

PERFORMANCE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of a meeting of the Performance Scrutiny Committee held VIRTUALLY VIA ZOOM on Thursday, 17 March 2022 at 10.00 am.

PRESENT

Councillors Ellie Chard, Martyn Holland, Hugh Irving (Vice-Chair), Geraint Lloyd-Williams, Arwel Roberts (Chair), Peter Scott and Andrew Thomas

Councillor Julian Thompson-Hill was in attendance at the Committee's invitation for business item 5.

Observer: Councillor Gwyneth Kensler.

ALSO PRESENT

Head of Legal, HR & Democratic Services (GW), Head of Highways & Environmental Services (TW), HR Services Manager (LD), Scrutiny Coordinator (RhE) and Committee Administrator (RhT-J [Webcaster])

1 APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Bob Murray and Pete Prendergast and from the Chief Executive, Graham Boase. The Head of Highways and Environmental Services was in attendance deputising for the Chief Executive in his absence.

2 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

No interests of a personal or prejudicial nature were declared.

3 URGENT MATTERS AS AGREED BY THE CHAIR

No matters of an urgent nature had been raised with the Chair prior to the commencement of the meeting.

The Chair advised that he would have to leave the meeting at circa 11am and that the Vice-Chair would chair the remainder of the meeting. He thanked everyone for their support and dedication to the Committee's work during the Council term, and to him during his tenure as Chair. He also paid tribute to the late Councillor Huw Ll Jones for his work as Chair of the Committee from 2017 until he untimely passed away. The Chair extended his good wishes to those members standing for re-election in the forthcoming local authority elections. He also thanked those who had decided to retire from public office for their services to their communities during their terms as county councillors, wishing them health and happiness for the future.

4 MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING

The minutes of the Performance Scrutiny Committee meeting held on the 27 January 2022 were submitted. It was:

Resolved: - that the minutes of the meeting held on 27 January 2022 be received and approved as a true and correct record of the proceedings.

No matters were raised with regards of the contents of the minutes.

5 STAFF ABSENCE AND TURNOVER FIGURES FOR DENBIGHSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL DURING 2020/21 AND 2021/22

The Lead Member for Finance, Performance and Strategic Assets introduced the report and appendices (previously circulated) which provided information and data on staff absence and turnover rates for the reporting years 2020/21 and 2021/22 (up to the end of Quarter 3 - December 2021). Also attached to the report was the Council's Workforce Plan 2022 and its associated Delivery Action Plan.

Introducing the wide-ranging report which provided staff absence and turnover data along with details of future plans for workforce recruitment, retention and development the Lead Member advised that pre-Covid Denbighshire was the best performing authority in Wales in relation to staff absences. Not unexpectedly during the first lockdown period, with the majority of staff working from home and strict restrictions in place on people's movements and interactions, staff absence rates reduced further. As a result, and in line with other Welsh local authorities, staff absences during 2020/21 were considerably lower than during a 'normal' year. As restrictions eased during 2021/22 staff absences rose slightly, with the estimated number of days lost to sickness per employee by the end of March 2022 expected to be 9 days, which would be slightly higher than the pre-pandemic figure. Not unexpectedly the highest rates of staff absences occurred in frontline services, services which had greater face to face contact with the general public. It was anticipated that sickness absence figures would remain slightly higher than 'normal' for the forthcoming couple of years due to the removal of social distancing restrictions, Covid still circulating within the community, and personnel now accessing pre-planned surgery and treatments delayed due to the pandemic.

In relation to staff retention Denbighshire's staff turnover rates were below the Welsh average, this was a trend which had continued for at least the last 5 years. Nevertheless, some services had higher staff turnover rates than others, namely Highways & Environmental Services, Planning, Public Protection & Countryside Services, and not unexpectedly in recent times Social Care Services. During the pandemic the biggest group of leavers were in the Grade 4 and below salary points, with the second highest number of leavers being in the Grade 10 and above salary groups. The reasons for leaving for the latter group were predominantly retirement or re-evaluation of work/life balance priorities, the reasons for leaving for Grade 4 and below seemed generally to be for personal reasons.

A draft corporate Workforce Plan, based on each Service's workforce plan, had been drawn up with a view to supporting resilience, retention and career development within the Council whilst also providing health and well-being support to staff and providing access to flexible and agile working opportunities. A copy of the draft Plan and its Delivery Action Plan were appended to the report.

Members were advised by the Lead Member that all public sector organisations were facing difficulties in recruiting to some posts, particularly specialist technical posts. One of the reasons for this was that the private sector paid far higher salaries and were able to offer more attractive employment packages for these types of posts. However, recruiting to other posts, at the lower end of the salary scale such as catering and cleaning, was proving difficult for both the public and private sectors alike. Despite these challenges the Council's workforce had been extremely resilient throughout the pandemic, as a result there had not been any significant adverse effect on service-delivery throughout the two-year period. Covid had, without doubt, resulted in many people reassessing their lives in general, including where and how they wanted to work in future. As a result, the Council like a number of other employers, would need to re-assess its service-delivery methods and adapt accordingly.

The Head of Legal, HR and Democratic Services advised that staff turnover should not necessarily be viewed in a negative way. It meant that staff had gained skills and experiences with the Council that had been identified by other employers as positive attributes and transferable for use in their business models. It also provided the Council with opportunities to attract 'new blood' which would bring new, fresh ideas, to the Authority and avoid an impasse developing. Denbighshire's turnover rates tended to be below the national average. New ways of working stemming from the pandemic had resulted in people being able to change jobs or careers without having the upheaval of moving home and uprooting their families. Some Denbighshire staff had taken advantage of this method of working in order to progress their careers. These new ways of working would, going forward, provide opportunities for the Authority itself to attract talented individuals to apply for employment opportunities with the Council. Work was currently underway to try and tackle specific recruitment and retention pressures, for example the appointment of a Social Care Recruitment Specialist to work in the HR Service to support the recruitment and development of social care staff.

In response to members' questions the Lead Member, Head of Service and the HR Services Manager:

- confirmed that 4.4% of Denbighshire staff (including teaching and school-based staff) possessed Level 5 Welsh language skills – the highest listening and speaking proficiency. Excluding school-based staff, 18.75% of the Authority's staff had indicated they regarded themselves as having intermediate (Level 3) Welsh listening and speaking skills, with just over 6% indicating they were proficient to Level 5. HR was currently working with the Welsh Language Strategy Group with a view to ensuring that all staff attained at least Level 1 proficiency in due course.

- assured the Committee that every effort was being made to help and support all staff, including frontline staff, who were absent from work due to depression and anxiety.
- confirmed that the Authority did provide a flexible retirement option for staff who wished to retire on a phased basis over a set period of time. Decisions on how the workload of posts impacted by personnel's phased retirement arrangements were operational matters and managed by service managers.
- Assured members that Social Services was not regarded as a Cinderella service. The pandemic, during the last 2 years, had clearly highlighted the important role this Service played in supporting individuals and communities. It was the highest spending service within the Council and touched the lives of all residents and their families at one time or another. The Corporate Director: Communities chaired a Working Group which was specifically examining recruitment and retention matters within care services. In addition, the Council had recruited a dedicated Social Care Recruitment Specialist to work within the HR service. This officer's role was solely focussed on social care recruitment matters. Other work was underway nationally, under the auspices of the Welsh Government (WG), with a view to improving recruitment, upskilling staff and retaining them within care services in Wales.
- agreed to include in future reports data on the number of staff who benefitted from maternity and paternity leave during the year.
- acknowledged that the past two years may have caused difficulty for elected members in terms of their 'normal' interaction with staff, including being aware of personal matters which may impact on member officer communication and work pressures. However, the Council was required to have regard to Data Protection legislation and could not share any personal information with others, including members, without the consent of the individual. Member officer relationships and protocols would form an integral part of the induction programme for councillors following the local authority elections in May. It was also anticipated that officer member relationships and communication would become easier as Covid restrictions eased.
- confirmed that an 'exit interview' was offered to all leavers and the information gathered during these interviews were used to improve personnel's experience of working for the Council. The forms used for this purpose had 'free text boxes' to enable personnel to provide more detailed answers and explanations. However, staff who were leaving the Council's employment could not be compelled to participate in an 'exit interview' if they did not wish to do so. All feedback was monitored by HR, and the relevant Head of Service would also be informed of the feedback. Officers agreed to circulate the data regarding the uptake of 'exit interviews' to Committee members.
- advised that the restrictions in place on people's movement and close contact with others during the Covid pandemic had necessitated the Council to advance its 'home-working' arrangements and introduce 'remote meeting technology' considerably sooner than originally planned in order to enable it to deliver its services and transact its business. Whilst some staff enjoyed working from homes, others did not. Therefore, moving forward into the 'post pandemic' era the Authority would need to strike an appropriate balance between productivity and interaction, while at the same time

managing and supporting staff's well-being. It was crucial that employees did not feel that they were isolated or 'living in work'. To avoid this happening, it was key that the positives identified during the pandemic were harnessed, for example increased productivity rates due to less interruptions and the benefit of utilising remote meeting platforms to hold meetings to cut down on travelling time, mileage costs, carbon emissions etc. be retained but balanced with regular face to face interactions and team meetings etc. to promote team ethos and responsibilities.

- provided assurances that every effort was made to promote team-working and inclusivity and avoid the risk of silo working when people worked remotely. The existence of the 'jabber' function on the Council's telephone system aided officers to ask quick questions to each other instead of using the e-mail system, virtual meeting platforms also helped officers to arrange urgent quick meetings without requiring to set-aside time to travel to meet-up in buildings etc. For welfare purposes some teams arranged to meet up for walks etc. to help build team spirit and ethos. Throughout the pandemic new entrants to the Council had been able to undertake their induction both virtually and person to person when appropriate. Going forward staff would not be expected to work from home on a permanent basis or from an office on a permanent basis if they did not wish to do so. It was envisaged that the majority of individuals would opt to work partly from home and partly in the office, with all officers expected to attend their office base periodically. The Chief Executive was keen to promote a 'One Council' ethos across all services, and it was anticipated that all teams within services would work differently in future, being flexible and devising innovative or creative ways of working as a team. Buildings may well in future be utilised for different purposes other than as permanent work bases e.g. team meetings etc.
- advised that the Council's Senior Leadership Team (SLT) was monitoring the new ways of working to make sure that people and services were not working in 'silos'. Middle Managers in turn were urged to ensure that 'silo working' did not develop within the teams under their management.
- confirmed that in future elected members would have the option to attend meetings in designated meeting rooms/Council Chamber or to join remotely. Legislation had recently been passed requiring local authorities to make provision for councillors to attend and vote on Council business remotely if they so wished.
- advised that the Council was exploring ways of equipping managers with the skills and tools required to manage people remotely. Staff were measured by productivity rather than by the time they spent in front of their computer screens. Offering flexible working opportunities to staff would also help the Authority to address recruitment difficulties by making working for the Council more attractive to people looking for work which better suited their work life balance preferences.

Members suggested that there may be employment opportunities within the Council in due course which could benefit from the skills of Ukrainian refugees that may be temporarily relocated to the area.

The Committee:

Resolved: having considered and discussed the Absence and Turnover data provided along with the associated documentation submitted and additional information provided during the course of the debate; to

- (i) receive the statistical information and support the work underway within the Council to manage staff absences and turnover; and***
- (ii) request that a further report on the subject, including national data for comparison purposes, be submitted to the Scrutiny Chairs and Vice-Chairs Group following the end of the 2022/23 financial year to enable it to determine whether the situation merited detailed examination by one of the Council's Scrutiny Committees at that time.***

6 SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME

The Scrutiny Coordinator introduced the report (previously circulated) updating members on relevant scrutiny related matters and seeking the Committee to review its forward work programme in readiness for its presentation to its successor Committee, following the local authority elections in May 2022. It would be a decision for the 'new' Committee whether it wished to continue with the inherited work programme.

Due to its proximity to the date of the forthcoming local authority elections, the Committee's next scheduled meeting, on 28 April 2022, had been cancelled. Following the elections, the 'new' Committee's first meeting would be held on 9 June 2022. Immediately preceding that meeting a short training and familiarisation event would be held for Committee members on performance and risk management, including the requirements of the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015.

Members' attention was drawn to the draft forward work programme at Appendix 1, in particular the education items listed for consideration at the Committee's July meeting. Both these topics had been identified as ideal matters to help aid new members' understanding of the requirements entailed with recent changes in education legislation and policy in Wales.

Members' attention was also drawn to the various documentation attached as additional appendices to the report and to the 'Information Brief' document circulated to Committee members earlier in the week, which contained the Corporate Plan Quarter 3 Performance Report.

In relation to questions raised by members with respect of Cefndy Healthcare the Scrutiny Coordinator confirmed that a report was already listed on the Committee's draft forward work programme for presentation at the November 2022 meeting. At that time, with further easing of Covid restrictions, Committee members may feel it apt to request a visit be arranged to the facility to see first-hand the production work and opportunities available there.

Resolved: - subject to the above to confirm the Committee's draft forward work programme for presentation to the new Committee post the Local Authority elections in May 2022 for consideration.

7 FEEDBACK FROM COMMITTEE REPRESENTATIVES

Councillor Hugh Irving informed the Committee that he had been attending meetings of the Queen's Building Project Board on a regular basis and that, based on the Project Board's work, Cabinet had recently approved the next phase of the project.

Councillor Peter Scott advised the Committee that the Flood Risk Management and Riparian Land Ownership Task and Finish Group had concluded its work and presented its final report to Communities Scrutiny Committee the previous week. The Group's findings, conclusions and recommendations in relation to strengthening working relationships and ensuring robust communication and information sharing channels between all flood risk management authorities, riparian land owners and the public in general, had been well received. The Committee had also supported the Task and Finish Group's recommendation that a Working Group of all the organisations involved with the work should continue to meet on an annual basis for the purpose of highlighting any major issues or problems which were being encountered, and for sharing information on major projects that were being planned.

The Committee:

Resolved: that the feedback received from representatives following their attendance at various meetings on the Committee's behalf be received and noted.

The meeting concluded at 11.30am.