

CORPORATE RESOURCES OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
18 MAY 2023

Minutes of the Corporate Resources Overview & Scrutiny Committee of Flintshire County Council held as a hybrid meeting on Thursday, 18 May 2023

PRESENT: Councillor Richard Jones (Chairman)

Councillors: Bernie Attridge, Bill Crease, Chris Dolphin, Alasdair Ibbotson, Gina Maddison, Jason Shallcross, Kevin Rush, Sam Swash and Linda Thomas

APOLOGIES: Councillor Billy Mullin (Cabinet Member for Governance and Corporate Services) and Councillor Vicky Perfect

CONTRIBUTORS: Councillor Ian Roberts (Leader of the Council), Councillor Paul Johnson (Cabinet Member for Finance, Inclusion & Resilient Communities), Chief Executive, Chief Officer (Governance) and Corporate Manager (People and Organisational Development)

IN ATTENDANCE: Democratic Services Manager and team

1. APPOINTMENT OF CHAIR

It had been confirmed at the Annual Meeting of the County Council that the Chair of the Committee should come from the Independent Group. The Committee was advised that Councillor Richard Jones had been appointed to this role for the municipal year.

RESOLVED:

That the appointment of Councillor Richard Jones as Chair of the Committee be noted.

2. APPOINTMENT OF VICE-CHAIR

Councillor Bernie Attridge nominated Councillor Bill Crease as Vice-Chair of the Committee and was seconded by Councillor Richard Jones.

Councillor Alasdair Ibbotson's nomination for Councillor Chris Dolphin was subsequently withdrawn at Councillor Dolphin's request.

There were no further nominations. On being put to the vote, the nomination for Councillor Crease was carried.

RESOLVED:

That Councillor Bill Crease be appointed Vice-Chair of the Committee.

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor Bernie Attridge declared a personal interest on minute number 7 (Employment and Workforce End of Year Update) due to family members employed by the Council.

4. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 20 April 2023 were approved, subject to including the apology submitted by Councillor Kevin Rush, as moved and seconded by Councillors Bernie Attridge and Bill Crease.

RESOLVED:

That subject to the amendment, the minutes be approved as a correct record.

5. ACTION TRACKING

The Democratic Services Manager presented an update on actions arising from previous meetings and advised that the workshop on the Coroner's Office had been arranged for 13 September 2023. He also advised that the comments raised at the previous meeting on the Council Plan had been shared with Chief Officers to enable a response to be circulated to the Committee prior to the Council Plan being submitted to Council in June.

The recommendation was moved and seconded by Councillors Kevin Rush and Linda Thomas.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee notes the progress which has been made.

6. FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME

In presenting the current forward work programme for consideration, the Democratic Services Manager agreed to follow up Councillor Bernie Attridge's comments regarding an update on Corporate Joint Committees (CJCs).

On that basis, the recommendations were moved and seconded by Councillors Bernie Attridge and Bill Crease.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the Forward Work Programme be noted; and
- (b) That the Democratic Services Manager, in consultation with the Committee Chairman, be authorised to vary the Forward Work Programme between meetings, as the need arises.

7. EMPLOYMENT AND WORKFORCE END OF YEAR UPDATE

The Chief Executive introduced the end of year update report on workforce statistics and analysis for 2022/23.

The Corporate Manager (People and Organisational Development) provided an overview of the key areas including the increase in staff turnover which was mainly due to the current labour market and cessation of the Test, Trace & Protect service where some employees had been successfully redeployed into alternative roles.

There was a slight improvement in attendance from 2021/22 with mental health continuing to be the main reason for absences followed by musculoskeletal issues. It was noted that the full-time equivalent absence rate of 5.59% in Flintshire followed the national trend. Recent data issued by the Office of National Statistics (ONS) reported a record high in UK absence rates since 2004 and noted high absence rates for public sector workers in 2022/23 in care, leisure and front-line services. The data also reported that long-term health conditions were at their highest point since 2008.

The Committee was reminded of the range of interventions and support available to the Council's employees whilst noting other factors such as the rising number of age-related health issues and more complex needs of service users in social care settings. In addition, delays to external medical appointments, assessments and treatments were in many cases prolonging absences and preventing employees from returning to work; an issue replicated across the UK.

On agency workers, Members were advised that not all of the 91 active placements recorded as at 31 March 2023 were engaged and working at that point in time. Although cumulative agency spend had exceeded the target, the majority of salary underspend from a high number of vacancies in Streetscene & Transportation and Social Services during the period had been utilised for agency appointments. As well as receiving an update on recruitment exercises in Streetscene, Members were reminded that agency workers were a vital resource for the delivery of Council services.

In response to questions from Councillor Bernie Attridge, the Corporate Manager provided examples on the benefits of using agency workers alongside the recruitment process. On attendance, there was no evidence to suggest that working from home was contributing to absences and a further employee survey would help to identify any issues. It was clarified that the vast majority of staff worked in their normal workplace, including Streetscene & Transportation and Social Care which recorded the highest number of absences.

The Chief Executive said that despite early intervention by the Occupational Health team to support employees returning to work, the ONS report reflected the national impact of delays to external medical appointments. He said it was important to understand the underlying base requirement for agency workers in front-line services such as Streetscene and spoke about plans to

streamline the application process for those agency workers who had been in vacant posts for a number of months.

The Chairman made the suggestion for the Committee to write to Welsh Government to raise concerns about the impact of delays in the health service.

In response, the Chief Executive explained that the wider issues in health were clearly recognised and that councils would need to work through those challenges.

The Corporate Manager advised that comparative absence data received from other Welsh authorities to date indicated that Flintshire was currently and positively in the upper quartile for attendance. She agreed to share analysis on the full range of data when it was published in September.

In speaking about her own experiences, Councillor Gina Maddison thanked the officer for highlighting age-related illnesses which would inevitably increase across all public services as the pension age increased.

In response to a question from Councillor Bill Crease, clarification was given on the framework used by the Council for appointing agency workers.

When asked by Councillor Jason Shallcross about absences linked to roles and locations, the Corporate Manager spoke about the main impact on front-line services such as Streetscene where the primary reason for absence was mental health. She went on to provide information on the Council's robust policy for employees reporting absences, the referral of stress-related illnesses to Occupational Health and the collective approach to holding case conferences for long-term absences.

Councillor Sam Swash asked whether data on absences due to mental health was broken down into work or non-work related issues. The Corporate Manager said that this was not recorded and that support was given irrespective of the reasons, with Occupational Health referrals and stress risk assessments identifying any work-related issues to be addressed. She agreed to review data on voluntary school staff leavers to establish if information was available on the proportion leaving to work at another school as opposed to departing the education professional altogether.

On a question from Councillor Kevin Rush, it was explained that managers were required to ensure that employees completed a Display Screen Equipment (DSE) assessment for the workplace including any areas worked from home.

Whilst acknowledging the explanations around absence rates and agency spend, the Chairman queried whether the targets should be more realistic. The Corporate Manager said that targets were reviewed and that there was a balance to ensure they were sufficiently challenging in order to seek improvement. On other questions, she provided information on the success of the apprenticeship programme and on the 11.46% staff turnover for 2022/23, she agreed to look into data of similar authorities for comparison.

The Chief Executive reminded Members about the approach to managing and controlling agency worker expenditure and the context behind data shown in the report. He would reflect upon the comments made around achievable targets raised by the Chairman noting that the landscape had changed and such consideration may now be necessary.

It was highlighted by the Corporate Manager that outturns for four out of the nine areas had been below the target and she suggested that any review should recognise the differing demands on services.

The Chairman commented that targets could be assessed more generally and that data on appraisals should form part of future reports, particularly to give assurance on processes for those working from home.

Councillor Paul Johnson thanked officers for the report and the national context behind some of the data. He also thanked Members for their comments.

In response to comments on the frequency of the report, the Chairman requested that it be scheduled on a six month basis.

On that basis, the recommendation was moved and seconded by Councillors Bill Crease and Bernie Attridge.

RESOLVED:

That the end of year Workforce Information Report for 2022/23 be noted.

8. MEMBERS OF THE PRESS IN ATTENDANCE

None.

(The meeting started at 10am and ended at 11am)

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Chairman