

NORTH DORSET DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE PERSONNEL COMMITTEE HELD IN THE COUNCIL CHAMBER, NORDON, SALISBURY ROAD, BLANDFORD FORUM, ON MONDAY, 17 MARCH 2008 STARTING AT 10.00 AM

Present: Cllr P Webb (Chairman)
Cllr J Tanner (Vice Chairman)
Cllr Mrs S Hunt
Cllr R E Moyle
Cllr Lt Col M Oliver
Cllr C Tomlinson

Officers: Samantha Armstrong, Human Resources Adviser
Bobbie Bragg, Senior Personnel Adviser
S Hill, General Manager, Development and Resources
Di Hinton, Human Resources Adviser

11. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations of interest were made by members.

12. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 28 January 2008 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

13. REVIEW OF PERSONNEL POLICIES

13.1 Updating the Council's Health and Safety Policy

The Chairman stressed that this was an important document and acted as a safeguard for everyone. He highlighted the importance of ensuring all staff and Members were aware of their responsibilities for health and safety.

The General Manager, Development and Resources advised that the Health and Safety Adviser was unable to attend the meeting and he would therefore try to answer any detailed questions, but might need to defer them if necessary and bring answers back to the next meeting. He explained that the Policy had not been reviewed for some time and in light of findings arising from the Legionella outbreak in Barrow in Furness it was important a review should take place to ensure that the findings arising from the Barrow case were taken into account in the policy. Advice had been taken from the Institute of Directors and the Health and Safety Commission and the revised policy now sets out more explicitly the levels of responsibility throughout the Council.

The Chairman emphasised that the role of Cabinet was to understand the implications relating to health and safety when making their decisions. They did not have any direct managerial responsibility as this was delegated to the Chief Executive. It was however important that Cabinet did not impede the process. He questioned whether Cabinet could be held responsible for negligence if they did not take this into account. The General Manager

responded that some individuals had been prosecuted for breaches of Health and Safety but this was unlikely to happen in relation to Cabinet as they would have to be proven to have prevented health and safety factors being applied to a decision.

Cllr Moyle raised the issue of the wording of the second paragraph of the Principles of Health, Safety and Welfare document. The paragraph read;-

“The Council believes that almost all accidents at work are avoidable, and the circumstances of accidents, whether involving injury or not, should be examined and, where possible, steps taken by management to reduce the probability of similar accidents recurring”

Cllr Moyle felt that if Health and Safety Policies were carried out correctly then all other accidents which occurred should be unavoidable as the risk was minimised. He stated that he would prefer either the word ‘many’ or ‘most’ to replace ‘almost all’ in the sentence.

The Chairman was concerned that the proposed amendment could be misinterpreted by others. He added that if the guidance encouraged the use of the phrase “almost all” then any change could weaken the policy. The General Manager stated that the wording did reflect guidance and showed a level of intent.

Cllr Tomlinson asked if the policy complied with the 1974 Health and Safety at Work etc Act and subsequent regulations and also if the Solicitor to the Council had agreed the wording. He was advised that the Health and Safety Committee had undertaken the review and made the recommendations for changes. He assured members that the Senior Management Team, including the Solicitor to the Council, were happy with the policy and its wording.

The Chairman drew the Committee’s attention to Appendix B of the report which showed the Business Cycle of the Health and Safety Committee. He highlighted the fact that two reports would be taken to Cabinet updating them on any issues.

Cllr Tomlinson raised his concern that the policy came across as more of a management control document and queried its usefulness to staff. He added that other policy documents appeared to be more practical in their approach. The General Manager advised that this Policy Document stated the clear lines of responsibility for all within the Authority it was important that Team Leaders ensured that this was disseminated through their team. Practical issues such as names of first aiders etc were dealt with separately and were posted in each office.

The Chairman enquired as to the frequency of the focus on health and safety issues, was this a mandatory item on each team brief? The Senior Personnel Advisor stated that this appeared as an item on team leader forum agenda setting meetings which occurred on a monthly basis. The General Manager added that a quarterly report was received by SMT and this information was passed down to team leaders. He also advised that each team was required to have risk assessments for their area and it was important that team leaders involved staff in the preparation of this.

Resolved

That the Revised Health and Safety Policy be approved.

13.2 Probationary Policy and Procedure

The Human Resources Advisor informed the Committee that although there was currently a Probation Policy in place it was considered that there was a need to formalise it to ensure that it was working effectively. She highlighted that at present there were no formal review sessions and no formal record of any issues which arose. The new policy sought to rectify this.

The new policy was designed to assist both the employee and the Authority by enabling performance to be checked on a regular basis. The probation period was six months and reviews would be required to be undertaken at four, twelve and twenty-two weeks with a final decision being made as to whether to make the appointment permanent at twenty-six weeks. She added that it was possible to extend the probationary period to twelve months, but that this would only happen in exceptional circumstances.

The new policy would also ensure clear, comprehensive and accurate records of probation interviews would be kept and any issues of poor conduct/performance would be discussed and actions agreed to rectify the situation. The interviews would be undertaken by the Team Leaders, initially with the support of Personnel. The employee would be given a copy of the paperwork in order that they could ensure that in their opinion it was a fair assessment. The forms were specifically designed to allow the employee to put forward their comments.

The Chairman expressed his concern that in the past yearly assessments had not been comprehensive in some areas and staff had struggled to improve. The Human Resources Adviser responded that with the new policy all conduct and performance issues were assessed from the outset and this would link into the staff performance reviews which were undertaken and reviewed.

Cllr Moyle pointed out that in pages 8/9 of the policy relating to Extending the Probation Period, second bullet point reference was made to not extending the period for maternity leave. This needed to be amended and should read

“... The probation period will normally be extended if the period of absence relates to a disability or maternity leave...”

Resolved

That the Probation Period Policy be approved, subject to the above amended wording.

13.3 Revision of Discretionary Payments made under the Local Government Pension Scheme Regulations

The General Manager, Development and Resources presented the report of Chris Schofield, Personnel Adviser to the Authority which was seeking approval to make changes to the Council's policy on Discretionary payments made under the Local Government Pension Scheme Regulations. Members were advised that the changes were only minor. This included, for example, the need for changes of dates to ensure references were correct.

He highlighted that under Section 66 of the Regulations every local authority was required to have, and keep under review a statement of policy relating to this area and the Flexible Retirement Policy, which was approved at the last meeting of the Committee, would be included in this. He drew the attention of members to Appendix A of the report which set out clearly the changes required.

The Chairman queried why the changes had not been subject to consultation and if staff were happy with this. The General Manager responded these were purely regulation changes and was felt that there was no need for consultation. He did however feel that in order to 'plug a gap' the unions should be informed of the changes. The Chairman agreed that as a matter of courtesy this information should be passed on.

Resolved

That the revisions to the Policy on Discretionary Payments made under the Local Government Act Pension Scheme Regulations be adopted, following informal discussion with the Unions.

14. WORKFORCE STRATEGY UPDATE

The Senior Personnel Adviser updated Members on the new targets which had been set for Workforce Development Planning at a national level. She highlighted that the Council was currently working in partnership with Poole Borough Council to employ a Workforce Development Planning Officer to ensure that both councils were reaching the targets set.

The report drew Members' attention to the following priorities which should be pursued:-

- Workforce Development processes to continue to be aligned with Business Planning and Performance Management systems
- Continual development of leadership and management skills, accessible at all levels and encouragement of 'informal' leadership
- Defining current and future skills gaps, including basic skills, and developing systems to support staff in meeting these gaps
- To continue to work with partners in developing solutions to meet recruitment and retention difficulties

- To explore the attitudes, skills and expectations of managers and staff with regard to pay and reward systems

The Chairman drew attention to the implementation of partnership working and highlighted the need for compatible policies. He queried if this was the case. The General Manager, Development and Resources stated that, as part of the Pathfinder project, he was working with the Senior Personnel Adviser and the other Dorset HR Advisers, including those from the unitary authorities of Poole and Bournemouth, to try and provide a consistent approach. It was important that terms and conditions of employment, pay etc were equal if partnership working was to be achieved. He added that this authority was very influential in the group and was 'punching above its weight'.

The Chairman felt that the last bullet point of the summary needed to be strengthened. The General Manager advised that there were different aspects to this and the introduction of performance related pay was being explored. He explained that the Staff Consultation Group were currently looking at the possibility of introducing a reward scheme. The Chairman felt that this issue needed to be considered with care as it was difficult to define success or achievement.

Resolved

That the Committee agrees the priorities highlighted above to ensure that Workforce Development continues to evolve positively within the authority.

15. IIP CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT ACTION PLAN

The Senior Personnel Adviser advised members that that during the inspection process the Assessor had detailed areas in which it was felt that improvement could be achieved. She added that most of the recommendations were in place but had not been picked up by the Assessor. She highlighted the following areas:-

Training: The Senior Management Team considered an annual report on training. The Chairman questioned whether Member training was included in this report. He was advised that this was not currently the case. If Members required this to be included, the General Manager would talk to Democratic Services who held this information.

Formal Suggestion Scheme: The Senior Personnel Adviser stated that the Chief Executive had challenged HR to consider how a scheme might be introduced. This was currently being looked at by the Staff Consultation Group and would be a priority on the agenda for their next meeting. The Chairman raised his concern that a suggestion scheme could cover up a lack of communication within a team. The General Manager stated that the monthly team leader's forums and the Staff Consultation Group meetings gave staff the opportunity to raise issues.

Communication: It was stressed that not all staff had access to a computer. The Senior Personnel Adviser stated that Team Leaders were required to

ensure all staff were informed of the team brief either verbally or by hard copy.

Staff Consultation Group: In order that information and views were cascaded up and down the Authority it had been agreed that the chairing of the group would be rotated amongst the membership.

Interactive Training: It was highlighted that the Council already had a commitment to e-learning and it was hoped that the partnership working with Poole would assist to increase this. The Senior Personnel Adviser stated that the council had made training available for the European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL) which was currently being used by 25% of the workforce.

Profile Review: The Assessor had suggested that the Council could consider the benefits of an on-line profile self check review. It was agreed that this would be undertaken on a yearly basis.

Cllr Moyle asked if there were additional costs associated with the introduction of the Workforce Development Officer or the profile review. He was informed that the post within HR already existed and that the partnership working would actually make a saving. The profile review was a free service.

Resolved

That the Action Plan and identified priorities be approved.

The meeting ended at 11.50 am

CHAIRMAN