

Minutes



Performance Scrutiny Committee - Place and Corporate

Date: 6 September 2021

Time: 4.00 pm

Present: Councillors J Richards (Acting Chair), M Al-Nuaimi, C Ferris and J Richards

In Attendance: Rhys Cornwall (Head of People and Business Change), Rachael Davies (HR and OD Manager), Neil Barnett (Scrutiny Adviser) and Louise A Thomas (Governance Officer)

1 Apologies

Councillors Chris Evans, Ibrahim Hayat, Graham Berry and Mark Whitcutt

2 Declaration of Interest

None.

3 Minutes of the previous meetings held on 7 June 2021 and 21 June 2021

The minutes of the previous meetings held on 7th June 2021 and 21st June 2021 were **approved** as a true and accurate record.

4 Staff Support during Covid-19

Invitees:

- Rhys Cornwall – Head of People and Business Change
- Rachael Davies – HR and OD Manager

The Head of People and Business Change gave a brief introduction to the report outlining the situation prior to the first lockdown of March 2020 and the subsequent general actions taken by the Council, focussing specifically on the Health and Safety aspects, support for employee well-being and communications.

The HR and OD Manager was introduced to provide greater detail. In March 2020 the immediate response was to put out as much information as possible and maintain good communication links with staff. The primary objective was to take steps to consider how best to protect and support the workforce. In line with government guidance all staff who were able to work from home were issued with guidance to do so, whilst those that were unable to work from home but were at higher risk of potential harm due to an underlying health condition, or had a family member who was vulnerable, to remain at home and not attend their workplace.

The existing HR /Payroll system was updated to record self-isolation details, shielding requirements, and also cases of Covid-19 and hospitalisation. The Gold Command group took decisions around the way in which terms and conditions were applied in order to support the workforce. Overtime rates and the flexi time scheme were reviewed and changes applied

to enable operational services to continue and increased flexibility to staff who needed support balancing their work and home lives during the demands of the pandemic. One major consideration during this time was how to support staff working from home. Remote Display Screen Assessment communications were rolled out by the Health and Safety Team. Checklists of appropriate and required equipment were made available to staff and when required, either delivered to the home address or safe collection from the Civic Centre arranged.

The Health and Safety Team had been working full-time on Covid related issues as the volume of work was unprecedented whilst also dealing with much of the day to day health and safety at work, accident reporting and investigations, wellbeing assessments and providing support for managers and staff had also continued. There had been a significant increase in the number of Occupational Health referrals where clinical support was required for employees suffering from effects of the pandemic, either directly or resulting from an issue with family members which had impacted upon their physical or mental wellbeing. Where possible, health and safety support continued to be offered during the interim period until an occupational health appointment could take place. However, for many cases clinical support was needed for cases where there was no work-related link.

The HR & OD Manager went on to report on staff training during the pandemic stating that all in-person courses had ceased in March 2020 whilst we waited for our training providers to adapt their courses to be delivered remotely via Teams. The 2021/22 Learning and Development Programme would be entirely provided via Teams with the exception of First Aid training which continued to be face-to face out of necessity. It was considered that the e-learning methods had worked well with the most subscribed course being “Maximising Success and Productivity – tackling the challenges of remote working”. The aim of this course was to help overcome the challenges of working remotely, and covered issues such as motivating yourself at home, avoiding distractions, prioritising workloads and staying connected with colleagues and remote team work – all areas which had been highlighted in employee surveys that have caused concern since March 2020.

Numerous wellbeing surveys had been sent out to staff over the past 18 months to gauge how staff had coped. Initially this had been every month but as numbers of responses had dropped, possibly due to ‘survey overload,’ the frequency had lessened. A survey was also issued to managers to ascertain the impact of working through the pandemic on their levels of wellbeing, and feedback included a range of different responses to the challenges being faced by managers and their teams. Communication with staff was paramount and the staff newsletter contained a Covid-19 update page which included all Welsh Government updates and the intranet page contained a dedicated Covid-19 messages page. Statistics showed that the absence figures due to non-Covid related reasons had decreased. This was understandable given the working from home regime but many staff had had to self-isolate and Managers had been given training on how to deal with and record this. Managers had been encouraged to be as flexible and accommodating as possible.

Members asked the following:

- How many staff responded to the surveys in order to say the responses were representative of the workforce?

The HR & OD Manager explained that there were approximately 1200 staff (excluding schools or front line roles) who tended to respond and response numbers varied from 150 to 800. Over the course of time the average was approx. 450 responses and this was considered a fairly high response rate. In answering a follow up question she confirmed that it was recognised that the responses would not reflect totally the views of the entire workforce and that we did not therefore discount the feelings of those who may not have responded to the surveys. It was a challenge to encourage staff to respond.

- A Member asked that if in hindsight, should HR had provided an online forum for staff to provide verbal feedback?

The HR & OD Manager commented that there were a series of networks in existence. Council had an inclusive staff access group and they had been helpful in discussing and communicating what additional support could be given to staff. There were some face to face opportunities to talk to staff but analysis of 450 responses would be more representative that the numbers an online focus group could manage in practice.

- Members stated they were keen to ensure that normal protocols with Trade Union consultations etc. had been maintained and asked if the Trade Unions had any observations?

The Head of People and Business change and the HR and OD Manager confirmed that Employee Partnership Forums had continued every quarter, with the exception of one meeting, and that there had been regular meetings with UNISON and GMB representatives, along with a separate forum for teachers to discuss school settings. There had been challenging discussions regarding working practices, health and safety, remunerations etc. but it was important to know that good relationships had been maintained with all fully engaged in healthy dialogue.

- A Member queried the graph showing that levels of stress had fallen.

The HR and OD Manager replied that in relation to work place stress, this had reduced because of WFH but had been replaced by other stresses such as caring responsibilities, home schooling, fear of Covid etc. It had been a very challenging time for everybody and this was recognised by all.

- A Member queried if we were aware of how neighbouring Authorities had managed the situation?

The HR and OD Manager responded that we had been in regular contact with both regional and national colleagues to share learning and experiences. ABUHB had agreed to roll out Connect 5, a Gwent based regional project set up to share information and best practice. Connect 5 was a mental wellbeing workforce training programme, jointly funded by the health board and Welsh Government and was the first, and only, evidence-based training programme available in the UK which aimed to promote mental health and wellbeing.

- A
Member asked for clarification on future developments referred to in the report.

The HR and OD Manager replied that previously there had been various pieces of information on the intranet regarding health and safety but that survey responses had highlighted that staff found these difficult to locate. Going forward, the intention was to rebrand the wellbeing information in one location on the intranet and make it available via Page Tiger for all employees to access from any device at work or at home. This would resemble an online brochure with all relevant information, signposting and links in one place.

The Chair thanked the Officers for their contribution and responses to Member's questions.

Conclusions

The Committee **noted** the Staff Support through Covid-19 report and made the following comments to the Cabinet

- Members were happy with the information contained within the report and praised the service area for the support they have provide staff with throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. Members made comment that the graphs in the report are useful, but for any future reports, it would be good to record and show the average of the size of the survey that led to those so that Members know how representative those results are. Members also appreciated that although surveys are helpful, we must be mindful of survey fatigue.
- Members were pleased to hear that the service area have been in close contact with trade unions and maintained good working relationships throughout the pandemic. Members voiced the importance of having trade unions involved in communications in any future changes in employee's working conditions, absence policies or contracts.
- The Committee also asked if they could please get additional information on the number of survey numbers from the graph contained in the report.

5 Scrutiny Adviser Reports

Invitee

- Neil Barnett – Scrutiny Adviser

The Scrutiny Adviser presented the Forward Work Programme, and informed the Committee of the topics due to be discussed at the next two committee meetings:

Monday 1st November 2021 at 4pm, the agenda items;

- 2021-22 Service Plan Mid-Year Review for:
 - Law and Regulation
 - People and Business Change

Monday 15th November 2021 at 4pm, the agenda items;

- 2021-22 Service Plan Mid-Year Review for:
 - Regeneration Investment and Housing
 - City Services
 - Finance

The Scrutiny Adviser queried with the Committee if they would permit for the two meetings to be changed to a slightly later date in order for service areas to be able to provide their data. The proposed new dates would be:

Monday 15th November 2021 at 4pm, the agenda items;

- 2021-22 Service Plan Mid-Year Review for:
 - Law and Regulation
 - People and Business Change

Monday 29th November 2021 at 4pm, the agenda items;

- 2021-22 Service Plan Mid-Year Review for:
 - Regeneration Investment and Housing
 - City Services
 - Finance

The Scrutiny Adviser then advised that the Committee that if these amendments were to be agreed, then the meeting afterwards would also need to be changed to –

Monday 13th December 2021 at 4pm, the agenda item;

- Economic Growth Strategy and Economic Recovery Plan – Recommendations Monitoring

The Committee **agreed** for the new dates for the November and December meetings. The Scrutiny Adviser advised the Committee that the Forward Work Programme would be updated and meeting invitations would be sent out shortly.

The meeting terminated at 5.15 pm