

Staffing Policy Committee

MINUTES OF THE STAFFING POLICY COMMITTEE MEETING HELD ON 26 AUGUST 2020 – ON-LINE MEETING

Present:

Cllr Stuart Wheeler (Chairman), Cllr Richard Clewer, Cllr Carole King, Cllr Ricky Rogers and Cllr Peter Evans (Substitute)

Also Present:

Jo Pitt - Director – HR & OD, Stuart Honeyball - HR Systems & Insight Manager, Paula Marsh - HR & OD Strategic Delivery Manager, Michael Taylor – Workforce Insight Analyst, HR, Mike Osment – Branch Secretary, UNISON and Kevin Fielding - Democratic Services Officer

22 **Apologies for absence**

Apologies were received from Cllr Phillip Whitehead – *Cllr Peter Evans subbing for him, Cllr Mike Hewitt, Cllr John Smale & Cllr Tony Jackson.*

23 **Minutes of Previous Meeting**

Resolved:

To confirm and sign the minutes of the last meeting held on the 3 June 2020

24 **Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest made at the meeting.

25 **Chairman's Announcements**

There were no Chairman's Announcements made at the meeting.

26 **Public Participation**

No statements or questions were received.

27 **Organisation Recovery Programme Overview**

Jo Pitt - Director – HR & OD, Wiltshire Council gave a brief presentation, points made included:

Organisational recovery

The Aim - to learn from the response to the pandemic and recover to emerge leaner and stronger

The Objective - to undertake organisational wide transformation of the Councils governance, policy and business processes, our systems and use of digital technology, the structure, flexibility, culture and behaviour of our workforce in delivering services and the assets we own in which to deliver those services, and to identify opportunities to maximise all of these.

Programme Principles

- To learn from and embed the positive lessons from COVID-19
- To utilise digital solutions to support recovery and ensure we have a sustainable way of working
- That all decisions would consider the economic, financial, environmental and workforce impact
- That Wiltshire Council would prioritise ways to protect employment
- Employment policies, procedures and practices would be refocused to support recovery and ensure agility of our workforce
- Wiltshire Council would explore opportunities to share resources/systems and processes
- Service redesign would be a catalyst for delivering improvement and efficiencies focused on a new operating model
- Communications would be timely, frequent and consistent
- Wiltshire Council would balance financial imperatives, ensuring that it had a capable workforce
- Wiltshire Council would promote workplace diversity and inclusion.
- Wiltshire Council would work in a way which delivered our employee promise to empower our people to innovate and collaborate
- Opportunities to share resources/systems/processes internally and with stakeholders /partners

Programme Structure – three themes

Workforce – who would we need in our workforce and how do we ensure that we have the capacity & capability to deliver recovery and beyond

Workplace – where would we engage and deliver services going forward

Work – how would we deliver services and what would we deliver

Priorities identified so far include:

- Further development of plans for return to the workplace
- Future workplace - where services/staff work, utilisation of current workplaces
- Developing options to reduce staff costs, including reducing the cost and application of some terms and conditions, recruitment freeze, agile redeployment
- Optimising digital solutions to maintain and embed new ways of working
- Refocusing recruitment and retention strategies
- Developing options for co-location and commercial return on our assets
- Green workplace and carbon neutral promise
- New models for delivery/customer access e.g. 24/7, 7 days a week, online only
- Opportunities to share resources/systems/processes internally and with stakeholders /partners

Points made by the Committee included:

- Did staff want new ways of working?
- The important that the hubs were adequately utilised.
- That a more balanced approach to home/hub working was needed – the need to pick out the good practices of the last months.
- Concerns that staff were missing working in the hubs and seeing their peers.

Resolved

- **That the Committee noted the program and looked forward to future updates.**

The Chairman thanked Jo Pitt for her presentation.

28 Covid Response Update

Paula Marsh - HR & OD Strategic Delivery Manager, Wiltshire Council gave a verbal Covid Response update.

Points made included:

Policies and guidance

- That the COVID19 policy remained in place which allowed the council to alter working arrangements; allocation of staff to roles; attendance at work, temporary working arrangements, holidays and some pay arrangements.
- The policy remained whilst staff were working in temporary ways, for example working from home, and would also enable Wiltshire Council to make changes should they be required in the event of a local outbreak and lockdown.
- CLT made the decision that the temporary arrangements which were put in place in March 2020 to maintain normal pay for casual workers and staff on variable hours contracts who were unable to work where services were closed due to lockdown restrictions, would cease on 31 August 2020. These arrangements meant staff were paid based on an assessment by the manager of either: Planned working time – the hours of work they would have been expected to undertake over the next 12 weeks; Previous working patterns (e.g. an average of the last 12 weeks or the same period in a previous year) or a sensible estimate of hours (advice could be sought from payroll or HR if required).
- Initially the arrangement were put in place for 12 weeks but was extended as services remained closed due to national lockdown measures.
- However due to the fact that lockdown measures had now been lifted and services are starting to remobilise the council would revert to paying staff for hours worked with effect from 1 September 2020.
- Wiltshire Council had briefed unions and ensure their agreement to this approach and services have written to impacted staff to confirm this to them.

- For permanent variable hours staff contracted on zero hours they would revert to normal pay arrangements, i.e. they would be paid only for the hours that they actually worked.
- If these staff did not work any hours in September, because the location or part of the service they work in was not re-opened, they would not receive any pay in October 2020 or beyond for as long as the service was closed.
- For permanent variable hours staff with guaranteed hours specified in their contract they would be paid only for these minimum hours from October 2020 onwards, unless they actually worked any additional hours.
- As variable hours staff were paid monthly in arrears their September pay reflects August, and therefore would be based on the expected / average hours approach.
- For casual workers where there was no anticipated work they should have their working arrangements ended on 31 August 2020. They would receive a final payment that month based on expected / average hours.
- Where services retain casual workers beyond 31 August they would revert to being paid for hours actually worked during the previous month. Services would only retain casual workers where there was an expectation that work would be available.

Furlough

- As outlined at the last SPC in June Wiltshire Council made the decision to furlough staff in income generating services who were not able to work or be redeployed.
- In total Wiltshire Council had furloughed 583 staff across 828 posts, mainly in Leisure ops, City Hall and Library service. Of these Wiltshire Council had claimed through the scheme for salary costs relating to 511 of these staff, some would not had had claims made due to not having any salary costs for the period.
- Where staff had been paid during the period Wiltshire Council had maintained these staff on 100% contractual pay (i.e. not reduced to 80% as allowed under the scheme) for the whole period of furlough.
- Wiltshire Council had also supported Wiltshire schools to make claims for 120 people – mainly in before and after school clubs and catering.
- For the period March – June 2020 we have claimed a total of £988k through the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme.

- The CJRS was extended until October, this included an option to “flexibly furlough” staff, meaning they could return to work for some of their hours. A part of the scheme extension the amount that could be claimed back reduced month on month until the scheme closure at the end of October.
- Wiltshire Council would continue to claim through the scheme where it were paying staff for contracted hours but they were unable to work. However claims would reduce significantly as services remobilise and as we revert to paying casual and variable hours staff based on worked hours.

Return to workplace approach

- In line with Public Health advice Wiltshire Council’s approach was still to encourage staff to work at home wherever possible. This enables it to ensure social distancing within our workplaces and so that we keep the staff who were delivering our essential services in and from the workplaces as safe as possible.
- Wiltshire Council had a significant number of staff who had continued to operate from our workplaces throughout lockdown.
- In addition from June, as lockdown started to ease, each directorate completed a checklist process to get approval where they wanted to bring staff back into workplaces due to this being essential for service delivery. Where these requests have been approved, managers had been supported to bring staff back safely through a return to work toolkit, 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).
- More recently a process to allow staff “ad hoc” access to workplaces assessed as COVID-secure had also been confirmed and communicated.
- The process enabled employees access to workplaces for short periods of time on a regular basis – for example this may be to allow them to print documents, scan in paperwork, collect post, pick up equipment etc.
- It also enables staff to work from council workplaces as a one off in exceptional circumstances – for example should their home internet access go down for a day. These ad hoc requests were confirmed by Directors and were not intended for employees having regular access to workplaces, any regular or permanent return to workplace arrangements still need to go through the checklist process for agreement by the Chief Executive.

- The staff survey indicated that for some groups of staff, working from home for a prolonged period of time was adversely affecting their wellbeing. Areas of concern include social isolation, distractions in the home and lack of a dedicated workspace. Some staff may also be in difficult domestic situations meaning that home was not a safe or pleasant environment for them. Wiltshire Council had therefore put in place a process for staff to be permitted access to work regularly in one of the three main council hubs for wellbeing reasons.
- Any requests to return for wellbeing reasons must be confirmed by Directors. Access support from the council OH&S team, and had also been provided with a toolkit through the council's Flourish intranet site – as in many cases simply returning to the office would not, in itself, provide the support required.
- The next steps for return to workplace would be led through the Organisational Recovery Programme to ensure they were aligned with the future vision for the council.

Workplace capacity

- Wiltshire Council workplace capacity had been reduced by approx. 50% due to the social distancing measures in place. Normal capacity across the three main council hubs was around 1600 staff, so this was currently reduced to around 800. Staff numbers working in hubs each day had increased since the RTW processes had been rolled out and currently the daily average figures were 178 staff accessing County Hall, 48 in Monkton Park and 65 in Bourne Hill.
- Around 75% of these were staff identified as essential workers who had been accessing the building throughout. Not all essential workers may access each workplace each day, or even week. Around 20% of visits were from staff in services later granted permission to return to workplaces in order to effectively deliver services following lockdown and around 5% are ad hoc/wellbeing access requests.
- Wiltshire Council were continuing to receive requests from services to bring some staff back into workplaces where it was becoming necessary to support service delivery. It also saw new ad hoc and wellbeing requests come through each week. Our approach currently would continue to be that staff who could work from home should continue to do so in line with public health advice. This helped to ensure social distancing could be easily maintained and protects staff and customers in our workplaces who had no choice but to be in them.

Risk assessment for vulnerable groups

- As outlined at the last meeting Wiltshire Council developed and communicated an assessment to support managers to have discussions with staff, or for individual staff to use to help them to identify if they were in a higher risk group in order to flag and discuss this with their manager. This was also adapted and rolled out to schools. With effect from 1 August 2020 the government's advice is that people in vulnerable groups can return to workplaces as long as they were COVID-secure.
- This risk assessment had been updated to take into account these changes.
- Wiltshire Council's approach was that, wherever possible staff should work from home, regardless of their risk level. Where staff were in roles which could not be carried out from home, and fall into one of the higher risk groups, Occupational Health would work with the managers and member of staff to conduct an assessment and explore if any reasonable adjustments could be made to enable them to work safely in the workplace. However if there was no role that could be undertaken safely the current approach was to continue to pay staff their normal contracted pay. Wiltshire Council were only aware of a small number of staff who currently fell into this group, however it does anticipate some queries as schools return in September.
- Wiltshire Council would also need to develop a clear approach if and when more teams start to return to workplaces in the future.

Salary Finance

- Wiltshire Council launched Salary Finance to employees on 17 July, as outlined at the last meeting Salary Finance offer financial education resources, savings products, advances on salary and also loans.
- As outlined at the last SPC the decision to accelerate the launch of this benefit was in response to evidence from the wellbeing survey that staff were worried about the financial impact of COVID and the associated economic downturn on their families.
- The scheme had a very high engagement level in the first few weeks after launch with around 20% of the workforce accessing the portal. Wiltshire Council had already had 31 loan applications in the first 4 weeks, this indicated that we do have some staff who required financial support and were making use of this benefit. Wiltshire Council would continue to monitor the numbers and rates of loans being offered to staff.

The Chairman thanked Paula Marsh for her update.

Resolved

- **That the Committee noted the update**

29 **Quarterly Workforce Report April - June 2020**

Stuart Honeyball – HR Systems & Insight Manager, Wiltshire Council outlined the Quarterly Workforce Report April - June 2020 (contained in the agenda pack).

Points made included:

- That the last three months covered by the report had seen exceptional circumstances due to the COVID-19 pandemic. There had been significant changes to the way that staff now work with staff working from home, being redeployed or furloughed. Through the many challenges there had been a willingness from staff, both frontline and back office, to be flexible and able to adapt to new ways of working which had resulted in the council being able to continue providing services and guidance to the community over this period.
- In line with government guidance Wiltshire Council had been required to cease a number of services. To support these areas the council had used the Corona Virus Job Retention scheme (CJRS) to claim back up to 80% of salary costs (including employers National Insurance and pension contributions) for staff who were furloughed, i.e. unable to undertake their normal work duties or could not be redeployed. Use of the scheme had allowed the council to claim back approximately £1m for the period March to June 2020; the council's claim to HMRC made in June under the CJRS included 631 individuals split across a number of services. Given the financial impact of COVID on the council, the money reclaimed through CJRS was a significant factor in supporting the budgets of the affected service areas.
- As part of the furloughing process under CJRS the council had been monitoring remaining staff capacity levels within services through daily 'sit reps', to identify and understand all of the different circumstances which may be affecting its ability to provide those services still permitted or able to operate. Areas of concern were highlighted to the HR business partners and the services to investigate if this was a significant risk to service delivery and how they could be supported.
- The Council had been fortunate that it had only 37 people recorded by managers in SAP as having taken sickness absence due to suspected/confirmed cases of COVID-19, which amounted to 252.5 FTE days. This equated to just 4.2% of all sickness taken in this quarter. The low number of cases confirmed in the council workforce had meant that capacity to deliver services was not significantly affected as a direct result of COVID related absences.

- Staffing capacity monitoring confirmed this, identifying that in mid April (during the height of lockdown) the council was running at around 86% workforce capacity (FTE), once those services that were closed and in which the majority of staff were furloughed were discounted. Further analysis as of the week ending 30th June, showed very little change, with the council's non-furloughed workforce still working at around 86% capacity.
- Around 135 staff had been redeployed between services to help deliver additional capacity within those services responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. This includes staffing critical services to help those most vulnerable in the community, including the wellbeing hub, the food distribution hub and supporting the community to claim the necessary government grants for residents and local businesses. HR had successfully supported the mobilisation of services with very little disruption or delay, utilising staff in services where demand had reduced or roles that were significantly limited by working from home to provide additional capacity in areas experiencing increased demand.
- During this time, the wellbeing of our workforce was paramount. A wellbeing survey was distributed to our staff in May, with over 2,700 responses received (a 61% response rate); a very positive and representative response. During this unprecedented time it was important to note that the council witnessed increased employee engagement scores. The overriding response from staff were that there were not any significant challenges to working from home, some even cited the time gained from a lack of commute and the ability to spend more time with their family as positive to their wellbeing, and felt that, on the whole, the technology that had been implemented had worked.
- However, not all responses were wholly positive; some of the challenges to working at home that staff cited were; social isolation, distractions in the home and a lack of physical workspace. 30% of all staff that were working from home did not have a dedicated workspace. Occupational Health had been providing IT equipment such as monitors, docking stations, and peripherals to try and create a more recognisable workstation at home. To help with wellbeing, staff Q&A sessions were being held on-line to answer any questions/concerns from the staff, supported by webinars with the Chief Executive. A follow up well being survey was due to take place in September, this would enable the council to gauge how the staff were now coping and whether this had changed. The next staff engagement survey is planned to take place in December.
- The recent staff wellbeing survey responses indicated that 77.7% of council staff were working from home and socially isolating; it was

therefore likely that this had a significant contribution to the reduction in short/medium term absences through reduced opportunities for the transmission of other viruses such as coughs/colds, and less manual labour meaning a reduction in muscular/skeletal related absences. Previous analysis had also shown that staff working from home were less likely to take sickness absence for minor illness (presenteeism).

- Current advice to staff was to continue to work at home wherever possible and only to attend hubs and council premises where this was essential to work or wellbeing; HR and Facilities Management were working together to regularly monitor how council hubs were being accessed and used to ensure staff wellbeing was maintained and risks were minimised. This analysis would also contribute to work around the effective utilisation of buildings including highlighting any commercial or consolidation opportunities.

The Chairman thanked Stuart Honeyball for a very informative report.

Resolved

- **That the Committee noted the report**

Michael Taylor – Workforce Insight Analyst, HR, Wiltshire Council outlined the June 2020 Wiltshire Council Employee Wellbeing Survey (contained in the agenda pack).

Points made included:

- That the survey was carried out in response to the global pandemic which required Wiltshire Council to make quick decisions about ways that it worked, including changing work locations, supplying equipment and following government advice to protect and support our workforce. It understood that this may have had an impact on wellbeing, so it was important for the organisation to understand what it could do to support staff. The results of the survey would be a key source for measuring how it could support wellbeing and what areas it should focus on, as well as informing the decisions which would define what the 'new normal' would look like.
- The total number of responses across the council was 2,726, representing around 60% of the workforce. This scale of response was similar to that of the 2018 employee engagement survey, validating the results and providing a significant indication of staff wellbeing during these challenging times.
- The council's response to these challenges had seen a significant and rapid shift in its usual ways of working. For the majority of staff this shift had resulted in a change of workplace, with the survey results showing that 77.7% of respondents were now working from home. The

experience of employees in adapting to this major change to working arrangements had varied, with around a third of staff corporately indicating they had 'no significant challenges' to working from home; however, this process had not been without challenge for other staff, with social isolation, distractions in the home and lack of equipment being the major areas of concern.

- It was anticipated that significant levels of home working were likely to stay in place for some time for many employees. It was therefore important that the council developed an awareness of how this may affect the ongoing wellbeing of staff. Several factors may influence this, including the effects of the pandemic on mental and physical health, feeling part of the organisation and the degree to which employees felt they could remain effective in their roles under the current circumstances.

The Chairman thanked Michael Taylor for his presentation.

Resolved

- **That the Committee noted the survey report**

(Duration of meeting: 1.30 - 2.50 pm)

The Officer who has produced these minutes is Kevin Fielding of Democratic Services, direct line 01249 706612, e-mail kevin.fielding@wiltshire.gov.uk

Press enquiries to Communications, direct line (01225) 713114/713115