



City and County of Swansea

Minutes of the **Scrutiny Working Group - Workforce**

Remotely via Microsoft Teams

Wednesday, 2 February 2022 at 3.00 pm

Present: Councillor C Anderson (Chair) Presided

Councillor(s)

J A Hale
L James
H M Morris

Councillor(s)

C A Holley
Y V Jardine
C L Philpott

Councillor(s)

D H Hopkins
S M Jones
L V Walton

Other Attendees

David Hopkins Cabinet Member - Delivery & Operations (Deputy Leader)

Officer(s)

Geoff Bacon Head of Property Services
Adrian Chard Strategic Human Resources and Organisational
Development Manager
Adam Hill Deputy Chief Executive / Director of Resources
Liz Jordan Scrutiny Officer
Rhian Millar Consultation Co-ordinator

Apologies for Absence

Councillor(s): M H Jones, A S Lewis and A H Stevens
Other Attendees: Sarah Lackenby

1 Disclosures of Personal and Prejudicial Interests

No disclosures of interest were made.

2 Prohibition of Whipped Votes and Declaration of Party Whips

No declarations were made.

3 Letters from Previous Meeting

The Working Group considered the letters from the previous meeting and noted its previous recommendations and the Cabinet Members' response.

4 Public Question Time

No questions were submitted.

5 Workforce Report

David Hopkins, Cabinet Member for Delivery and Operations attended for this item, together with relevant officers to provide a brief update and answer questions.

The following main issues were discussed:

- Panel queried the percentage of all Council staff who are working from home. Officers agreed to provide this information outside of the meeting.
- Panel felt the Council should have more full time rather than part time jobs at the lower end of the pay scale and that there was a disparity in the percentage of female workers at the lower end. Officers responded that part of the reason the workforce strategy is being revised is to look at diversity, equality, protected characteristics etc.
- Panel queried if there was an entry exam for posts in the Waste department and was informed there are no entry exams, but the Authority does have a selection assessment criteria and process to appoint the best person for any job with the Council.
- Panel asked if there is an opportunity to offer vacancies to agency staff who are being employed by the Council on a temporary basis to cover sickness etc. Officers stated that measures are being taken to reduce the numbers of agency workers and they will have the opportunity to apply for traineeship roles and other roles if they desire.
- Panel queried how the Council is going to assess and manage agency workers in the future and heard the Governance and Audit Committee has been assured that line managers are complying with the agency workers policy and that this is being regularly reviewed.
- Panel is aware that there is a Return-to-Work Policy for staff illness but queried if there is an opportunity for a member of staff to phone up anonymously and talk to someone. Informed Occupational Health deal with many responses from staff, plus there is a Helping Hands confidential helpline which provides support and counselling but is not anonymous. There is anonymous advice and support available on domestic abuse and harassment.
- Panel raised the issue of workforce planning for the future as there are many employees between the ages of 40 and 60 and asked if there is a strategy to 'straighten out the curve'. It heard the Council will not be selective but will try to ensure it is attracting people across the board and that people of all ages are encouraged to apply for all jobs including traineeships and apprenticeships.
- Panel raised a query regarding sickness absence and what the roles are for the people appointed into support roles in various departments, and was informed that it has been identified that staff need additional support so sickness absence officers have been appointed in the main directorates, who will support line managers and team leaders in making sure the sickness absence policy is administered and identify proactive ways to reduce sickness and prevent sickness happening in the first place.
- Panel requested that the Council goes back to having one Human Resources department which is responsible for all HR functions and one Cabinet Member holding this portfolio. Officers confirmed the role of Head of HR and Service Centre has just been advertised, which will bring the HR, Organisational

Development (OD) and Service Centre back together all under one department and they suggested this would be a good opportunity to look at how this sits under one Cabinet Member.

- Panel queried what measures have been tried to recruit more people into Social Services. Officers confirmed a recruitment and development policy has been developed for Social Services which is not just about pay, its about using different channels for recruitment, working on staff morale and offering a healthy work/life balance and flexibility.
- Panel queried how the Council is supporting its staff working from home. Officers responded that the instruction is to work from home if you can. For those staff who find this difficult, they are encouraged to come into the office. Managers have retained regular contact with their staff with team meetings, 1-2-1s etc.
- Panel expressed concern about the rising energy costs for staff working from home and asked if the Authority advises staff on how to claim money back from the tax office. Officers confirmed that this information is made readily available to staff through the Agile Working Policy, trade unions, link via the Council's Covid-19 FAQs page direct to HMRC website, also mentioned in staff briefings, in staff newsletter and in Phil's blog.
- Panel requested the January figures for Occupational Health and these was confirmed as follows: Occupational Health Referrals 101 (94); Health Surveillance 78 (52); Counselling Referrals 55 (53).
- Panel understood that the pandemic has moved forward the agile working policy and accommodation strategy considerably. Officers confirmed that the Authority started its journey on agile working before the pandemic and is now moving from how it manages its accommodation for Covid to how it manages its accommodation for the future for the workforce.
- Panel requested feedback on the effects of long covid on staff and the support given to them. Panel was informed that there is a long covid protocol for local authorities in Wales which protects staff from reductions in sick pay if suffering from long covid. This protocol is coming to an end and is in the process of being reviewed to consider issues of equality and fairness across any other long term sickness absence.
- Panel queried if the Authority is aware of the number of staff working from home whilst they are ill (especially with covid). Officers stated that people could have covid but not be ill, so are fit to work and do their job. If they are not fit to work, the Authority expects them not to work.
- Panel felt it would be useful to have a 'one stop' shop to contact if people have several questions they want answered. Informed that the Service Centre can answer a number of questions from staff and the public.
- Panel queried how the Councils productivity was affected by staff working from home and was informed that generally the leadership team feels, and results from the survey suggest, that staff feel more productive, however, the Authority is affected by the productivity of other partners and organisations that it links in to, which can cause delays.
- Panel Members raised a number of queries about surveys. Members wanted to know if the Authority is considering undertaking another follow up survey and were informed the staff survey usually takes place annually but there may be opportunities to do more ad hoc surveys on particular aspects.

- Panel was informed that one difficulty was how the Authority engages with all its workforce going forward particularly front-line workers, it needs to find different ways of approaching them. Officers confirmed the survey was focussed more towards home workers as staff working from home had the most change to how they work and many front-line staff continued with their jobs.
- Panel felt confidentiality of surveys was very important and queried if the Authority was able to ensure this. Officers confirmed they are confidential.

6 Discussion and Conclusions

The Working Group discussed progress and made the following conclusions:

1. Working Group Members would once again like to give their thanks and acknowledge the hard work and commitment of all staff, the senior management team and everyone in the organisation who have worked so hard doing their jobs and supporting the people of Swansea in very difficult times.
2. Working Group Members felt this follow up session was very useful. They felt reassured by the answers given and felt confident that the Authority is progressing in the right direction with regards its workforce.
3. Working Group had some concerns that the recent survey may not be a true reflection of how staff are feeling as the number of responses was low. Members feel the Authority needs to find ways of getting a higher response to surveys but realize this is a difficult task. Members would encourage officers to, amongst other things, make more hard copies of surveys readily available; try offering incentives to staff for completing a survey; and consider including something in new employee contracts to encourage them to complete surveys.
4. Working Group Members were pleased that information on how to claim money back from the tax office for working from home is made readily available to staff in various ways. They would like to see reminders of this published on a regular basis so all eligible staff can take advantage of it.
5. Working Group Members were very pleased to hear that all HR functions will be brought together under one Head of HR and Service Centre. They hope that this will result in one cabinet member for this portfolio.

Following on from this meeting:

A letter will be written from the Convener of the Working Group to the Cabinet Members, summarising the discussion and outlining the Working Group's thoughts and recommendations.

The meeting ended at 5.15 pm