

EMPLOYMENT COMMITTEE

MINUTES OF THE MEETING of the Employment Committee held on Tuesday 10 January 2012 at 12.45 pm in the Executive Meeting Room, Guildhall, Portsmouth.

(NB These minutes should be read in conjunction with the agenda and reports for the meeting.)

Present

Councillor Gerald Vernon-Jackson (In the Chair)
Councillor Leo Madden (Vice-Chair)
Councillor Lynne Stagg
Councillor Rob Wood
Councillor Simon Boshier
Councillor Jim Fleming

Councillors Donna Jones and Jim Patey observing

Officers Present

David Williams, Chief Executive
Michael Lawther, City Solicitor and Section 151 Officer
Chris Ward, Section 121 Officer
Kay White, Head of Human Resources
Stephen Todd, Senior Manager Pay & Policy
Shaun Tetley, Payroll & Pensions Manager
Jacqueline Coonie, Senior Manager HR –
Employee Relations
Ama Juss, Employment Lawyer

The chair of the committee, Councillor Gerald Vernon-Jackson introduced members to the meeting and said that Councillors Donna Jones and Jim Patey, who are not full members of the committee, are attending in a non-voting capacity.

The chair said that Mr Richard White of Unite the Union had asked to make a deputation on the item on terms and conditions and agreed that he would allow the deputation even though it had not been received on time.

The chair also asked members to agree to a change in the next scheduled meeting date from 28 February to 1 March and this was agreed.

Apologies for Absence

There were no apologies for absence.

1 Declarations of Interest (AI 2)

Councillor Rob Wood declared a personal, non-prejudicial code of conduct interest in that his son-in-law works for Harbour School.

Councillor Lynne Stagg declared a personal, non-prejudicial code of conduct interest in that her daughter teaches at a Portsmouth school.

Councillor Jim Patey declared a personal, non-prejudicial code of conduct interest in that he is a life member of GMB union.

2 Minutes – 21 November 2011, 2 December and 13 December and Exempt Appendices in each case (AI 3)

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meetings of the Employment Committee held on 21 November (and exempt appendix), 2 December (and exempt appendix) and 13 December (and exempt appendix) be confirmed and signed by the Chair as a correct record.

3 Sickness Absence Record for Housing (AI 4)

Mr Owen Buckwell, Head of Housing Management, attended the meeting at the request of members concerning the sickness absence record for Housing. Mr Buckwell had prepared a briefing note for members. Mr Buckwell was invited to provide the committee with an overview of the briefing note. He said that there had been significant changes in the Housing Service and that a particular problem had been with those people working in the Green and Clean team. Mr Buckwell outlined the measures that had been put in place to improve the situation which included:

- consistency of sickness absence recording
- education of those in the Green and Clean team in relation to shared learning for example the use of disinfecting hand gels to cut down on instances of gastro sickness.
- All sections are running measures to show instances per month and days lost per month for both short and long term sickness and the reasons for sickness.

Mr Buckwell said that his service was taking this issue very seriously and that the measures taken had led to a significant drop in long term sickness absence and a reduction in short term sickness absence and that the trend was now downwards.

In response to questions the following points were made:

- Specific training had been given to the Green and Clean team to improve hygiene and thus to cut down on instances of gastrointestinal problems. In addition employees had received training in how to lift items properly and on general back care.
- The biggest cause of sickness seemed to have been changes to the job specifications. Now that staff have become used to the changes, the sickness absence has reduced.
- The dramatic increase shown on the charts in the handouts for September coincided with new working practices.

- In response to a question about performance development reviews, and whether or not this might have had a bearing on sickness absence, Mr Buckwell said that PDRs had always been carried out but were in a different form from those conducted in other services.
- Mr Buckwell clarified that the major cause of sickness absence had changed for a short time from musculo-skeletal to stress but this had now reverted to being musculo-skeletal.
- Mr Buckwell said that although he expected the current downward trend to continue, he could not predict how dramatic the reduction in sickness absence would be.
- It was confirmed that although there had been a decrease in sickness absence, the trend was still high and therefore the committee felt that the situation in Housing Service should continue to be monitored.

RESOLVED that Members

- (1) note the update;**
- (2) request a report on progress on sickness absence to come to the committee in six months time.**

4 Sickness Scorecard (Members) (Q2) (AI 5)

The Head of Human Resources, Ms Kay White, introduced the report. Ms White said that the report showed that the sickness absence appeared to be static around an average of nine days. Ms White explained that a review was now being undertaken on how to reduce sickness absence further and this would include the impact of occupational health and the wellbeing agenda that will be reported to the next meeting of Employment Committee in a new report format.

During discussion the following points were made:

- The long term sickness absence figures were a matter of concern to members who observed that there was a need to try to help those on longer term sickness absence back to work.
- From the table shown in paragraph 9 of the report it seemed that Portsmouth was doing significantly better than those with whom it was being compared. It was pointed out that many councils would not agree to share data on sickness absence.
- Members noted that although there were five persistent services where the sickness absence record was poor, there were also very good results for some services for example Education, Leisure and Customer, Community & Democratic Services.

Ms Jeanette Smith said that HR will focus on long term sickness absence through the occupational health and wellbeing agenda that will be reported to the next meeting of the Employment Committee.

With regard to Legal, Licensing & Registrars, it was suggested that as the number of people in that department was comparatively small, a more realistic result might be achieved if the tariff was weighted as otherwise a small number of people on long term sickness absence could give a false picture.

RESOLVED that the sickness absence figures continue to be reviewed on a regular basis.

5 Exclusion of Press and Public (AI 7)

The Chief Executive suggested that before members of the press and public were excluded, he could give an overview of the exempt report in open session before hearing the deputation from the unions. This was agreed.

The Chief Executive provided a brief explanation of the report that was to be put to the committee. He explained that before Christmas there had been discussions with the trades unions concerning the scope for introducing either an enhanced voluntary redundancy scheme or a severance scheme. The counter-proposals put forward by the union had been considered but were unaffordable. Management then looked to see if there was any benefit in offering an enhanced severance scheme in order to gain union support for the proposed increment freeze if that proved to be necessary. However it was not possible to agree to the union's proposal that there should be no compulsory redundancies.

Unions' response to management proposals did not seem to be forthcoming and therefore it was decided by the Employment Committee that the voluntary severance scheme should be withdrawn but that the voluntary redundancy scheme date for expressions of interest should be extended in order to ascertain whether the required savings could be achieved without the need for an increment freeze. There had been 87 applications for the existing voluntary redundancy scheme and the time limit for expressions of interest had now ended. Evaluation of the applications had taken place to ensure that the identified potential savings would be translated into actual savings and also to calculate which posts could be lost. The Chief Executive explained that the exempt financial appendix and exempt report contains recommendations to the Employment Committee and would therefore be considered in exempt session.

Mr Richard White of Unite the Union was then invited to make his deputation. Mr White said that from the very first stages the joint unions have tried to explain their position. He said that there had been many cuts over recent years and staff generally were overworked and underpaid. In real terms he said that there had been a 16% cut over four years. Although the unions recognised that the squeeze on pay was not the fault of the Employment Committee, staff rely on increments to keep pace with inflationary pressures. He said that the unions did not think that enough work had been done early enough to consider other ways to make the savings required. Mr White said

that the pensions impact could be considerable if the increment freeze is imposed and that this unfairly impacted on some staff. He said that the measures to reduce costs over the coming years relied heavily on goodwill and buy-in from staff and felt that for all the above reasons the increment freeze should not be imposed.

The chair thanked Mr White for his deputation.

It was proposed by Councillor Vernon-Jackson and seconded by Councillor Leo Madden that under the provisions of Section 100A of the Local Government Act 1972 as amended by the Local Government (Access to Information) Act, 1985, the press and public be excluded for the consideration of the following item on the grounds that the report contains information defined as exempt in Part 1 of Schedule 12A to the Local Government Act, 1972.

RESOLVED that the above motion be agreed.

6 Report on Terms and Conditions (AI 8)

Members discussed the report in some detail. It was proposed by Councillor Vernon-Jackson and seconded by Councillor Leo Madden that the recommendations in the report be adopted and this was unanimously agreed.

RESOLVED that Employment Committee agree

(1) To give full consideration to the consultation responses.

(2) Not to proceed with an increment freeze as the savings accruing from voluntary redundancy applications and/or other measures can achieve equivalent savings.

VJP/DMF
17 January 2012
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