

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Minutes of a Meeting of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee held in Committee Room No. 2, Civic Centre, Tannery Lane, Ashford on the **11th July 2023**.

Present:

Cllr. Bell (Chair),
Cllr. Chilton (Vice-Chair).

Cllrs. Bartlett, Mrs. C. Bell, Feacey, Joseph, Ledger, Meaden, Michael, Shilton, C. Suddards.

In accordance with Procedure Rule 1.2(c), Cllr Mrs C. Bell attended as Substitute Member for the Conservative Vacancy.

Apologies:

Cllrs. Arnold, Buchanan, Giles, Nilsson.

In attendance:

Assistant Director HR Customer Services Communications and Digitalisation,
Human Resources Manager, Project Accountant, Policy & Scrutiny Officer, Member Services Officer.

Also in Attendance (virtually)

Service Lead Finance

64 Election of Chair

Resolved:

That Cllr. Bell be elected as Chair for this Meeting

65 Election of Vice Chair

Resolved:

That Cllr. Chilton be elected as Vice-Chair for this Meeting

66 Declarations of Interest

Cllr	Interest	Minute No
Feacey	Made a Voluntary Announcement that he was Chair of Ashford Volunteer Centre and Chair of Ashford International Development Company	69

67 Minutes

Resolved:

That the Minutes of the Meeting of this Committee held on the 13th June 2023 be approved and confirmed as a correct record, with the addition that Cllr. Meaden had given his apologies.

68 Annual Sickness Report 2022/23

The Human Resources Manager introduced the report, and the Committee were asked to advise Officers whether they wished to receive a further update in a years' time and if any further information on the report was required. She gave a summary of the key topics within the report, including

- 4716 total days lost to sickness
- Employees taking no sick days had decreased, owing to return to the office
- 53% short term absence and 47% long term
- Sickness absence levels had increased, returning to pre-Covid norms
- The main reason for absence was stress/mental health (33.33%), and respiratory was the 2nd highest (28.73%)
- Presenting triggers for mental ill health included work related, personal, and complex
- The cost of living crisis was anticipated to contribute to mental ill health going forward
- Established interventions and wellbeing initiatives continued to be well used
- The distribution of absence within each service was broadly in line with headcount

The report was then opened up to the Committee and the following questions and points were raised: -

- Tonbridge & Malling Council displayed lower overall numbers and it was confirmed that this was due to a smaller workforce.
- A Member suggested that short-term sickness seemed higher for ABC, although comparable with Medway and Tonbridge & Malling. There were no exceptional reasons for ABC having slightly higher short-term absence than a neighbouring LA. The Human Resources Manager had asked KCC for their sickness data to include as a comparison, but was informed that this would not be available until September.
- The Vice-Chair spoke about work related mental health illness, specifically around restructure and possible redundancies in the coming months. He asked whether there were any initiatives or policies from the current administration to try and tackle this. The Human Resources Manager explained that currently the policy was to maintain concise communication and individuals were kept informed about procedures and given clear timeframes. HR support attended every meeting and the Employee

Assistance Programme (EAP) was available throughout the process for employees to utilise. A Management Development Programme was being introduced to provide Managers with adequate training on how to handle restructure and redundancies.

- The impact of Working from Home (WFH) was discussed with the HR Manager explaining that attitudes had shifted since Covid, with staff returning to the office in greater numbers, and many individuals utilising the WFH option and its increased flexibility to better manage their work home life balance. New candidates applying for jobs were requesting hybrid working, and LA counterparts were increasingly offering the option to maximise recruitment selection. Generation Z held an expectation to work flexibly and these workers under the age of 24 were starting to enter the workforce in greater numbers.
- Return to Work Interviews were an established tool for managers to use and proved beneficial to discover any other underlying issues or trends. It also provided the opportunity to discuss any Occupational Health referral needed.
- The EAP was an extremely valuable service offering a counselling provision, with managers able to refer individuals. Referrals were expected to increase in the current climate with more staff welfare concerns over the Cost of Living Crisis. The HR Manager outlined how the service operated to the Committee.
- It was confirmed that the Benenden Health scheme, currently open to staff members, was not open to Councillors.
- A query was raised around the accuracy of the figures showing days lost to sickness during Covid being lower than now. It was explained that during the lockdown periods, people were less exposed to the usual viruses and bugs they would pick up when working in an office, in shops or leisure venues, hence the lower sickness figure during that period. Diagnosis levels also decreased.
- One Member highlighted the importance of nurturing staff, since they were the Council's primary asset. With increased pressure on a smaller workforce, his concern was that this could detrimentally affect staff mental health and wellbeing even more in the future. The Staff Survey was anticipated to be conducted in autumn 2023, and the Questionnaire was based on the HSE standards around stress, designed for organisations to obtain a good grasp on the pressures and demands on employees.
- The Member then spoke about home working, and he described the problems encountered in Schools with children not receiving discipline during lockdown, and his concern that WFH was not productive. He said that he had witnessed neighbouring residents supposedly WFH, but seemingly not undertaking any work. He worried that the right expectation levels were being set.
- A comparator to other LA's was requested for mental ill health related absence (point 23 in the report), in future, as this would be beneficial for the Committee. The HR Manager confirmed that she would endeavour to include

that comparator, and noted that mental ill health had steadily increased over recent years nationally.

- The Committee agreed that it would be valuable for Portfolio Holders to attend the meetings. Once a Chair had been officially appointed following full Council on 20th July, invitations would be sent to Portfolio Holders for individual meetings.
- The variance nationally between private and public sector absence rates was discussed, and the Chair suggested ABC should be aiming to be comparable to the private sector rates. The Assistant Director HR Customer Services Communications and Digitalisation reminded the Committee that sickness pay within the public sector was often more generous than in the private sector, so employees on lower income were not under that financial pressure to come to work when feeling unwell. The Chair highlighted the point made earlier regarding the link between short-term sickness and staff morale, and the HR Manager said that long-term sickness could also peak and a more in depth study such as the staff survey would be needed to ascertain trends. Mental health often went hand in hand with self-care and resilience. The stress container was another tool managers could use to ascertain how much pressure each individual was under, and set appropriate goals going forward. The Chair asked whether the Survey could be brought forward, but the Assistant Director HR Customer Services Communications and Digitalisation confirmed that this was not possible due to other larger HR projects the Council had committed to. However, the questions contained within the survey would be presented to the Committee prior to publication.

Recommended:

- That**
- i) the report be received and noted**
 - ii) the report be brought before the Committee next year**
 - iii) any requests in connection to the report data made during the meeting be carried out by Officers**

69 Savings Plan Progress Update

The Project Accountant introduced this report and she outlined the budget build process to close the deficit gap of £1.6m. Savings of £200k had already been applied, and proposals for a further £1.4m had been identified.

The report was then opened up to the Committee and the following questions and points were raised: -

- The Chairman asked whether the figures quoted at the last Cabinet meeting were confirmed. The Service Lead Finance explained the figures at that time were projected and that following that meeting, interest rate rises had occurred again and further rises were expected. This meant that more detailed effort was now underway to review the MTFP, since further interest rate rises and homelessness increases would present further pressures to the

Council. It was anticipated that the savings figure was more likely to be around £3m, but this was not definite. It was a continually shifting picture.

- The saving was not cumulative; once made, it would continue throughout further years.
- The MTFP was scheduled to come to the 26th October Cabinet Meeting. The Chair requested that those figures come to O&S prior to the Cabinet meeting. The October O&S Meeting was scheduled for the 10th October. The Policy & Scrutiny Officer and Service Lead Finance would liaise to determine timeframes.
- A Member highlighted analysis was needed to determine where posts may be made vacant and to determine if they were front facing or back office. The Joint Consultative Committee would be involved in all processes and more details would be available concerning posts once more work had been undertaken. A cross party working group had been suggested and this would prove very beneficial.
- The proposed saving of £100k in relation to reductions in grants was confirmed as grants received for the whole Council, not just Member grants.
- It was clarified that monies within the budget were still assigned to vacant posts until they were definitely removed, at which point that would become a definite savings amount.
- The Vice-Chair was pleased to see the removal of Deputy Portfolio Holders as he felt they were un-necessary.
- The Project Accountant confirmed that the Enforcement Review cited in the Savings Report referred to all types of enforcement within the Council, not just Planning Enforcement. She explained that there might be cross boundaries in that field and therefore room for savings to be made. The Chair voiced concern over making cuts within Planning Enforcement, since it was such a core role with specific legal attachments. The Chairman requested that the final report on this be seen by the O&S Committee also.
- The proposed move to International House was discussed and the Chair asked whether there was an assumption that WFH would continue in the same way that it currently did. The Assistant Director HR Customer Services Communications and Digitalisation explained to the Committee that WFH was here to stay across the country, and it was the way in which employees expected to work now. The modelling data for the move was based on current data received on capacity needed, and this would be the variable used to measure the amount of desks in the new building. The Chairman said that some Councillors held a certain degree of scepticism about WFH productivity levels, and so the Committee would welcome more details to show this was the best way and would provide a valuable saving. A Member asked whether the numbers of staff coming into the office had peaked, and would more space be available if more staff wanted to come into the building. The Project Accountant confirmed that International House had ample capacity, based on

the modelling and desks were available. The Chairman repeated the request for more details on the modelling data. The Service Lead Finance reminded Members that any concerns of that nature could be shared with Management Team, for them to pro-actively investigate, and help the Committee reach any decisions, including trends in days worked. The Chairman asked for his comments to be shared with Management Team, and invited any feedback received. This matter would also be covered within the topic on the work programme concerning morale, motivation and productivity (Corporate Health Check).

- It was confirmed there was no direct cost to ABC for people WFH.
- A Member spoke about deterioration in services and the need to have sight of Service Level Agreements. The Corporate Performance Review included the Key Performance Indicators and the Chair explained that was the vehicle used to present that information. Quarterly updates were also provided to the O&S Committee.

Resolved:

That the report be received and noted and the further information requested be brought to the Committee.

70 O&S Work Programme Update

The Policy & Scrutiny Officer presented the report to the Committee, which incorporated the scores and recommendations of new topic suggestions, after being put through the Matrix. New projects included a review on Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, whilst the Leaders Vision for the Corporate Plan 2024 to 2028 would be deferred as the Corporate Plan was still in its early stages, and a working group was being set up. The topic of GP appointments would be assessed following the KCC Health O&S meeting on 19th July and Members were encouraged to attend this meeting, which was available to them virtually, as well as in person.

The Policy & Scrutiny Officer had been liaising with services to ascertain when reports could be produced to come to the Committee, following approval. The Cabinet Schedule of Key Decisions was newly included with the Work Programme but the expectation was not that every item on that schedule be brought to the O&S Committee.

The report was then opened up to the Committee and the following questions and points were raised: -

- The Chair and Vice Chair had discussed the Work Programme prior to the meeting and they felt that a Task Group for the Corporate Health Check was necessary. Equalities, Diversity and Inclusion would require a report prior to the formation of a Task Group. It was hoped that the Leader would attend an O&S meeting to explain his reasons for standing for election and (along with the Chief Executive) the Council's emerging corporate priorities.

- A Member spoke about inviting external partners and agencies to meet and discuss infrastructure plans. The Chair highlighted water supply as a pressing issue within the Borough and requested that this topic be scrutinised. The Policy and Scrutiny Officer said that she would need to check capacity to fit all of this work in, taking into account budget scrutiny through December and January and Officers workloads. A representative from South East Water and the Regulator would be invited to attend a future meeting.
- A Member highlighted the need for Green issues to be considered and agreed that the topic of water supply and quality be included, and asked that the topic of biodiversity be incorporated also. The Chairman said that the Waste Contract implementation was on the Tracker and remarked that he thought the Green Party would have indicated that they wanted a higher recycling target than was stated at the recent Cabinet meeting.
- The Chairman spoke about the two recommendations made at the last meeting around extending the term of office of the Mayor and the Leader. He requested that the Solicitor to the Council provide a formal letter or guidance if the recommendations were contrary to primary legislation. The Policy & Scrutiny Officer confirmed that the two recommendations would be going to Council for consideration.

Resolved:

That the Report Tracker be received and noted, the additional topics suggested be added and further information requested be provided.

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