

RESOURCES & DELIVERING VALUE SCRUTINY BOARD - 2 December 2021

MINUTES

Present: Councillors: M Parker (Chairman), Mrs D Holl-Allen MBE (Vice-Chairman), M Allen, B Groom, M McCarthy, A Rebeiro, P Thomas, J Tildesley and A Mackenzie (Substitute)

Officers: Adrian Cattell – Head of Human Resources (HR) (item 5)
Tracey Ellis – HR Business Manager (item 5)
Sam Gilbert – Assistant Director of Finance and Property Services (item 6)
Gabrielle Whitehouse – Group Manager (item 6)
Mark Pinnell – Executive Director Asset Management & Development SCH (item 6)
Jane Game – Democratic Services and Scrutiny Manager

Apologies: Councillors: S Davis

1. DECLARATIONS OF PECUNIARY OR CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

None received.

2. QUESTIONS AND DEPUTATIONS

None received.

3. MINUTES

The Resources and Delivering Value Scrutiny Board:

RESOLVED:

To agree the minutes arising from the Resources and Delivering Value Scrutiny Board meeting held on 2 November 2021 as an accurate subject to the deletion of the duplication of Cllrs Groom and Allen in the attendance record.

In responding to a question arising from the minutes regarding an update on the £1.477m unallocated grant against the Covid-19 Emergency Funding Grant, Officers advised this was a continually moving picture as things would have moved on since the report in November.

4. SICKNESS ABSENCE

The Board was provided with details of the Council's performance in relation to the management of employee sickness absence and details of current and proposed interventions to reduce levels.

Members were reminded that previous reports had been presented to the Board highlighting the concerns over the increasing levels of sickness absence, particularly in Adult Social Care and Support, and the actions that had been taken to reduce sickness absence levels.

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Members were advised that since 2018 sickness absence had fallen by 20%, but there were now signs that there was a small upward trend. CLT had reviewed sickness absence and had set a target of no more than 9 days per FTE.

Members were provided with a breakdown of sickness absences by Directorate, which identified that the highest levels were still in Adult Social Care and Support although significantly reduced. All other Directorates were below the target set by CLT. The report also detailed:

- The biggest causes of sickness absence, the top one being mental health;
- Short term absences
- Key changes to Sickness Absence Management Policy
- Other initiatives/actions taken to tackle sickness absence

The Head of HR and the HR Business Manager were in attendance to take Members through the report and answer Members questions.

On receiving the report Members sought clarification on a number of points, which Officers responded to and in summary included:

- With regard to the Pulse Survey detailed in section 3.17 of the report Members questioned whether all managers were able to direct employees to the relevant help when needed. Officers advised that Managers were required to hold regular one to ones with team members and wellbeing should form part of that conversation. It was also possible that there could be a lack of knowledge or understanding and this could be followed up. There was also some evidence that some employees were happy to look for their own support in the first instance;
- Following on from the Pulse survey the Council had introduced Individual and Team Wellbeing Action Plans to support this area of work;
- Officers were able to confirm that work with partner organisations had been undertaken, which included BSOL and the STP, and although the strategies detailed in the report were designed for Solihull Council needs, collaborative working was important and valued;
- Members sought assurance that staff in demanding jobs for example in social work continued to be supported, as this area of work could be harrowing, particularly when working at home and missing out on contact with colleagues who understood and could be supportive;
- Officers were pleased to report that sickness absence in this area was down, and there was no evidence to suggest that employees were finding it difficult to access support. Officers referenced the support mechanisms which were available and detailed in the report, as well taking into account the type of work and environment;
- Members also recognised that it was important to ensure that any action plans developed to support wellbeing were regularly refreshed and updated rather than forgotten about. Officers confirmed that as part of managers responsibility this oversight was included and formed part their performance and development reviews;

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- With regard to the reintroduction of an awards scheme to recognise those employees who had not taken any sick leave, Officers commented that in the past this kind of scheme had, had a mixed response from staff, and that things had moved on with the development of the Employee Awards Scheme;
- There was a discussion around recruitment and retention particularly around Adult Social Care and Support where it was recognised that there was a national shortage of social workers and competition was keen. Officers advised Members on what work and strategies the Council was putting in place to try and recruit and develop social workers; and
- Officers also informed Members that a piece of work was currently being undertaken regarding workforce planning to try and future proof the Council position.

In conclusion the Chairman felt the report was very positive and the initiatives in place to support staff were having a positive effect on sickness absence levels. The Chairman emphasised the need to keep documentation alive, by reviewing and updating them. It was recognised through the debate that the last 18 months had been very difficult for staff, and it was a tribute to the workforce that they had kept going.

RESOLVED:

That the contents of the report be noted and the actions identified endorsed.

5. FOLLOW UP REPORT – BUILDING SAFETY

The Board was provided with an update on current Building Safety legislation and activities undertaken for the Council's Housing Stock and other Council owned buildings.

The Board had received a previous report in December 2020 which provided an update on the implications arising from the Draft Building Safety Bill. Members were advised that since then the Council and Solihull Community Housing (SCH) had taken a number of steps to work towards meeting the demands of the new Building Safety regulatory regime. The report covered the following points:

- Fire Safety Act 2021 (section 3.3)
- The Building Safety Bill 2021 (section 3.4)
- Actions taken to Date in response (section 3.5)
- Accountable Person Under the Building Safety Bill (section 3.6)
- Building Safety Manager Proposal (section 3.7)
- Building Safety Lead (section 3.8)
- Building Safety in High Risk Buildings (section 3.9)

The Assistant Director of Finance and Property Services, the Group Manager and the Executive Director Asset Management and Development of SCH were in attendance to take Members through the report and answer Members questions.

On receiving the report Members sought clarification on a number of points, which Officers responded to and in summary included:

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- Officers confirmed that sprinklers would be fitted in both residential properties and communal areas in line with the current regulations;
- With regard to the spandrel panels Officers took Members through the timeline for this work, briefed them on the independent advice taken to ensure safety was maintained and advised that the walls behind the panels were not combustible;
- In relation to the Building Safety Managers (6 new posts), Members noted that the cost of these posts was £505k and questioned whether anyone in-house was already performing these roles. Officers confirmed that these roles were required under the legislation, which would come into law in 2022, and no one was doing these roles currently. The roles carried with them a significant level of responsibility and a job evaluation process would be followed. Given that these roles would be required across the country it was anticipated that there would be competition for candidates who had the requisite experience and skills required under the new legislation; and
- With regard to the establishment of a new Building Safety Regulator (BSR) which will sit within the Health and Safety Executive, Officers advised Members that the Council/SCH would need to demonstrate to the BSR that the Council and SCH were compliant and that the Council/SCH had the records to demonstrate this. The BSR would undertake audits every five years. With regard to the recent audit which had been undertaken, Officers confirmed that the final report would be circulated to Members when received.

In concluding the debate the Chairman recognised that this was a very important issue which needed to come under frequent review. The Chairman was pleased to see that the Council and SCH was totally focussed on this piece of work and keeping residents safe.

RESOLVED:

That the implications arising from the Fire Safety Act, Building Safety Bill and associated legislation be noted and that a further report be received as part of the Boards work programme in relation to Building Safety and compliance.

The meeting ended at 7.30 pm