

Staff and Pensions Committee

Wednesday 5 October 2022

Minutes

Attendance

Committee Members

Councillor Andy Jenns (Chair)
Councillor Bill Gifford (Vice-Chair)
Councillor Brian Hammersley
Councillor Christopher Kettle
Councillor Sarah Millar
Councillor Mandy Tromans

Officers

Barnaby Briggs, Assistant Chief Fire Officer
John Cole, Senior Democratic Services Officer
Jan Cumming, Team Lead and Senior Solicitor – Commercial and Contracts
Martin Griffiths, Technical Specialist – Pension Fund Policy and Governance
Vicky Jenks, Pensions Administration Delivery Lead
Chris Norton, Strategy and Commissioning Manager – Treasury, Pension, Audit and Risk
Tina Riley, Senior People Practitioner – Strategic People Improvement
Keira Rounsley, Diversity, Inclusion and Wellbeing Team Leader
Kate Sullivan, Lead Commissioner – Culture, Leadership and Performance
Gary Summerfield, Health and Safety Technical Specialist

1. General

(1) Apologies

There were none.

(2) Disclosures of Pecuniary and Non-Pecuniary Interests

There were none.

(3) Minutes of the Previous Meeting

Resolved:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 13 June 2022 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

There were no matters arising.

2. Annual Review - Leading Organisational Wellbeing

Kate Sullivan (Lead Commissioner – Culture, Leadership and Performance) introduced the report which provided details of work undertaken over the past 12 months to promote organisational wellbeing, including key achievements in 2021/22, the priorities and action plan for 2022/23, and workforce performance data for 2021/22 with trend and benchmarking information.

In response to Councillor Millar, Kate Sullivan advised that the increase in absence rates in 2021/22 was largely due to the return to workplace settings following the requirement for many staff to work predominantly from home during the Pandemic. The easing of social distancing restrictions had led to increased transmission of colds and other viruses. This had been anticipated as a likely outcome of the transition to agile working and the absence target had been adjusted for this reason.

In response to Councillor Millar, Kate Sullivan agreed that agile working provided a means for individuals who were slightly unwell but able to work to remain at home rather than risk passing on any viruses. She emphasised the importance of ensuring that managers were able to maintain an awareness of the wellbeing requirements of staff, particularly those working remotely for long periods. She highlighted the advantages of collaboration spaces to ensure that office locations could be used flexibly to support engagement within teams.

Councillor Millar expressed support for the free on-site flu vaccination scheme. Kate Sullivan advised that the 2022 Scheme had recently been launched. Previously, the vaccination offer had attracted a good level of interest, leading to an expanded scheme for 2022.

The Chair praised the on-site vaccination scheme, stating that for a relatively low cost, the Authority could make a saving by avoiding staff absences due to flu.

In response to Councillor Millar, Kate Sullivan advised that support for stress, mental health, and workload management was tailored according to the demands of different roles across the organisation. Engagement with managers and teams was undertaken to develop an understanding of how support could be targeted. The Employee Assistance Programme provided a means to provide help and advice, particularly to individuals whose roles meant that they could be exposed to traumatic and upsetting situations.

In response to Councillor Kettle, Kate Sullivan advised that, historically, rates of absence were higher within the People Directorate. In cases where there was a risk of passing a virus on to vulnerable individuals, staff were directed to remain at home. However, approaches to limit absence rates remained a focus, including learning from areas of the organisation which had a consistently low sickness absence rate.

In response to Councillor Hammersley, Kate Sullivan advised that the cost of arrangements to cover staff absences was difficult to measure. It was influenced by multiple factors, such as staff covering the work of absent colleagues and arrangements for agency staff. Where agency staff were taken on, the reason for the appointment was not recorded. The figure provided within the report was based on salaries; the actual cost was much more difficult to verify.

In response to Councillor Gifford, Kate Sullivan advised that, at present, managers received information relating to attendance each month by email. The proposed Managers Absence

Dashboard would provide a convenient resource for managers to refer to, including data that enabled analysis of the reasons for staff absences, how this compared across the organisation, details of long-term absences, and other indicators.

In response to Councillor Kettle, Kate Sullivan advised that sickness absence data was scrutinised, enabling analysis of the number of days lost per employee across the organisation, as well as proportionately against the number of the staff who had not taken any sickness leave. Sickness absences were monitored, and indicators were in place to ensure that conversations could be held with members of staff who had reached a cumulative number of absences within a set period.

Councillor Gifford sought assurance that measures were in place to monitor potential abuses of the sickness absence policy whilst ensuring that proper attention was given to individuals who required support for legitimate problems, such as mental health difficulties. He highlighted the challenges for recruitment within the current labour market which placed additional pressure on some staff.

Kate Sullivan advised that the relaunched Attendance at Work Policy placed an emphasis on supporting staff to be well in work. Where there were cases of staff failing to maintain an expected level of attendance, processes were in place. HR advisors could liaise with staff and managers to review individual cases to reach a positive outcome.

Resolved:

That the Committee:

1. Endorses the Leading Organisational and Wellbeing Review 2021/22 as set out at Appendix 1.
2. Notes the performance information in relation to the management of employee sickness absence during 2021/22 set out in Section 3 and endorses maintaining an overall target of 8 days per FTE (with a +/- 1 day tolerance) for 2022/23.
3. Notes the work in Our Approach to Leading Organisational Wellbeing and supports the priority actions for 2022/2023 set out Section 2.10.

3. Annual Review - Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI)

Keira Rounsley (Diversity, Inclusion and Wellbeing Team Leader) introduced the report which provided details of the diversity of the Council's workforce in 2021/22, including gender, ethnicity, and disability pay gap data. The report outlined the Council's commitment to support staff to feel valued, included, safe, and supported. It provided a summary of key achievements in 2021/22 and priority actions for the year ahead.

Councillor Gifford praised the quality of report, stating that it provided a positive account of the organisation. This would provide assurance to prospective employees that a culture was in place that did not discriminate based on gender, sexuality, ethnicity, disability, or other grounds. He praised the good progress that had been made.

In response to Councillor Hammersley, Keira Rounsley advised that the Council operated an equal pay policy, meaning that there was equal pay for equal work irrespective of gender, ethnicity, or

other factors. She advised that the pay gap data included within the report provided insight into the difference between average earnings for specific groups. She emphasised that recruitment was based upon talent, however, the existence of structural inequalities was acknowledged. Pay gap data showed a higher proportion of men in senior roles. Research had shown multiple reasons for this, including unconscious bias and wider societal factors. The findings of the report enabled a focus on the inclusivity of promotional rates.

In response to Councillor Kettle, Keira Rounsley advised that the Your Say survey had been updated for the year ahead to enable a distinction to be made between direct experience and witnessing of bullying. Future annual reports would provide details of these two categories, including the nature of the incident (for example, whether it related to an interaction between colleagues, with a manager, or involved a member of the public). This would provide improved data. Anonymous reporting would also support a better understanding of levels of bullying, and where engagement could be targeted to achieve an improvement.

In response to Councillor Kettle, Keira Rounsley advised that, based on the data for 2021/22, it was difficult to discern if there had been multiple reports by witnesses of the same incident of bullying. She highlighted the changes brought about by agile working; should bullying occur on a platform such as Microsoft Teams, there would be fewer witnesses. Sessions to address the risk of online bullying and harassment would be held during National Inclusion Week.

Keira Rounsley advised that several options were available to staff to report bullying and harassment. Where possible, individuals affected by bullying were encouraged to seek an informal resolution. In cases that required a different approach, it was possible to make use of the Council's Grievance Policy, Bullying and Harassment Policy, Listening Mates scheme, as well mediation, and engagement with trade unions.

Councillor Millar praised the report, stating that the quality of the data captured would help the Council to achieve its objectives. She expressed support for the even balance between men and women within the Senior Leadership Team. The actions proposed to accelerate progress would support the drive for equality across the organisation. In future, she suggested that a view be sought from staff on the implications of caring responsibilities to gauge the impact that this had on wellbeing.

Resolved:

That the Committee:

1. Agrees that the Council's Equality, Diversity & Inclusion (EDI) Annual Review 2021/2022 be published on the Council's website to meet the statutory requirement to publish annually equality information relating to employees, including gender pay gap information.
2. Agrees that the Council's gender pay gap figures, based on a reporting date of 31 March 2022, be published on the Government's gender pay gap website, as required by the gender pay gap regulations.
3. Notes the work in Our Approach to EDI and supports the priority actions for 2022/2023 as set out at Section 2.7.

4. Annual Review - Focus on Corporate Health and Safety

Gary Summerfield (Health and Safety Technical Specialist) introduced the report which provided an overview of the work undertaken in 2021/22 to promote the Council's corporate Health and Safety objectives, including key achievements in 2021/22 and areas of focus for the year ahead.

Barnaby Briggs (Assistant Chief Fire Officer) provided a summary of the Warwickshire Fire and Rescue Service (WFRS) Health, Safety and Wellbeing Annual Review 2021/22 which was included as an appendix to the report.

In response to Councillor Gifford, Gary Summerfield advised that health and safety legislation had not yet caught up with the shift to agile working. Where an employee was asked to work from home, technically this constituted an office environment, and the employer had a responsibility for that individual's safety. He emphasised that the employee also had a responsibility for the safety of their home environment. Priority had been given to ensuring that Display Screen Equipment (DSE) assessments were undertaken to improve the safety of those working from home. Portable Appliance Testing (PAT) was also appropriate in circumstances when staff had removed electronic equipment from office locations to support home working. The Council had a responsibility to ensure that this equipment was safe and well maintained.

In response to the Chair, Gary Summerfield advised that a risk assessment and DSE assessment were required for home working. It was not practicable for the Health and Safety Team to visit home working locations to make an assessment. Instead, guidance was provided to staff. The Council's principles for Health and Safety would be updated once the anticipated changes to national legislation were made.

In response to Councillor Hammersley, Gary Summerfield advised that, following a report of an accident or personal injury, an investigation was undertaken. This would seek to ascertain the cause of the incident, and whether it had resulted from a management issue or a 'deviation from arrangements' (where an individual had neglected to follow recommended processes). In cases where personal injury had resulted from a failure to follow guidance, the Authority was not held to be at fault. Training was required to ensure that all staff were aware of Health and Safety standards.

Councillor Kettle highlighted the challenges associated with risk assessments for home working. He queried whether it was reasonable for the Authority to be held responsible for accidents occurring at home.

Gary Summerfield advised that any incidents would be examined on a case-by-case basis. If an accident had resulted from equipment which had been supplied by the Council, the investigation would seek ascertain whether the equipment had been properly maintained and used safely.

In respect of the WFRS Health, Safety and Wellbeing Annual Review, Councillor Millar expressed her thanks for the valued work undertaken by the Fire and Rescue Service.

In response to Councillor Millar, Gary Summerfield underlined the importance of Near Miss reports. By monitoring near misses, the Council could anticipate emerging trends to prevent serious injury or harm. Technological innovations would support increased reporting of near misses, enabling investigation and the introduction of control measures.

Resolved:

That the Committee:

1. Endorses the Annual Review;
2. Supports the Council's proposed Health and Safety key focus areas for 2022/ 2023 as set out in Section 3.0 and within the Our People – Focus on Corporate Health & Safety Annual Review 2021 / 2022.

5. Subsistence Allowances

Kate Sullivan (Lead Commissioner – Culture, Leadership and Performance) introduced the report which sought to align subsistence allowances paid to members of staff with the recent upgrades to member subsistence allowances emerging from the revised Members' Allowances Scheme. She provided a summary of the proposed maximum allowance rates for lunch and evening meals. She emphasised that these were not fixed allowances but rather the maximum amount that could be claimed upon submission of a receipt. She advised that very few subsistence claims were made; financial implications were minimal.

The Chair expressed support for the allowance paid to staff to be aligned with the members' scheme.

In response to Councillor Hammersley, Kate Sullivan advised that subsistence allowances for staff had not been reviewed for several years. The updated Members' Allowance Scheme had prompted the initiative to update staff allowances. The amounts were not linked to inflation.

Councillor Gifford underlined that the financial implications of the proposed changes were minimal. He expressed support for the recommendation.

Resolved:

That the Committee:

1. Approves the alignment in Lunch and Evening Meal subsistence allowances between members and staff to be effective as soon as reasonably practical.
2. Authorises the Strategic Director for Resources to engage with schools on the proposal that the increase to subsistence allowances be applied to all community and voluntary controlled Warwickshire schools and to finalise those arrangements having regard to the outcome of that consultation.

6. Pensions - Regulatory and Policy Update

Martin Griffiths (Technical Specialist, Pension Fund Policy and Governance) introduced this report which provided a summary of recently reviewed Pension Fund policies and gave an update on regulatory developments in the pensions arena. He advised that the Committee's approval was sought to authorise the Strategic Director for Resources to update the Administration Strategy Statement and Governance Policy Statement.

Martin Griffiths reported that the Admissions and Termination Policy had been reviewed by Hymans Robertson, the Fund's Actuary. Hymans had suggested that some changes be made to the Policy, listed within the report. He advised that, as Hymans was in the process of restructuring the Council's Funding Strategy Statement, it was proposed to delay finalising the Admissions and Termination Policy until after this work was completed. An update would be provided to the Committee in due course.

Martin Griffiths advised that, at the time of compiling the report, the Chancellor of the Exchequer had confirmed that the state pension triple lock would be reinstated from April 2024. There had been no indication that this would change as an outcome of governmental changes. However, the Committee would be kept informed of any alterations.

Resolved:

That the Committee:

1. Notes the updates contained within the report.
2. Authorises the Strategic Director for Resources to update the Administration Strategy Statement, and (in consultation with appropriate persons) the Governance Policy Statement.

7. Pensions Administration Activity and Performance Update

Vicky Jenks (Pensions Administration Delivery Lead) introduced the report which provided an update on the key developments affecting pensions administration and the performance of the Pensions Administration Service.

Vicky Jenks advised that efforts had been made to progress the Member Self Service Scheme (MSS), enabling Annual Benefit Statements to be accessed electronically. To date, 20% of eligible scheme members had signed up to the scheme. She advised that this compared favourably to the progress of similar schemes elsewhere. Continued promotion of the MSS Portal would help to increase the number of subscribers.

Vicky Jenks advised that a breach had been reported following difficulties in obtaining data from a Multi Academy Trust within agreed timescales. Since publication of the report, up-to-date information had been provided leading to resolution of the matter.

In response to Councillor Kettle, Vicky Jenks advised that a resolution had been reached to a recent complaint from a member of the Pension Fund who had expressed concern that payment had been made prior to issue of a payslip. This had occurred because of a minor software glitch which had since been corrected. There had been no other complaints.

Resolved:

That the Committee endorses the report.

8. Employers Joining and Leaving the Pension Fund

Vicky Jenks (Pensions Administration Delivery Lead) introduced the report which provided notice of new employers entering the Pension Fund as well as employers that were no longer active within the Fund.

Barnaby Briggs (Assistant Chief Fire Officer) advised that Kineton High School was part of the Stowe Valley Multi Academy Trust (rather than the Stour Federation, as listed within the report). Further investigation showed that a typographical error had been made. The report should have referred to 'Kineton Primary School', which had become part of the Stour Federation from 1 July 2022. This would be corrected.

In response to the Chair, members of the Committee agreed to approve the delegation of authority to the Strategic Director for Resources as set out within the report (subject to changes to the reference to Kineton High School).

Resolved:

That the Committee:

1. Delegates authority to the Strategic Director for Resources to approve applications from the listed employers subject to the applications meeting the criteria for admission:

New Academies

- Kineton Primary School (Part of the Stour Federation), 1st July 2022

New Employers

- ABM Catering LTD (Holy Spirit Multi Academy Trust), 1st August 2021 (See 1.5)
- Alliance In Partnership LTD (Castle Phoenix Trust), 4th October 2021 (see 1.5)

2. Notes that the following employers will no longer be active in the Warwickshire Pension Fund:

- Chartwells Compass Group UK (Community Academy Trust), Community Academy Trust, 30th September 2022
- Chartwells Compass Group UK (The Polesworth School), 30th September 2022.

9. Next Meetings

Members noted the dates of future meetings.

The meeting rose at 15.30.

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Chair