

## **HUMAN RESOURCES COMMITTEE**

Minutes of the meeting of the  
HUMAN RESOURCES COMMITTEE held  
in the Fire and Rescue Headquarters,  
Barmston Mere, Sunderland on MONDAY  
11 JULY 2011 at 10.30 am

### **Present:**

Councillor Bell in the Chair

Councillors Hayley, Renton, Stephenson and D. Trueman.

### **Part I**

#### **Apologies**

Apologies for absence were submitted to the meeting on behalf of Councillor Mole and Watters.

#### **Declarations of Interest**

Councillors Haley declared a personal interest in item 9 "Pension Age" as an active member of the LGPS.

#### **Minutes**

1. RESOLVED that the minutes of the Human Resources Committee held on 21 February 2011 (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 the report outlined the national and local situation with regard to sickness absence.

In relation to the national situation, Members were advised that in the last year the average level of employee absence in all sectors had increased by 0.1% to 3.3% of working time, equating to 7.7 days per employee.

Whilst average absence levels had generally increased across all the main sectors, absence in the public and non-profit sectors was notably higher than the private sector with the highest levels found in public services such as health at 10.6 and local government at 10.3 days lost. The average annual absence level for manual workers was 7.4 days per employee per year, compared with 6.3 days per employee for non-manual workers.

Members were informed that the public sector had the highest absence rate, an average of 9.6 days per employee, compared to 6.9 days for the private sector. The most common cause of short-term absence was for minor illness, such as colds, flu, stomach upsets, headaches and migraines. For manual workers, significant short-term absences were due to musculoskeletal injuries and back pain followed by stress.

The most common cause of long-term absences were reportedly acute medical conditions, musculoskeletal injuries, stress, mental health and back pain.

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer confirmed that like the majority of companies, Tyne and Wear Fire and Rescue Authority were taking action to reduce absence in the work place. For example, the Authority used return-to-work interviews and trigger mechanisms to review attendance. Sickness absence information was also provided to line managers and Occupational Health Services were always involved where appropriate. Combined Occupational Health and management case conferences also took place on a monthly basis.

Members were informed that a Sickness and Absence Management Policy was in place and that the Authority, through its Occupational Health Scheme, provided comprehensive pro-active health awareness programmes to prevent sickness absence.

The involvement of Occupational Health and Medical Support had enabled the Authority to achieve the best results in relation to sickness absence in the last fifteen years. Current absence rates were 5.57 shifts/days lost for operational staff and 6.05 shifts/days lost for all staff which showed an overall reduction of 1.6 shifts lost from the previous year.

A chart was displayed within the report which showed sickness absence rates over the years. A chart was also displayed showing the retirement profile of the Service since 1997. The Deputy Chief Officer advised that since 2000/1 the number of medical retirements had been decreasing year on year and for the last three years there had been no ill health retirements from the operational workforce at all.

Councillor Renton enquired how short term and long term absences were split. The Deputy Chief Fire Officer advised that twenty-eight days was classified as long term absence and that these were monitored closely, with referrals made to Occupational Health where appropriate. Phased returns were also offered to employees returning to work following a period of long term absence. At the present time the percentage divide between long term and short term absence figures in the Authority was approximately 50:50.

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

### **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 2010 to 31 March 2011.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer advised that the Occupational Health Unit had been in operation for eighteen years and was a fully integrated and well respected part of the organisation.

Members were informed that for the first time the Authority, led by staff of the Occupational Health Unit entered the 'Better Health at Work Awards' during 2010/2011. The Award brought with it external accreditation and audit, and was aimed at improving the health of the North East workforce. The Deputy Chief Fire Officer was happy to report that the Authority had been successful in gaining the Bronze Better Health at Work Award, which was seen to be a credit to the organisation. The Authority would aim to attempt to gain the Silver Award next year.

In terms of health surveillance, members were advised that health screening continued to be the core activity of the unit. Health screening was conducted at various times throughout a fire fighter's career, initially at the very start and every three years thereafter. A variety of health-screening programmes had been developed by the Authority for specific risk categories, which were designed to detect early changes in a persons' health and protect their health. A fit and healthy workforce continued to be the main objective of the unit.

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer stated that he would like to see more corporate staff take up the free screening, and that the Authority were currently trying to encourage it.

A diagram was presented within the report demonstrating the outcomes of the health screening process since the year 1994/1995 to date. The illustration showed a steady increase in the take up of health screening throughout the years.

Committee Members were informed a Service Medical Advisor (SMA) conducted clinics four times per week. Appointments covered the following categories: -

- Plus 40 years – three yearly / 50 to 55 years annually.
- LGV – on request and scheduled
- Sickness absence assessment
- Ill health assessment
- Referrals
- Staff pre-employment
- Assisted Medical Support Scheme

The Occupational Health Unit also continued to offer vaccinations, physiotherapy, the Accelerated Medical Scheme, Counselling and Welfare Support, audiometry testing, Aids to Vision and Aerobic Capacity Training. An extensive range of other training that was provided by the Unit included: -

- Manual Handling
- Resilience Training
- North East Excellent Manager Programme
- Trauma Conference
- Finance and Procurement
- Occupational Health Implications of the Equality Act 2010
- Carbon Champion Training
- ALAMA Conference
- Accessibility Audit Training

Members of the Human Resources Committee expressed an interest in visiting the Occupational Health Unit to see at first hand what goes on behind the scenes. The Deputy Chief Fire Officer offered to arrange a visit immediately before the next Human Resources Committee meeting.

Councillor Haley in referring to the report stated that he was impressed with the way in which the Unit had performed in relation to smoking cessation. The Deputy Chief Fire Officer stated that the Authority had a policy in place which clearly indicated that

it was a non-smoking organisation, however smoking areas were provided for staff. Staff were actively encouraged not to smoke and only a small proportion of the workforce did smoke. The Deputy Chief Fire Officer agreed to obtain the exact figures of those helped in the smoking cessation programme.

Councillor Stephenson commended the excellent work undertaken by the Service Medical Advisors.

Councillor Renton enquired how easy it was for corporate staff to take part in the health screening process. The Deputy Chief Fire Officer stated that staff were encouraged to make contact with the Occupational Health Unit, either by telephone or email to arrange an appointment, which could be carried out in work time.

Councillor Bell commented that the Occupational Health Unit was clearly a very well respected part of the workforce, and that this should be seen to be the same across all authorities.

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.

### **Reform of the Equality and Human Rights Commission**

The Chief Fire Officer and Personnel Advisor submitted a joint report (copy circulated) informing Members of the Governments' proposals to reform the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC).

(For copy report – see original minutes).

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer stated that the EHRC was established in October 2007 and replaced the Equal Opportunities Commission, Commission for Racial Equality and Disability Rights Commission.

In March 2011, the Government Equalities Office published a consultation document entitled 'Building a Fairer Britain: Reform of the Equality and Human Rights Commission'.

The Governments' vision for the EHRC was that it should become a valued and respected national institution, focusing on its core role as a strong, modern equality regulator and UN-accredited National Human Rights Institution.

The consultation document proposed legislative and non-legislative reforms in three main areas. A summary of the reforms were listed within the report for Members' information.

The Government believed that a combination of legislative and non-legislative reform would ensure that the EHRC and Parliament had clear and shared view about the nature and extent of EHRC's role.

Councillor Haley enquired how this would affect the Authority. The Deputy Chief Fire Officer responded advising that it was difficult to ascertain what effect it would have, however the Authority did expect to have an impact which would be closely monitored.

Councillor Bell commented that there did not appear to be a lot of detail behind the proposals. The Deputy Chief Fire Officer stated that the consultation had ended and that the Authority was awaiting feedback. A report regarding the findings following the consultation would be brought back to a future Human Resources Committee.

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

4. RESOLVED to:-

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

### **Evaluation of E-Network**

The Chief Fire Officer submitted a report (copy circulated) updating Members regarding the progress of the e-network established primarily for lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) employees of the Authority.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

The employee network had been in operation since September 2010 and had been set up in response to a Stonewall audit which advised that establishing a network was a key development area for the Service.

The main aims of the network were to: -

- Provide information and support for all employees on LGB issues;
- Advertise social and other networking events for LGB staff;
- Raise awareness for non LGB staff and managers;
- Provide links to other LGB employee network groups and support mechanisms;
- Provide contacts for LGB staff with issues at work; and
- Provide a confidential discussion forum for LGB staff.

An interim evaluation of the e-network had been carried out by the Diversity and Equality Advisor. During which the main finding that had been discovered were as follows:-

- hits to page were proportionate to 10% of the organisation;

- all hits were to the information pages
- the EAG were using the network; and
- employees were not using the discussion boards.

In order to address the issues highlighted by the interim evaluation, it was proposed to progress a series of recommendations to ensure the success of the e-network. These were:-

- creation of a communications action plan to promote the network
- trial the removal of the password protection requirement; and
- monitor weekly access to determine whether the actions have had the desired impact.

Councillor Haley in referring to the potential misuse of the discussion forum within the e-network enquired if a moderator was able to track I.P addresses. The Deputy Chief Fire Officer responded confirming that the e-network was only available on work PCs and that computer details could be tracked.

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

5. RESOLVED to:-

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

### **NHS Disability Placement Scheme**

The Chief Fire Officer, the Finance Officer and the Personnel Advisor submitted a joint report (copy circulated) informing Members of the success of the NHS Disability Placement Scheme.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer reported that in early 2010 the Chief Fire Officer identified a need to expand and develop the Authority's young persons' work experience procedure to ensure it was inclusive to young adults in the local community, in particular, young people with learning disabilities.

Members were advised that the Business Services Department of the Service Headquarters established two thirteen week placements as a pilot exercise and with the help of the NHS Project Choice Co-ordinator training was provided to employees involved in the placements. Mentoring, supervision and support was also provided on a daily basis by members of the Business Services Team.

The aims of the programme were outlined for Members, together with project objectives and targets for placements.

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer advised that an evaluation exercise had been undertaken whereby qualitative information was gathered in the form of focus groups

and a de-brief with employees involved in the pilot.

Members were advised that the Chief Fire Officer proposed that the Authority continue to support the NHS Work Experience Placements, providing a placement for one student at a time on an annual basis, reducing the level of mentoring required from employees and establishing more support from the NHS representative.

Financial implications taking into account preparation, planning, implementation and on-going support for the duration of the placements was outlined within the report

Councillor Haley commented that the benefits outweighed the cost.

In response to an enquiry from Councillor Renton regarding what the cost was made up of, the Deputy Chief Fire Officer stated that it was mainly staff time, to mentor, train and buddy-up with individuals, which was required to ensure that they had meaningful work to do.

Members discussed the benefits of having two placements instead of only one, however agreed to just have one placement on an annual basis with a view to increasing it in the future to two.

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer stated that the evaluation report would be submitted to a future Human Resources Committee meeting.

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

6. RESOLVED to:-

- (i) agree to the proposals as set out in the report; and
- (v) receive further reports as appropriate.

## **Pension Update**

The Chief Fire Officer, the Finance Officer and the Personnel Advisor submitted a joint report (copy circulated) providing Members with an overview of the recommendations made by the Independent Public Service Pensions Commission regarding future pension arrangements for the public sector.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer advised Members that the Independent Public Service Pensions Commission published future pension arrangements for the public sector on 10<sup>th</sup> March 2011. The report made twenty-seven recommendations relating to administration, structure, governance and reporting of public sector pension schemes.



A detailed summary of the key recommendations was provided within the report. However, the Deputy Chief Fire Officer drew particular attention to the following recommendations: -

- To move the final pension from being based on final salary, to a pension based upon career average earnings, which was to be known as Career Average Related Earnings (CARE).
- It was proposed that the Normal Pension Age (NPA) in the future would be linked to the State Pension Age (SPA) and that changes would be tracked.
- Lord Hutton had stated that an individual's occupational pension when taken with the State Pension should provide 2/3rds of the retirement income, and that the principle that a pension should provide adequate levels of retirement income should be made explicit to all public sector employees.
- That an individual's accrued rights should be maintained and that the effect of any future changes should only impact during the years after the changes have been made.

Members were advised that Lord Hutton had produced an extremely detailed analysis of issues facing public service pension schemes together with a series of considered, practical recommendations for consideration by the Government who had accepted the recommendations in principal. However, it remained to be seen whether all of the recommendations would be implemented.

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer stated that informal consultations were currently being carried out and that feedback would be provided to Committee Members in due course. However, it was fair to say at this stage that pensions could potentially cause unrest in organisations.

Councillor Bell stated that a watchful eye was to be kept on pensions. She also drew attention to the fact that there were only three Human Resources Committee meetings scheduled per year and stated that it may be necessary to call an extraordinary meeting in order to continue to keep Committee Members abreast of developments in relation to pension schemes, including any proposed changes.

Councillor Haley commented that the Treasury seemed to think that changes to pensions would cause a 1% drop-out rate, however the Tyne and Wear Head of Pensions predicted a 20% drop-out rate.

Having discussed and commented upon the matter, it was: -

7. RESOLVED to:-

- (i) note the contents of the report; and
- (vi) 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 to involve a likely 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, Paragraph 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.