

MINUTES of the meeting of General Services Committee held on 13 December 2011 at 7.00 p.m.

Present: Councillors John Kent (Chair), Amanda Arnold (substitute for Councillor Anderson), Oliver Gerrish (substitute for Councillor Worrall), Diana Hale (substitute for Councillor Morris-Cook) and Tom Kelly (substitute for Councillor Wootton).

Apologies: Councillors Phil Anderson, Val Morris-Cook, Mike Revell, Simon Wootton and Lynn Worrall.

In attendance: Richard Waterhouse – Director of Transformation
Steve Jones – Democratic Services Manager

6. MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 19 October 2011 were agreed as a correct record.

7. ITEMS OF URGENT BUSINESS

The Chair advised that he had not agreed to the consideration of any items of urgent business.

8. DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

There were no declarations made.

9. HUMAN RESOURCES (HR) POLICY REVIEW AND CHANGES

It was proposed by the Chair and seconded by Councillor Gerrish:

“That the item be deferred and the meeting adjourned until a date to be set in consultation with Members, to enable further consultation to take place on the proposals in the report“.

Members indicated their agreement to this proposal, whereupon the Chair declared this to be carried.

RESOLVED:

That the item be deferred and the meeting adjourned until a date to be set in consultation with Members, to enable further consultation to take place on the proposals in the report.

The meeting was adjourned at 7.04 p.m.

The meeting was reconvened on 17 January 2012 at 7.00 p.m.

- Present:** Councillors John Kent (Chair), Phil Anderson (Vice Chair), Diana Hale, (substitute for Councillor Worrall), Barry Palmer, Mike Revell, Andy Smith (substitute for Councillor Morris-Cook) and Simon Wootton.
- Apologies:** Councillors Val Morris-Cook and Lynn Worrall.
- In attendance:** Richard Waterhouse – Director of Transformation
Jackie Hinchliffe - Head of HR, OD & Customer Strategy
Chris White - HR Strategy & Policy Manager
Steve Jones – Democratic Services Manager
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10. ITEMS OF URGENT BUSINESS

The Chair advised that he had not agreed to the consideration of any items of urgent business.

11. DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

Councillor Wootton declared a personal interest in respect of Agenda Item 5 as his wife was an employee of the Council.

12. HUMAN RESOURCES (HR) POLICY REVIEW AND CHANGES

The Director of Transformation introduced the report, which sought approval for the proposed changes to policies and procedures affecting the employment of staff.

Members were informed that the framework of core HR policies had been rewritten in support of the Council's wider transformation agenda. It was reported that the new policies aimed to deliver workforce efficiencies and enable more effective staff management and that they had been drafted following research and careful consideration of best practice in other local authorities and comparable organisations.

It was reported that most of the amendments were non-contentious and had been designed to simplify processes, facilitate better understanding and consistency across the Council and incorporate recent legislative updates. However, it was reported that certain proposals involved changes to integral employment practices which required the authorisation of the Committee.

The Committee were advised that the changes to the policies could be categorised as follows:

- Changes that were not significant and did not require approval under the Constitution
- New policies that were not considered to be contentious
- Changes to existing policies that were not considered to be contentious
- Changes to existing policies that were believed to be contentious

The HR Strategy & Policy Manager informed Members that three new policies were proposed to be introduced to seek to balance the need to be more efficiency and cost conscious with a desire to increase the range of retention incentives in place for staff, as follows:

- Buying annual leave
- Green travel loans
- Guidelines on major sporting events

Copies of each of the policies were attached to the report for Members' consideration.

Members discussed each of the proposed new policies.

In respect of buying annual leave, Members considered the matter of who would authorise any such requests and whether it was sufficient for the line manager of a member of staff making such a request to authorise this. In addition, Members were of the view that they would feel more comfortable if an officer above the line manager audited this.

The Committee were advised that if the request was for more than 10 days, it would go to a Director for determination.

Members queried the calculation in paragraph 4.5 of the proposed policy and felt that this did not take into account pro-rata staff. The Director of Transformation undertook to check this calculation.

Members suggested that, following implementation of the policy, the costs of overtime, temporary staff and contractors ought to be monitored. It was further suggested that the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee be asked to look at the impact of this policy after it had been in operation for three months, and also investigate whether any additional costs for overtime, temporary staff and contractors had been observed.

All Members indicated their agreement to the introduction of the buying annual leave policy, together with the suggestion for the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee to look at the impact of this.

In considering the green travel loans policy, Members discussed the matter of salary sacrifice and were informed that this was being considered across a range of areas, such as the matter of parking provision for staff that would be taken to Cabinet in the future, but not this particular area at present.

In addition, Members enquired whether there was a shared car scheme and what arrangements would be made for people who did not travel by train. It was reported that a shared car scheme could be considered as part of the alternative parking arrangements that were being developed and that as part of this, and the green travel loans policy, staff would be encouraged to use public transport.

All Members indicated their agreement to the introduction of the green travel loans policy.

Members then considered the guidelines on major sporting events, in which rules around time off for staff during major events, such as the Olympics and major football tournaments, were clarified. Members indicated their agreement to this and also suggested that it may be worth drafting a policy to cover if a member of staff was selected to compete in an event.

The Committee were informed that details of existing policies where changes had been made that were not considered to be contentious could be found in Appendix 1 to the report. It was noted that these included the Career Break Policy and the Officer Code of Conduct, the latter having been considered by the Constitution Working Group.

Members then considered the changes that had been made to existing policies which were believed to be contentious, as follows:

Sickness Absence Policy

In considering the sickness absence policy, it was reported that sickness absence rates were above average when compared to other local authorities and even higher relatively when benchmarked across all industries. Members were informed that the new policy included an additional trigger review point calculated by number of days lost which would capture a larger number of absence cases that could potentially develop into consistent attendance problems. Furthermore, Members were advised that there would be a clearer process for managers in respect of handling long-term sickness absence.

It was noted that paragraph 30.1 of the Policy set out how the Policy would be monitored and that Human Resources would produce regular reports on sickness absence statistics and trends, whereupon Members enquired where these reports would go.

The Committee were advised that the reports would be sent to Directors and Heads of Service, the Health & Safety Group and that they would also be considered by the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

Members queried why Portfolio Holders had not been included in the list of those that were to receive the monitoring reports, whereupon it was acknowledged that they could be included in the final bullet point of paragraph 30.1 on page 79 of the Agenda. It was also noted that Portfolio Holders could access such information through the Council's performance management system.

Members also enquired as to whether the monitoring report would compare the Council with neighbouring authorities and the private sector. It was reported that there was a danger in undertaking such benchmarking, in that a huge amount of work would be created and Members were advised that the Corporate Performance Report included sickness and also looked at trends.

In addition, the Chair noted that it was possibly more important for the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee to undertake such benchmarking once or twice each year and that this was probably a matter that was best left for the Committee to determine.

With regard to the implementation date of the policy, Members suggested that this be 1 April 2012, instead of 1 March as detailed in paragraph 3.18 of the report. The HR Strategy & Policy Manager advised Members that he accepted this change.

The Committee then considered the matter of when employees became sick whilst during a period of annual leave. The HR Strategy & Policy Manager advised that this had been included in the Policy due to case law but that previously, a manager would have consulted Human Resources and that they would have been given the same advice as had now been included in the Policy.

Members were of the view that, in respect of employees who became sick whilst during a period of annual leave, paragraph 23.3 of the Policy ought to be amended to soften the wording a little. It was also suggested that the self-certification element of this be replaced with a requirement for any illness to be certified by a doctor. In addition, Members also requested that an amendment be made so that any approval required be made at a higher level, such as a Head of Service.

Members indicated their agreement to the policy, subject to the amendments that had been requested.

Smoke Free Policy

In considering the Smoke Free Policy, it was reported that this had been based on the intention of the Council to become a healthier employer and that this had been partly driven by the rates of smoking in Thurrock, which were high when compared both regionally and nationally. In addition, it was noted that a secondary benefit may be that productivity could increase.

The Committee were informed that some of the controversy around preventing smoking breaks would be averted by increasing the support available to smokers to help them to stop. It was reported that this would include granting limited paid time off to attend appointments and a reasonable amount of unpaid time off.

Members were informed that it was originally intended for the Policy to go live on 1 June 2012, having been preceded by a period of substantial promotional activity around smoking cessation and support networks, between January and May 2012. However, it was reported that implementation date should now be revised to 1 July 2012 in order to offer smokers a reasonable period of support before the policy was implemented.

Members enquired as to whether the policy would apply to all employees, regardless of whether they worked in an office and a further question was posed as to what would happen to those staff who worked across the borough.

The Committee were informed that the biggest debate was how to enforce the policy and ensure compliance.

Members were informed that whilst the policy would prohibit smoking breaks during work time and would require the Council to maintain smoke free zones around all of its premises, a precise distance away from Council buildings had not been specified.

Members indicated their agreement to the policy, including the request to delay the implementation date to 1 July 2012.

Change Management Policy

Members were informed that the Redundancy & Redeployment Policy had been renamed the Change Management Policy and that this covered a wider remit of organisational restructuring scenarios and also subsumed the separate policy on pay protection. It was reported that the key modification to existing practice was a reduction in redundancy terms.

Members were advised that the current redundancy terms at Thurrock were more generous than most other Councils, with a multiplier of two times the statutory number of weeks' pay being used. It was reported that the new terms would effectively cap this multiplier at a £30,000 payment and that any remaining weeks' entitlement over and above £30,000 would be multiplied by one instead of two.

The Committee were informed that the new terms would only apply to employees under the age of 55 or those that were over 55 but not members of the Local Government Pension Scheme (LGPS). It was noted that staff over the age of 55 who were in LGPS currently received the basic statutory number of weeks pay, plus early receipt of their pension, and that this would not change.

Members were advised that of the 30 redundancies made by the Council last year, only 8 of those people would have been affected by the proposals contained within the new policy.

Members were informed that this policy was to be implemented on 1 April 2012 but that it would not impact on any employee that was already subject to a consultation in respect of a restructure.

The Committee were of the view that the policy aimed to treat people fairly, whilst also protecting the lower paid workers in the authority. It was noted that for the policy to affect staff, they would have to earn more than the average salary in the borough.

Members enquired as to what the review period for the policy would be, whereupon the Head of HR, OD & Customer Strategy informed the Committee that a review framework could be built into the policy.

Members indicated their agreement to the Change Management Policy.

RESOLVED:

- 1. That the General Services Committee authorise the key changes to the framework outlined in Section 3 of the report, as amended at the meeting, to be implemented at various stages in 2012.**
- 2. That the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee be asked to look at the impact of the buying annual leave policy after it had been in operation for three months, and that the Committee investigate whether any additional costs for overtime, temporary staff and contractors had been observed.**

The meeting closed at 8.23 p.m.

Approved as a true and correct record

CHAIR

DATE

**Any queries regarding these Minutes, please contact
Steve Jones, telephone (01375) 652107,
or alternatively e-mail sjones@thurrock.gov.uk**

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