

NORTH EAST DERBYSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

ORGANISATION SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – 3 FEBRUARY 2016

EXTRACT OF MINUTE

568 Administrative Arrangements and Joint Officers Scrutiny Review

The Committee considered, as part of its review into Administrative Arrangements and Joint Officers, data on sickness absence, recruitment and retention issues, risk assessments, breakdown of the workforce working under these arrangements and exit interviews.

The Committee were advised that Paul Hackett, Executive Director – Transformation and Sara Gordon, HR and Payroll Operations Manager were attending the meeting to provide an explanation of the data provided and to answer any questions members may have.

Members discussed at length their concerns over various aspects of the data, including monitoring to identify issues and trends, the use and composition of exit questionnaires and sickness absence figures within the Strategic Alliance. Questions and comments were raised with the Executive Director – Transformation and the HR and Payroll Operations Manager, by the Committee.

From the data provided it showed a significant difference in the amount of officers working under joint arrangements at Bolsover and North East Derbyshire.

North East Derbyshire District Council had 22% (103 officers out of 468 officers) compared to Bolsover District Council who had 2.8% (14 officers out of 501 officers)

The Committee queried the apparent impact on sickness figures within North East Derbyshire. At North East Derbyshire, 29 out of the 103 joint postholders had exceeded the Council's sickness trigger.

This was compared with Bolsover, who had 5 out of the 14 joint postholders who had exceeded the Council's sickness trigger.

It was suggested that as North East Derbyshire hosted the large joint services such as Environmental Health and ICT, there would inevitably be higher levels of sickness absence compared to Bolsover.

The Committee were advised that sickness absence could be occurring in the Authority due to an ageing workforce, particularly operatives carrying out manual jobs. The Executive Director – Transformation explained to the Committee that the Strategic Alliance was formed in 2011. All staff in Environmental Health and ICT were transferred over to North East Derbyshire under Joint Arrangements (the joint ICT Service was formed prior to the Strategic Alliance). This included Bolsover staff transferring over to North East Derbyshire. The Committee noted that the Council did have certain joint services already in place before the formation of the Strategic Alliance. The Executive Director – Transformation advised that no large staff transfers had taken place from North East Derbyshire to Bolsover.

The finances of both Councils at the time of the formation of the Strategic Alliance were discussed. Bolsover had a number of historical grants in place that provided additional funding. However, the formation of the Strategic Alliance made the position of both Councils more workable.

The Committee discussed how the Alliance had developed and acknowledged the differences in culture at both Councils, which had been a learning process.

The Committee were advised that staff now worked in a whole new environment and rising sickness levels were not as a direct result of the formation of the Strategic Alliance, although this could be a contributing factor. It was acknowledged that stress of increasing demands on staff under joint arrangements was higher due to carrying out an increased workload.

Members raised questions on why five years into the Strategic Alliance large sickness levels still existed. The Executive Director – Transformation advised the Committee that the Strategic Alliance was only a contributing factor that affected sickness absence figures but there were many other factors feeding into the figures. An ageing workforce was a factor affecting the figures and the Council needed to assess the impact of the ageing workforce and stress factors, possibly looking at re-deployment opportunities, where appropriate.

The Executive Director – Transformation advised the Committee that risk assessments for staff under joint arrangements were not carried out as such. He felt that staff under joint arrangements were tested through the interview process and were part of an on-going training programme put in place to assist officers in their roles and support their continual development.

Risk assessments were also carried out as part of the health and safety elements of the job. Staff were able to receive support through the occupational health service if necessary.

Members felt that a forward plan should be in place showing where the Council was going as an alliance with Bolsover and how it would deal with the effects of an ageing workforce. This should be incorporated into a Human Resources Plan. The Executive Director – Transformation advised the Committee that the Council was fully aware of its ageing workforce and mechanisms were put in place to support staff in their job roles.

Members felt that there did not seem to be enough emphasis from senior management to ensure that Exit Interview questionnaires were completed when an employee left the Council. A question was raised on whether the questionnaires were just a tick box exercise or whether meaningful data was collected.

At present, there were two different questionnaires, one for each Authority. Members suggested that both these questionnaires should be merged into one standard Exit Interview Questionnaire for both Authorities.

The Executive Director – Transformation advised the Committee that Human Resources were currently working on harmonising how both Councils work. The policies that were used on a more regular basis had been prioritised and would be

harmonised first, but the Executive Director – Transformation would ensure harmonisation was looked at more generally to ensure everyone was working to the same processes. Members were advised that the Exit Interview Questionnaire was important and should be part of the employees' contract and induction process. The Committee felt the Exit Interview Questionnaire should help the Council in improving its services. The Questionnaires should be scrutinised by senior management after completion and if common trends were identified these should be analysed to determine the reasons.

The Committee were advised that any employee's that had left the Authority was not as a direct result of the joint services, there are a wide range of reasons and combination of factors.

Members commented on the facilities at the District Council Offices at Mill Lane. Moving staff to a new building took away the social element of staff being located in the town centre. The Authority needed to be developed and improved to ensure staff were provided with more options and incentives which supported them in their job roles at this new location. The Executive Director – Transformation advised the Committee that the facilities at Mill Lane needed improving for staff and this was being looked at. All employees received a welcome pack when relocated and, where appropriate, were also given a travel allowance for a period of four years to compensate for any extra mileage costs incurred.

A number of packages had been put together for staff such as free eye sight tests for staff using VDUs, childcare vouchers and discounts through the Karp benefits system. Staff also had access to free leisure facilities services at the Council's leisure centres. Members suggested introducing an 'Adult Learners' Week' for staff to get involved in different activities such as pub quizzes to Reflexology classes, also improving outside facilities for staff such as providing outdoor furniture for the summer months and maintaining the garden areas for staff to sit out at lunch time.

Members commented that the Council needed to be more pro-active towards issues with staff, not reactive when issues occurred.

The Chair, on behalf of the Committee thanked the Executive Director – Transformation and the HR and Payroll Operations Manager for attending the meeting and if members of the Committee had any further questions they would be in contact.

RESOLVED – That the information gathered as part of the Committee review into 'Administrative Arrangements and Joint Officers' be noted.
