessions. The Authority was also looking to bring more private landlords on board.

10. RESOLVED to: -

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

Stonewall Workplace Equality Index

The Chief Fire Officer, the Clerk to the Authority, the Finance Officer and the Personnel Advisor to the Authority submitted a joint report updating Members regarding the Authority's Stonewall Workplace Equality Index (WEI) submission for 2015.

Area Manager Robson outlined the report. In doing so he drew Members' attention to the fact that for over five years the Authority had entered the WEI to benchmark and evaluated its performance in relation to LGBT equality and inclusion.

Members' were reminded that in 2014 the HR Committee was informed that the Authority achieved 8th place and was the first Fire and Rescue Authority in the country to achieve a place in the top 10 of the WEI. Area Manager Robson stated that the Authority was also ranked 4th top public sector employer, sector leader and the LGBT Network was selected as one of Stonewall's 75 Star Performing Networks.

It was noted that Stonewall had undertaken a 5 year review of the WEI which included the launch of a questionnaire for 2015 which was considered tougher than previous years. This had raised some challenges to organisations entering the process and it was hoped that the Authority would continue to achieve positive results through participation in the WEI.

Members were advised that strengths and development areas were discussed at a feedback meeting with Stonewall representatives in late January 2014. It was confirmed that all improvement actions identified in this meeting had been progressed by equality staff and members of the LGBT network.

On 6 September, 2014 the Authority's completed WEI questionnaire, along with over 120 of supporting evidence was submitted. It was anticipated that the Authority would be informed of the outcome of the 2015 WEI in mid-January. It was confirmed that following this a further report would be submitted to the Human Resources Committee regarding the results.

ACFO Baines reported that as part of the ongoing leadership of the Stonewall Workplace Equality Index there had been excellent participation and involvement from the Authority's volunteers which had been hugely appreciated.

During discussion, Members stated that the completion of the WEI questionnaire was an excellent piece of work, however they felt that further work was required to engage with gay people. Nonetheless, Stonewall was testament to the good work and achievements of the Authority to date.

Councillor Bell on behalf of the Committee thanked the Authority, plus all of the volunteers that had participated and staff for their involvement.

11. RESOLVED to: -

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

Investors in People 2014 Improvement Action Plan

The Chief Fire Officer submitted a report informing Members of the development of the Investors in People (IIP) Improvement Action Plan and to update them on the performance criteria that the Authority had been assessed against during the audit.

The Committee was reminded that during the Human Resources Committee meeting on 14 July, 2014, a paper was presented on the 2014 IIP Audit and that an improvement action plan was to be developed.

Members were advised that the 2014 IIP assessment was met with Gold accreditation for a second time, however further clarity was required around the number of performance criteria that the Authority were being assessed against.

It was confirmed that in 2014 the Tyne and Wear Fire and Rescue Authority had been assessed against 170 performance criteria and of these 143 were met in full, 23 were met with development and 4 were not met.

Therefore the performance of the Authority was regarded as very strong considering that during the time the 2014 IIP assessment took place, the Authority was experiencing an extremely challenging time, not only in terms of national issues around industrial action but also local issues relating to promotion and recruitment freezes plus the latest IRMP, in particular the Fire Cover Response Review.

Members were advised that the IIP team recognised that “the fabric of the organisation remains intact” and that despite recent challenging times and events the Authority led an organisation with a strong and cohesive culture and continued to demonstrate a commitment to its employees in terms of their personal development.

The areas that the Authority had not met were briefly outlined.

It was confirmed that an Improvement Action Plan had been developed prior to being distributed to delegated leads for implementation and subsequent inclusion in relevant Service and Departmental plans. Within this, there were 27 areas for improvement that had been identified during the audit that had been transposed into specific actions so that the Authority could remain committed to continuous improvement.

Councillor Wright enquired if the Authority accepted the 170 performance criteria or if there was any form of debate. In response, ACFO Baines advised that the criterion was challenged in instances where the Authority did not agree.

12. RESOLVED to: -

- (i) Note that the performance criteria numbers had been amended from the previous report;
- (ii) Support the development and implementation of the improvement action plan; and
- (iii) Receive further reports as necessary.

The Mental Health Challenge

The Chief Fire Officer, the Clerk to the Authority, the Finance Officer and the Personnel Advisor to the Authority submitted a joint report advising Members of the Local Authority Mental Health Challenge and the potential to appoint a ‘mental health champion’ across the Authority to compliment the great work undertaken by the Occupational Health Unit.

ACFO Baines advised that the Mental Health Challenge was set up by Centre for Mental Health, Mental Health Foundation, Mind, Rethink Mental Illness, Royal College of Psychiatrists and Young Minds.

The challenge was to support and encourage local authorities to take a proactive approach to mental health and was funded by the Department of Health through the Mental Health Strategic Partnership.

Facts regarding mental health were outlined as follows:-

- 1 in 6 people will experience a mental health problem in any given year.
- The World Health Organisation predicts that depression will be the second most common health condition worldwide by 2020.
- Mental ill health costs some £105 billion each year in England alone.
- People with a severe mental illness die up to 20 years younger than their peers in the UK.
- There is often a circular relationship between mental health issues such as housing, employment, family problems or debt.

Members were assured that the Authority had an excellent Occupational Health Unit and that solid partnerships were in place with unions to ensure staff were supported. External specialists were also appointed to staff that required either more individual, professional or dedicated support.

In terms of the appointment of a 'mental health champion', Members were advised that the role would be defined locally but key activities may include: -

- Raising awareness of mental health issues in the development of Authority policies and strategies, and in public forums;
- Leading discussions on mental health issues with NHS organisations in the local area;
- Speaking with schools, businesses and community groups about mental health;
- Linking with mental health service users and voluntary groups locally to understand their needs and concerns;
- Tackling myths and misconceptions about mental health in the local community.

Currently the Mental Health Challenge was open to councils to take part, however Members were advised that this may exclude Fire Authorities. Officers were holding a series of exploratory discussions with Mental Health Challenge to determine whether the Authority could participate in the programme or whether it could run a complementary scheme that mirrors the approach undertaken by the Mental Health Challenge.

Councillor Haley stated that as a member of the Health and Wellbeing Board in Gateshead, his involvement in this would be an obvious link.

During discussion, the Committee expressed the view that partnership working alongside vulnerable groups was essential. Members hoped that the Department of Health would not restrict this work to only local authorities and that it would see the benefits the Fire and Rescue Authority could give and allow it to get involved.

Members considered it pleasing to learn that mental health was now coming more out in the open and understood. Members were keen to be involved and stated that they wished to participate in raising the profile of mental health and increasing awareness of the illness.

13. RESOLVED to: -

- (i) Approve in principle the proposal detailed in section 6.1 of the report; and
- (ii) Receive further reports as appropriate.

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

At the instance of the Chairman, it was: -

14. RESOLVED that in accordance with Section 100(A) 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.