

Staffing Policy Committee

MINUTES OF THE STAFFING POLICY COMMITTEE MEETING HELD ON 3 JUNE 2020 – ONLINE MEETING

Present:

Cllr Stuart Wheeler (Chairman), Cllr Tony Jackson (Vice-Chairman), Cllr Richard Clewer, Cllr Mike Hewitt, Cllr Carole King, Cllr John Smale and Cllr Philip Whitehead

Also Present:

Kevin Fielding (Democratic Services Officer), Stuart Honeyball (HR Systems & Insight Manager), Paula Marsh (HR & OD Strategic Delivery Manager), Jo Pitt (Director – HR & OD), Lisa Pullin (Democratic Services Officer), and Helen Strong (Associate Business Partner)

15 **Apologies for absence**

No apologies were received.

16 **Minutes of Previous Meeting**

Resolved:

To confirm and sign the minutes of the last meeting held on 8 January 2020.

17 **Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest made at the meeting.

18 **Chairman's Announcements**

The Chairman invited Paula Marsh (HR & OD Strategic Delivery Manager) to provide verbal updates on the following:

Salary Finance Employee Benefit

This is an employee benefit we have been looking at for some time, but it has now been accelerated due to the current situation and the potential for there to be significant economic impacts which may result in some staff facing financial difficulties.

Salary Finance is a company focused on helping middle and lower income earners to become debt-free and to save for their future. Their focus is on employee financial wellbeing.

The company have received widespread independent recognition for innovation and social impact including “Responsible Business of the Year 2018 from Prince Charles’ Business in the Community (BITC), for work in financial wellbeing.

A large number of private and public sector organisations have already launched Salary Finance to around 1 million employees. Clients include Tesco and Sainsburys as well as a large number of Local Authorities including Hampshire County Council, North Somerset Council; West Sussex County Council; Newport City Council; Portsmouth City Council; Hackney Council; Haringey Council; Barnet Council; Somerset County Council; Horsham District Council; Milton Keynes Council; Croydon Council and most recently Essex County Council.

The Local Government Association has used two of Salary Finance’s clients to highlight best practice in their Workforce Wellbeing data bank.

Employees can access the Salary Finance online platform via the council intranet or directly on their personal devices to

- Access a broad range of financial education resources.
- Make regular savings directly from their salary into a bank account provided by partner Yorkshire Building Society.
- Set up a Help to Save account. By saving just £50 a month, employees can earn up to £1,200 in tax-free bonuses from HMRC over four years (this product is provided in partnership with HMRC).
- Apply for a salary-deducted loan. This can replace/consolidate any existing high cost debt employees have (like payday loans or credit cards) into a single low-cost loan, with repayments collected via salary deduction each month. It can also be used for emergencies.
- Set-up a pay advance for early access to earnings already accrued, if an employee has an unexpected expense mid pay period and no savings to cover it.

It has been agreed to implement this employee benefit (Officer decision) which they are looking to roll out in July 2020 to support the current wellbeing offer.

Officer decisions undertaken re: COVID-19 – Staffing impacts

Policies and guidance

A new **COVID-19 policy** was partially launched on 17 March 2020, and fully implemented on 24 March to support the council in putting in place emergency arrangements to ensure we could provide effective essential services for the residents and communities of Wiltshire during this event.

This has temporarily superseded some existing policies, including working arrangements; allocation of staff to roles; attendance at work, temporary working arrangements, holidays and some pay arrangements.

This policy was developed with the involvement of Trade Unions representatives, recognising that successful application of this policy would only be possible through the goodwill, flexibility and commitment of our staff.

As part of the roll out of the policy some of the main variations we have made to normal working practices are

- asking staff to work from home wherever possible – and putting place ways for them to access ICT and office equipment to support with this
- our approach to 7 day working rotas and bank holiday working – to promote the use of TOIL to enable staff to take time back rather than claim for overtime to protect the council's financial position
- communicating a requirement for staff who are not working to use 1/12 of their annual leave each month to prevent a buildup that needs to be taken on their return
- the option to roll forward additional annual leave if necessary for operational reasons - although still promoting that staff should take leave wherever possible for their own wellbeing and to enable BAU on return
- The option to postpone purchased annual leave for up to 2 years
- Providing guidance to managers on how to submit pay claim for casual and variable hours staff who are no longer working or who have reduced work – we have continued to pay these staff based on either planned working patterns or a reference period

We have also provided guidance and FAQs on other aspects of employment including

- vulnerable groups (working closely with PH) social distancing and PPE for staff continuing to attend at workplaces
- guidance for managers on supporting staff with caring responsibilities
- guidance on critical workers and template letters to send to these staff to enable them to access childcare
- guidance on use of volunteers
- guidance on call up of military reservists
- bereavement guidance

Initially we said that we would review this and other guidance after 12 weeks. However, as a number of national restrictions remain in place (e.g. in relation to staff working from home where possible and some services remaining closed), we have confirmed with the unions that the current temporary arrangements will remain in place for now. We will continue to review the need for these in line with national approaches to the easing of restrictions.

As we move from “temporary” towards a “new normal” we will engage with unions to look at any longer-term changes to working practices, policies and guidance which may be needed to support recovery longer term and bring these through Staffing Policy Committee for agreement.

Furlough

A significant area that decisions have had to be taken on has been the decision over whether to furlough staff.

Since the initial guidance about the Coronavirus Job Retention scheme was published on 26 March a working group from HR, legal and finance have been reviewing which groups of staff we may be able to make a claim for under this scheme.

There were a clear group of staff from with City Hall and Leisure operation which fully met the criteria for the scheme as these services are fully income funded and all income stopped with effect from 20 March. We have carefully reviewed and evidenced that these staff all meet the scheme criteria.

Following an officer decision by the CEOs, and consultation with the Trade Unions the first group of these staff were sent furlough letters on 14 May backdated to the date they stopped working.

In this first group there were 244 people covering 307 posts. A press release was prepared however so far there have been no media enquiries. This first group of staff were those who could be easily identified as not working from the date the leisure centres and City Hall closed.

There was a second group of staff working in these services where further work was required to determine furlough dates and to ensure that they met all of the scheme criteria.

This work has now been completed and the CEOs have agreed a further list of posts to be furloughed in leisure operations and City Hall - this covers an additional 280 people covering 458 posts. This will bring the total to 524 staff across 765 posts.

We have maintained these staff on 100% contractual pay for the whole period of furlough. We are able to claim 80% of their salary costs back through the scheme until the end of July – we are awaiting further guidance on how the scheme will operate for the period between August and October.

The estimated claim through the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme for all staff now identified for furlough across both services is £245k per month (so around £1m potential claim up to end of July).

This will not cover the costs to the council of paying staff who have not been working but will mitigate some of this cost.

We are also supporting Wiltshire schools to make claims for furloughed staff from before and after school clubs and catering posts.

The CEOs also confirmed a local decision to make claims for staff who have been furloughed in one contract but not in another - this had to be a local decision as no national guidance has been forthcoming. We will ensure we have a clear record of the claims that we have submitted which fall into this group in case any future guidance indicates that we would need to repay these claims. This does however enable us to now include claims for school staff - most of who have multiple contracts. We will confirm to schools this approach in our next update to them.

The CEOs also confirmed that they do want us to now also look at other income funded services to identify any other posts which could be included in a furlough claim - we are working with finance to identify the relevant services and will update you in due course about this phase.

We are working closely with unions to ensure all furloughing decisions are consulted on and communicated effectively to staff.

Committee members asked the following questions:

What is the furlough position for People for Places staff and self-employed instructors?

David Redfern (Head of Leisure Operations) has been working closely Places for People and they have furloughed all of their staff. I am not sure what they have done with their instructors and what types of contract they have and there are other Government schemes that self-employed people can access. The furlough scheme is only for those who are directly employed, and we will follow this up with David Redfern to check on the position of those staff.

I am aware of some people partly going back to work who have been furloughed – is this the case for any of our employees?

As the scheme stands at the moment, staff have to be fully furloughed and would not be able to carry out any work for us at all if we are making a claim through the HMRC scheme. The indication is that from July the scheme will change to allow employers to bring people back partially, but that guidance is not due to come out until 12 June 2020. It is also envisaged that the amount employers can claim through the scheme will also reduce.

Return to workplace approach

Our approach is still to encourage staff to work at home wherever possible, and we are looking at bringing staff back to workplaces in a phased way - starting with those for whom it is essential to deliver services.

We asked all Directors and Heads of Service to complete checklists for their staffing groups to identify which staff fall into which groups within their services:

- a) Services/teams/roles who are **already attending the workplace** as previously identified as essential services
- b) Services/teams/roles that are **urgently required to return to their workplace** as they need to undertake roles which cannot continue to be carried out at home
- c) Services/ teams/roles who can continue to work from home but where it may be **beneficial to bring them back into the workplace** as this would add value to service delivery (i.e. enable a better service to customers, enable staff to work more efficiently or effectively or enable a higher level of income generation for the service).
- d) Services/teams/roles that **can continue to work from home** for the foreseeable future, with no impact to service delivery

By workplaces we mean:

- Respite centres, resource centres
- Council depots
- Council owned hubs, buildings, sites or other settings
- Places that they visit as part of their role within the community (e.g. home visits)

Initially we are focused on ensuring that those already in workplaces and those for whom it is essential to return are safe and following national guidance.

We have created a toolkit for managers which takes them through a step by step process for considering all aspects of a safe return to the workplace (e.g. social distancing, working practices, site operations, building checks, communication to staff and identification of vulnerable groups).

We have also implemented measures within our hub building to ensure these are COVID Secure in line with national guidance and will support managers working in other locations to carry out risk assessments to put relevant measures in place before staff return. This has included reducing the number of desks staff can use, reducing meeting room capacity, changing cleaning regimes etc. I attach the draft risk assessment for our hub buildings for your information - a final version will be confirmed next week.

The CEOs are reviewing all of the requests for an urgent return to the workplace and, as they approve these, we will be working with managers of these teams to complete the toolkit and bring these teams back in safely.

We will also be asking managers of teams already in the workplace to review the toolkit and to apply any elements that are not already in place. Once this stage is complete we will move on to consider the next phase of enabling staff in those teams where it would be beneficial for them to have access to workplaces to start to return. However, this will be carefully managed, taking into account the local COVID-19 situation and national guidance on the easing of restrictions.

We will be discussing the return to workplace toolkit and approach at the Equality Impact Analysis panel on 9 June 2020.

A Panel Member commented that he could see that lot of effort had been put into recognising the importance of our staff and we must thank the co-operation from the staff who been great, through all this uncertainty. Although some staff that he had spoken to were concerned about what is going on with the pandemic they are still committed to working and they appreciate the support and guidance that has been put in place around this.

A Committee member asked if there was any resistance/reluctance from staff to return to work? Paula Marsh reported that whilst there were some staff that were understandably anxious, she would be giving further details in her next part of the update about the plans for vulnerable groups.

Risk assessment for vulnerable groups

We have been carefully reviewing the national picture and guidance in relation to vulnerable groups, in particular Black and Minority Ethnic groups.

Our approach has been to wait for and follow national guidance, however as this has still not been published we have now agreed to adopt a risk assessment that was initially developed by the Great Western Hospital - the intention is that this can be used to support managers to have discussions with staff, or for individual staff to use to help them to identify if they are in a higher risk group in order to flag and discuss this with their manager.

This risk assessment has been developed by Public Health and HR with the support of the BME Staff Network and the unions and will be updated if additional evidence or national guidance becomes available.

Communications have gone out to managers today and will shortly go out as a global message to all staff.

Committee Members were in support of what work was being done to identify vulnerable staff but wanted there to be an awareness that for some staff coming into work is a huge part of their life and for others working from home will not be easy for all due to space restrictions and if there are others at home also using

the space. Some staff may fall behind at work as their home surroundings are not ideal and so the Council will need to consider different aspects of vulnerability to our thoughts moving forward. There was some concern that some members of staff now have a lot of responsibility that has been thrust upon them and wanted to be reassured that managers are doing what they can to support them.

Jo Pitt – (Director – HR & OD) reported to Members that following the recent staff wellbeing and engagement survey which related to the current working arrangements she was pleased to report that the overall engagement score was higher now than it was in 2018 (the score then was high), it was currently 88. However, the survey did indicate that there were some areas that needed to be looked at and obviously some staff are finding working at home quite isolating and don't have a dedicated work space which is difficult.

Managers would be drilling down into service level to inform their working arrangements going forward and HR would talk to them about their service areas and the results of the survey. They would look into how many staff have accessed the counselling service and there was lots of additional wellbeing support and advice being shared to staff.

Resolved:

That the Committee note the verbal updates.

19 **Public Participation**

There were no members of the public present or statements submitted.

20 **Quarterly Workforce Report January-March 2020**

The Committee received a workforce report, for the quarter ended 31 March 2020.

The Committee noted that the report was another new format which had been designed to show the information and data in an easier and more interesting way. Officers asked for Members to let them know of any feedback or comments or if they wished for any additional metrics or measures to be included in future reports.

Key areas to note were that the increase in head count had started to level off as anticipated and numbers were back as they were in 2016. There had been an increase in demand for some of our services – particularly social care areas and following the targeted and focussed recruitment campaigns the staffing levels in these areas had risen. In the areas that had shown a reduction in staffing numbers these were areas of recent restructure planned to consolidate teams and align with other services.

The new infographics in the report had been included to focus on areas of most value and now included visuals on disability and ethnicity as percentages. The

top 5 reasons for sickness were the usual causes and did not include Covid-19. The impact of staff being off sick with coronavirus had been very low with an almost negligible impact. The long-term sickness when looked at by directorate level you will see that this comes mainly from the adult care/access and re-enablement teams. We had previously been asked to look at plans that could be put in place to reduce sickness, particularly in these areas and recent events had overtaken this but these plans would be presented at a future meeting.

Looking at staff turnover, one of the top three reasons was retirement and although not the highest the work on succession planning should smooth this level out a bit. Whilst there had been 8 new advisory cases in the quarter relating to improving work performance – when we looked further into these we saw that they were spread across directorates and service areas, and so can reassure that there are not significant problems or cause for concern in the same areas.

Incidental costs had not been included e.g. business travel, but they could be added to future reports if of interest to the Committee.

The Committee thanked officers for the ongoing work on reducing staff absence and wanted to reiterate that the aim is not to punish staff for being sick but providing support to get them back to work. A Member asked for details of the numbers of people in the long-term absence category as only the percentage was given in the report. This figure would be passed onto the Member following the meeting.

A Member asked about the numbers of leavers who had been in post less than a year, they appeared to be higher– were there any particular reasons for this. Officers reported that split was even across a number of reasons for leaving and it does depend on the time of year etc, and whilst it had gone it is was within the normal range and was a spread across the reasons.

Resolved:

To note the Quarterly Workforce report for the period ended 31 March 2020.

21 **Code of Conduct**

The Committee received a report by the Director, Human Resources & Organisational Development which outlined proposed amendments to the council's code of conduct policy following the agreed changes to the behaviour framework.

The Committee were reminded that EPIC is the Council's employee brand standing for innovation, collaboration and empowering people and it is the golden thread of the employees' journey. A review of the current behaviour's framework was recommended to ensure that it continued to be an effective tool

in promoting a positive culture and to support the council in delivering its priorities and aligned to the employee promise.

Focus groups and staff feedback formed the basis of the development of EPIC values. Staff supported in identifying what values resonated with them. It was felt behaviours held negative connotations and ratings should be removed to ensure the tool was viewed in a positive way also resulting in the removal of what a value does not look like.

The Joint Consultative Committee had been updated about the changes to the behaviour's framework. EPIC Values has also been presented to team EPIC and at the manager forum. All providing positive feedback, specifically highlighting the simplicity of the framework.

This was due to come to Staffing Policy Committee in March, but as the meeting was cancelled it was given approval through Officer decisions in order to progress with this and the code of conduct. The Committee were shown a draft version of the document at the meeting for which branding was still being finalised.

Committee members were happy with the EPIC values standards and the way it was clearly presented.

They reviewed the changes to the Code of Conduct policy which were required to be made alongside the introduction of the new EPIC values document.

Resolved:

That the Committee approve the changes to the Code of Conduct policy.

(Duration of meeting: 2.00 - 3.15 pm)

The Officer who has produced these minutes is Lisa Pullin of Democratic Services, direct line 01225 713035, e-mail committee@wiltshire.gov.uk

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