

SCRUTINY BOARD (CENTRAL AND CORPORATE)

MONDAY, 8TH SEPTEMBER, 2008

PRESENT: Councillor M Dobson in the Chair

Councillors B Atha, J Bale, S Bentley,
B Chastney, P Davey, J Dowson, P Ewens,
A Lowe, B Selby and P Wadsworth

Apologies Councillor M Hamilton

15 Declarations of Interest

Councillor J Bale declared a personal interest in Agenda Item 8 – Cover Pricing (Minute No 19 refers) – in his capacity as a Fellow and Past President of the Chartered Institute of Building.

16 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence from the meeting were submitted on behalf of Councillor Hamilton.

17 Minutes - 7th July 2008

RESOLVED – That the minutes of the meeting held on 7th July 2008 be confirmed as a correct record.

18 Scrutiny Inquiry - Absence Management - Session 1 - Setting the Scene

Further to Minute No 4, 9th June 2008, and Minute No 13, 7th July 2008, the Head of Scrutiny and Member Development submitted a report outlining a proposed timetable and witnesses in relation to the Board's Inquiry into sickness absence management.

The Board also received a presentation from Chris Ingham, HR Manager (Safety, Well-Being and Attendance), setting out the background and context to the current absence management scheme and initiatives in place or being developed to try to improve the scheme and reduce sickness absence.

In brief summary, the main points of discussion were:-

- The development of the 'Happy, Health and Here' initiative of a few years ago into the Managing Attendance policies and procedures now in place, with trigger points which moved staff through various formal stages of the procedure and could, ultimately, lead to ill-health retirement or dismissal;

- The training of managers down to team leader level in the scheme, and the guidance and support available to managers from HR;
- An occupational health analysis undertaken which had concluded that the Council would be best served long-term by developing its own in-house service w.e.f. 2009;
- The excellent and comprehensive welfare service operated on behalf of the Council by Care First;
- The bi-monthly 'Challenge' meetings held between HR and individual Directorates, to focus on absence management challenges in their particular area, and how this system was percolating down the management structure within Departments in terms of accountability and ownership;
- Health awareness and self-help initiatives and promotions aimed at improving the health of the work force;
- The management skills and training of front line supervisors, who could have a great influence and impact, for good or bad, on staff morale, stress levels and absence levels;
- The extent to which accusations of bullying and harassment by managers played a part in absence levels;
- The variances in performance between, and even within, Departments, the need to 'drill down' to try to establish why, and the dissemination of good practice across the authority;
- The fact that 'stress' was one of the main recorded reasons for absence, that lack of control and influence over workload was often quoted as a reason for inducing stress, and what if anything might be done to try to tackle this issue;
- Whether other factors, such as reductions in staffing levels, pay and grading issues, the Council Change initiative and the job evaluation exercise currently being undertaken, added to staff feelings of stress;
- The difficulties of trying to strike a balance between the needs and problems of individual employees and the needs of the Department in terms of service provision and continuity;
- The scope for greater liaison and co-operation between the Council's OH Service and GP's, especially in terms of initiatives such as staff working reduced hours, rather than none, temporary or permanent re-deployment, homeworking and rehabilitation of staff;
- The role of HR, and the support and type of advice available to managers and schools in dealing with sometimes difficult situations;
- The fact that whilst local government could always learn from private industry, caution was necessary, as each sector was not subject to the same demands and constraints, for example national and local conditions of service and procedures and collective trade union agreements;
- The use of the Staff Satisfaction Survey to pinpoint pressure points and take appropriate action.

Members agreed the proposed Inquiry timetable and the list of potential witnesses, with the exception of agreeing that the whole of the Board's meeting on 3rd November 2008 should be given over to this particular Inquiry.

RESOLVED –

- (a) That Chris Ingham be thanked for attending the meeting and the manner in which he responded to Members queries and comments;
- (b) That the report of the Head of Scrutiny and Member Development be received and approved, with the proviso that the whole meeting on 3rd November 2008 be dedicated to this particular Inquiry.

(N.B.1 Councillor P Wadsworth joined the meeting at 14.10, during the consideration of this item;

2 Councillor S Bentley, left the meeting at 15.05, during the consideration of this item.)

19 Report of Scrutiny Board Working Group - Cover Pricing

Further to Minute Nos 4 and 5, 9th June 2008, the Head of Scrutiny and Member Development reported back on the outcome of the work of the Working Group established by the Board to look into the issue of cover pricing, and measures and practices the Council has in place to combat any unethical practices within the tendering process.

RESOLVED – That the report, conclusions and recommendations of the Working Group on cover pricing be approved and endorsed and circulated as appropriate by the Head of Scrutiny and Member Development.

20 Report of Scrutiny Board Working Group - Embedding Equality, Diversity, Cohesion and Integration

Further to Minute Nos 4 and 5, 9th June 2008, the Head of Scrutiny and Member Development reported back on the outcome of the work of the Working Group established by the Board to look into equality and diversity issues, and in particular the monitoring of the Council's Equality and Diversity Scheme 2008-2011.

RESOLVED – That subject to the addition of a Recommendation 4, referring to all Council Members undertaking regular training in equality and diversity matters and the development of an annual programme by the Member Development Officer, the report, conclusions and recommendations of the Working Group be approved and endorsed and circulated as appropriate by the Head of Scrutiny and Member Development.

21 Work Programme 2008/09 and Inquiry Draft Terms of Reference

The Head of Scrutiny and Member Development submitted a report regarding the Board's work programme 2008/09, updated to reflect decisions taken at previous meetings. Attached to the report were the draft Terms of Reference for two proposed Inquiries, on the employment by the Council of consultants and on Member development, together with a copy of the minutes of the Executive Board meeting held on 16th July 2008 and an extract from the Council's Forward Plan of Key Decisions for the period 1st September – 31st December 2008.

RESOLVED –

- (a) That the report and attachments be received and noted, and the draft terms of reference for the Inquiries be approved;
- (b) That subject to any changes necessary as a result of today's meeting (see Minute No 18), the work programme be approved.

22 Dates and Times of Future Meetings

Monday 6th October 2008
Monday 3rd November 2008
Monday 1st December 2008
Monday 5th January 2009
Monday 2nd February 2009
Monday 2nd March 2009
Monday 6th April 2009

All at 10.00 am (Pre-meetings at 9.30 am).