

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 JULY, 2009 at 10.30 a.m.

Present:

Councillor Charlton in the Chair

Councillors Boyes and T. Wright.

Part I

Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were submitted to the meeting on behalf of Councillors N. Forbes, Hayley, Jordan and Woodwark.

Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

Minutes

1. RESOLVED that the minutes of the Human Resources Committee held on 27 October 2008, Part I (copy circulated) be confirmed and signed as a correct record.

National Equality and Diversity Report

The Chief Fire Officer, the Finance Officer and the Personnel Advisor submitted a joint report (circulated) highlighting key findings and notable good practice across the national fire and rescue service with a focus on the Authority's performance against national equality and diversity targets.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer advised that the National Equality and Diversity Strategy 2008-2018 was the first of its kind published by Government.

The report had been divided into five sections, namely:-

- Section One - which sets out the context in line with the National Strategy and Audit Commission's Performance Assessment 2008.
- Section Two - which reports on some key national initiatives including details of the 2008 Equality and Diversity Award winning initiatives.
- Section Three - which details the National Action Plan, identifying initiatives that stakeholders had committed to progress in 2009/2010.
- Section Four - Local Government targets set by each fire and rescue service in England published for the first time.
- Section Five - an overview of current performance on equality and diversity in the fire and rescue services in England and of each individual service.

Members referred to Section 2, paragraph 5.5 which provided details on the Fire and Rescue Service Equality and Diversity Awards. During which Members noted that the Authority's Catering Manager received runner-up for work to overcome significant disability, to facilitate a comprehensive process of rehabilitation, adjustment and a return to work programme.

Section 4 of the report related to Recruitment Targets. It was reported that twenty-nine Fire Authorities (out of 45) endorsed the stretch targets for BME employees and thirty-six Fire Authorities endorsed the stretch target for female entrants, therefore the Deputy Chief Fire Officer there was clearly a gap.

The 2009 National Equality and Diversity Report provided an analysis of Equality and Diversity performance based upon statistical returns provided annually to the CLG and Local Government by all Fire Authorities. Members referred to an addendum attached as Appendix A detailing what is required in terms of the National Strategy.

Attention was then drawn to the supplementary Self Assessment document (copies circulated), at which point Members were advised that a gap analysis had been completed against the five priorities contained within the Strategy. The colours within the document identified achievement against priorities (green), work in progress (orange) and urgent action (red).

Councillor Wright commented that a black and ethnic minority group had been set up at City-wide level in Sunderland to act as a support group. However, some female organisations had raised that groups such as this were mostly formed by men and that due to cultural differences it can be difficult to involve women.

Councillor Boyes concurred with Councillor Wright stating that Gateshead Council had a small ethnic minority group in place and that it was also male dominated.

The Deputy Director of Human Resources and Organisational Development explained that networking had been undertaken nationally as a way of encouraging and supporting black, ethnic and minority groups.

Upon discussion, it was:-

2. RESOLVED that:-

- (i) the contents of the report be noted;
- (ii) the actions taken towards the National Strategy be endorsed; and
- (iii) further reports to be received as appropriate.

Fire and Rescue Service Equality Framework (FRSEF)

The Chief Fire Officer, the Finance Officer and the Personnel Advisor submitted a joint report (circulated) advising Members of the proposed Fire and Rescue Service Equality Framework (FRSEF).

(For copy report – see original minutes).

Members of the Committee were informed that the new FRSEF had been drafted and was currently subject to consultation until August 2009.

The FRSEF included the same three benchmarking levels as the Equality Framework for Local Government i.e. 'developing', 'achieving' and 'excellent'.

Based on the five themes within the Equality and Diversity Strategy and strongly linked to the Equality Framework for Local Government, the FRSEF is expected to enable application across all the governance arrangements, including county based services as well as facilitating equality and diversity partnership arrangements established with Local Authorities and other partners.

Councillor Wright stated that he supported the new framework and enquired would there be a charge. The Chief Fire Officer responded stating that costs would be incurred in the same way as all external accreditation processes.

Councillor Boyes enquired whether there was a time frame in place. In response, the Deputy Chief Fire Officer advised that for the moment this particular stage was about committing to the process and taking part in consultation. Until the outcome of the pilot exercises a recommendation could not be made.

Upon consideration, it was:-

3. RESOLVED that:-

- (i) the contents of the report be received and noted;
- (ii) the Chief Fire Officer in consultation with the Chairman of the Human Resources Committee were to respond to the consultation; and
- (iii) further reports be received as appropriate.

Fire and Rescue National Framework 2008/11 – HR Issues

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

(For copy report – see original minutes).

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer explained that a traffic light system had been used throughout the document where risks had been identified as green, yellow and red. The Deputy Chief Fire Officer updated Members in relation to the actions identified as red.

Councillor Wright enquired as to whether this would delay the Regional Board. The Deputy Chief Fire Officer confirmed that it would indeed delay the Regional Board, however that every effort was being made to minimise risk to firefighters.

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

4. RESOLVED to:-

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

Introduction of a Single Equality Scheme

The Chief Fire Officer, the Clerk to the Authority, the Finance Officer and the Personnel Advisor submitted a joint report (copy circulated) enclosing the first edition of the Authority's Single Equality Scheme (SES) and associated action plans.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer advised Members that currently there were a number of equality schemes in place within the Authority, that have been brought together to form one document, which is easy to read, understand and follow.

The SES was considered to be a 'live' document, that will be regularly reviewed and developed on an annual basis. The scheme covers six strands of equality:-

- Disability
- Race
- Gender
- Religion and Belief
- Age
- Sexual Orientation

Councillor Wright commented that he fully supported all six strands and felt the merger of the six equality strands was worth celebrating.

Councillor Wright requested that all new Members sign up to the Equality Scheme.

Councillor Boyes enquired whether all Fire Authority buildings were accessible to wheelchair users. In response the Deputy Chief Fire Officer confirmed indeed they were all accessible to the blind, disabled and wheelchair users via the use of handrails, lifts and ramps. What's more, all fire stations had accommodation for both genders and were fully accessible. All buildings were of an excellent standard and for that reason very few problems had ever been encountered.

Councillor Boyes then queried whether a dog would be allowed to enter into a fire station. It was confirmed that dogs for the blind were allowed to enter the fire station and that recently a member of staff had requested permission to train to become a guide dog trainer, which had been granted.

Upon consideration, it was:-

5. RESOLVED that:-

- (i) the introduction of a single Equality Scheme be approved;
- (ii) plans identified within each of the six strands be endorsed; and
- (iii) further reports be received as appropriate.

Regional Human Resources Management Strategy

The Chief Fire Officer, the Finance Officer and the Personnel Advisor submitted a joint report (circulated) providing Members with an update on the progress made with regard to the implementation of the Human Resources Strategy for the North East Fire and Rescue Services.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer advised that following a review of the Strategic Direction for Human Resources, at a North East Regional level, a collaborative approach was considered to ensure optimising performance improvement.

Areas where progress had been made were identified in the report as follows:-

- Regional Policy Frameworks;
- Overtime;
- Part-Time Working;
- Day Duty Systems;
- Wholetime/Retained;
- Discipline, Grievance and Capability;
- Secondary Employment Framework;
- Additional Responsibility Allowances;
- Career Breaks;
- Collaborative approach to Absence Management;
- Regional Toolkit for alternative duty systems;
- Collaborative approach to Health and Safety Management including Occupational Health; and
- Provision of HR support and guidance to the Regional Control Centre project.

Members were advised that Workforce Development and Health and Safety also featured high on the Authority's agenda. Collaborative arrangements for HR and working in partnerships remained vital to ensure the delivery of effective and efficient local services.

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

6. RESOLVED that:-

- (i) progress made to date be noted; and
- (ii) further reports be received as appropriate.

Implementation of the Agency Workers Directive

The Chief Fire Officer and the Personnel Advisor to the Authority submitted a joint report (circulated) advising Members of the proposed implementation of the Temporary Agency Workers Directive (2008/104/EC), which affords agency workers equal treatment in basic employment and working conditions as if they had been recruited directly by the end user.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

Members were advised that the Department for Business and Regulatory Reform (BERR) is seeking views on the implementation of the Directive on Conditions for Temporary (Agency) Workers – Directive 2008/104/EC. The purpose of the consultation is to seek the views of agency workers, temporary worker agencies and hirers. This was the first stage of the consultation, running for 12 weeks until 31 July 2009.

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer stated that any agency workers employed at the Fire and Rescue Services tended to be temporary and covering only on a short-term basis, for example to backfill a post if someone has resigned.

Councillor Wright enquired whether there was a policy in place should agency workers remain in a post for in excess of ten or eleven weeks. In response the Deputy Chief Fire Officer stated that the Fire and Rescue Authority monitor the situation regarding agency staff regularly and tend to find that agency staff move on to another post of their own accord within a few weeks, or are offered full-time work outside of the agency to which they are subscribed. For that reason, the Fire Authority does not ever need to sever links with any agency workers who may be employed there.

Upon consideration, it was:-

7. RESOLVED that:-

- (i) the contents of the report be noted; and
- (ii) further reports be received as appropriate.

Occupational Health Unit – Annual Report

The Chief Fire Officer submitted a report (circulated) advising Members of the services provided by the Occupational Health Unit and its staff over the period 1 April 2008 to 31 March 2009, marking the sixteenth year of the operation of the Unit.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

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

The aim of the Unit continued to support the broad aims of the Government health initiatives whilst focusing on specific areas of concern within the working environment for the benefit of employees.

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer updated Members that the Unit had been actively involved in the formation of operational swift water rescue and High Volume Pumping Teams saw the Unit provide Typhoid and Hepatitis A immunisation for the respective teams which was undertaken in-house.

The Unit had also provided OHU cover to a neighbouring fire and rescue service in response to a request from Cleveland Fire Brigade, which commenced in April 2008 and lasted for a period of six months.

In relation to health screening and surveillance, monitoring and preventative measures continued to be a fundamental aspect of OHU practice which allowed for the early detection of detrimental changes allowing for positive intervention. The Unit has developed health screening programmes which were detailed within the report.

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

Another success of the Authority was the implementation of the accelerated workforce system to allow firefighters who have been injured back into work quickly.

Finally, the Deputy Chief Fire Officer remarked that the Authority saw this as a positive report and thanked Members for adopting the schemes that had been implemented.

Councillor Boyes commented that the report was excellent. She went on to enquire whether OHU nursing staff undergo follow-up training. In response the Deputy Chief Fire Officer explained that they did and that personal development plans were in place to allow OHU nurses to do this. He added that all OHU nurses had received vaccination training and that the necessary medical insurances are taken out on them.

Councillor Boyes went on to enquire further should a firefighter contract a serious illness do the firefighter's family receive support. The Deputy Chief Fire Officer explained that Counselling and Welfare support was available, and that the level of support would depend on the individual circumstances, however confirmed that support does indeed extend to the firefighter's family. Primarily the support is in place to assess the impact upon the individual and supporting them back to work.

Councillor Charlton enquired how many doctors were in place at the OHU. The Deputy Chief Fire Officer responded that one part-time male doctor was in post.

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

8. RESOLVED to:-

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

(Signed) D. CHARLTON,
Chairman.