

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE  
PERSONNEL BOARD  
HELD ON 21 JUNE 2023 FROM 7.00 PM TO 9.20 PM**

**Committee Members Present**

Councillors: Rachel Bishop-Firth (Chair), Prue Bray (Vice-Chair), Lindsay Ferris, Stephen Conway and Pauline Jorgensen

**Officers Present**

Madeleine Shopland, Democratic and Electoral Services Specialist  
Louise Livingston, AD HR & OD  
Susan Parsonage, Chief Executive (items 1-15)  
Sally Halliwell, Lead HR Business Partner

**1. ELECTION OF CHAIR 2023-24**

**RESOLVED:** That Councillor Rachel Bishop-Firth be elected Chair for the 2023-24 municipal year.

**2. APPOINTMENT OF VICE CHAIR 2023-24**

**RESOLVED:** That Councillor Prue Bray be appointed Vice Chair for the 2023-24 municipal year.

**3. APOLOGIES**

An apology for absence was submitted from Pauline Helliar Symons.

Stuart Munro attended the meeting virtually.

**4. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING**

The Minutes of the meeting of the Minutes of the Board held on 13 January 2023 and the Minutes of the Extraordinary meetings held on 23rd January 2023, 6 February 2023, 24 March 2023 and 30 March 2023 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

**5. DECLARATION OF INTEREST**

There were no declarations of interest.

**6. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME**

There were no public questions.

**7. MEMBER QUESTION TIME**

There were no Member questions.

**8. DEVELOPMENT OF THE COUNCIL'S PEOPLE STRATEGY**

The Board received a report regarding the development of the Council's People Strategy.

During the discussion of this item, the following points were made:

- The Assistant Director, HR & OD had been reviewing the Council's HR practices and looking at linking them with the Council's objectives.
- The Council would be developing a People's Strategy. Engagement in the process would include councillors, and the draft and final versions would be presented to the Personnel Board for comment.

- The People Strategy would help to set the direction of the workforce and would link to the work around the Community Vision and Council Plan.
- Possible areas for inclusion included performance, leadership, investment in people, organisational behaviours, engagement, inclusivity, reward, and employer brand.
- The report detailed various engagement tools that would be used. Personnel Board's views would be sought on these.
- A further update would be provided in September and the views of Board members would be sought prior to this. A final version would be presented to the Board in November.
- Prue Bray welcomed the idea of a strategy on a page. She felt that this would be more likely to be read.
- Pauline Jorgensen questioned what the scope would be and whether it would be aimed at contractors as well as employees. Louise Livingston indicated that it would be mainly aimed at the workforce, but conversations would also be had with partners such as Optalis.
- Pauline Jorgensen questioned whether reference should be made to a sourcing strategy. Louise Livingston indicated that the strategy itself would be succinct but there would also be a clear action plan underneath. Members felt that this would help to provide guidance.
- Stephen Conway commented that the development of a People Strategy was very encouraging and that he welcomed the focus on partnership working and the taking into account of the community vision work.
- In response to a question from Lindsay Ferris, Louise Livingston indicated that staff would see how the Council intended to develop its staff, making a commitment to look at factors such as career development, growing its own and ensuring that there was transparency around how salaries would be set. It was hoped that this would help recruitment and retention.

**RESOLVED:** That the proposed method of defining the people strategy through engagement and consultation with the wider workforce, be agreed.

## **9. MODERN WORKFORCE CONCEPTS**

The Board considered a report regarding Modern Workforce concepts.

During the discussion of this item, the following points were made:

- The Council would look at taking the ways of working which had developed over the pandemic, and what it needed to do as an organisation to deliver the best for its residents, ascertaining where this would open up opportunities to work flexibly.
- Stephen Conway suggested that reference be made to partnership working under the section relating to potential principles. This would be an important part of the modern workforce concepts.
- Sally Halliwell stated that whilst the framework would focus on staff, the customer remained at the heart of all that we did as a Council. The principles related to the customer/colleague experience but allowed greater flexibility that had started to develop over the pandemic. This would help to broaden the net when it came to recruitment and allow flexibility in the market. It continued to be difficult to recruit to certain roles, but some roles could also work in different ways. The concepts would be very service orientated as one size did not fit all.

- The concepts were linked in with other initiatives such as staff parking and accommodation.
- Some worker styles had been identified but the Council was very diverse in what it delivered. Engagement would take place with staff across all levels.
- Pauline Jorgensen expressed some concerns regarding the wording of part of the benefits section. She was of the view that 'Colleagues will have flexibility of when, how and where they work taking into account the needs of the service allowing for a better work life balance', gave the impression that the colleague was the one who decided how they worked. The needs of the organisation were important. She felt that this could be better worded. Sally Halliwell agreed that the wording could be amended. The needs of the organisation were paramount and there would still be a requirement to be present in the office as and when required.
- Lindsay Ferris commented that it could be difficult when officers were based some distance away. Whilst there needed to be flexibility, it needed to be within a framework and understood by both parties, to ensure that an additional burden did not fall on officers who were based closer.
- Members agreed that clear communication from the start of employment, and during recruitment, was essential. Sally Halliwell emphasised that the Council would be clear around expectations when recruiting.
- Stephen Conway stated that it was often helpful for officers attending committee meetings to attend in person as it helped to get know councillors and how the committee worked, better. He went on to state that flexibility in the system was beneficial. Some officers liked to come in to the office for the social aspect.
- Prue Bray stated that planning the size of the workspace was difficult if there was a lot of flexibility in workstyles.
- In response to a question from Prue Bray, Louise Livingston commented that the Learning and Development team were looking at development opportunities. She emphasised that discussions were being held with the property team regarding accommodation.
- Pauline Jorgensen referred to the proposed signage for the forthcoming car parking changes, which included reference to the cost of staff parking permits. She suggested that this wording be removed. She was also of the view that £950 was a lot for those on the lower end of the pay scale who may not work full time in the office. Sally Halliwell indicated that discussions were being held with the Parking team. The pause on permit charges had been extended to allow for the permits to be modelled in line with the modern workforce, based on worker styles.

**RESOLVED:** That the concepts to develop a Modern Workforce Policy be agreed subject to the comments made at the meeting, set out above.

## **10. ABSENCE MANAGEMENT CONCEPTS**

The Board considered a report regarding Absence Management Concepts.

During the discussion of this item, the following points were made:

- The Chair indicated that monitoring staff absence was a key performance indicator. It was important to have a policy to ensure that staff who were ill were fairly treated but also so that the Council could manage situations where absences became prolonged or frequent.
- Louise Livingston indicated that guidance was in place for managers, but absence management concepts would tighten this up, remove ambiguity and help to clarify expectations.

- Trigger points would be set to help identify patterns.
- The policy would help to define long term absence. Louise Livingston assured the Committee that the Council was here to support its staff when they were ill. The policy would help to manage that process. However, in the worst-case scenario, the individual could be managed out of the organisation either via medical retirement or capability. Managers would be trained to use the policy.
- Sally Halliwell stated that the lack of an existing absence management policy made it more difficult for managers to manage absences. The new policy would help to set out obligations and expectations on both sides.
- Items of focus would include support through Occupational Health, quality of data, training for managers, and clarification around time off for appointments.
- Members expressed surprise that there was not currently an Absence Management Policy in place. Lindsay Ferris commented that there had been inconsistencies in this area previously.
- Prue Bray asked about absences due to bereavement or absence without pay, and whether these would be covered by the policy. In addition, she was of the view that managers should be able to exercise a level of discretion around absence management.
- Prue Bray commented that it was important that officers did not come into the workplace when they were infectious, and questioned what would be done to stop this.
- Sally Halliwell responded that bereavements and unpaid leave would feature in a separate policy and that the Absence Management Policy would solely focus on absence due to illness. This would cover ensuring that staff did not attend the workplace when infectious.
- It was important that the policy complied with the Equality Act requirements.
- Members were informed that there would be consultation on the draft policy, which would be brought to the July Board meeting.
- Stephen Conway stated that an absence management policy would help to identify issues at an earlier stage.
- Susan Parsonage referred to practical examples where staff might be missing work e.g., because of domestic abuse.
- Pauline Jorgensen emphasised that the policy needed to be clear and not overly complex and give information on identifying trends. She emphasised that there needed to be discretion around terminal or serious illness. Sally Halliwell responded that there would be a section regarding absence due to terminal illness. Conversations were being had with the BWO team about modules that would help to identify absence management patterns. However, work patterns would need to be built in which could take time.
- Lindsay Ferris suggested that reference also be made to chronic illness and other factors which could lead to prolonged absences such as long Covid and the menopause.
- Louise Livingston emphasised that the policy was to help and support, and penalise employees, but equally they needed to be able to undertake their role.

**RESOLVED:** That the concepts for the Absence Management Policy be agreed.

## **11. GENDER & ETHNICITY PAY GAP REPORT**

The Board considered the Gender and Ethnicity Pay Gap Report.

During the discussion of this item, the following points were made:

- The Council was required to publish a Gender Pay Gap Report annually.
- Louise Livingston indicated that it was an old report, set at March 2022 and that the version for 2023 would be presented at the September Board meeting.
- The Gender Pay Gap was a measure of the difference between the average earnings of men and women across an organisation, expressed as a percentage of men's earnings in comparison. The mean Gender Pay Gap for the Borough was currently 14.07%, a slight decrease on 2021.
- As part of the Council's inclusivity work, opportunities for attracting males and females into roles at all levels, would be looked at.
- It was quite difficult to change the gap as many specific roles tended to attract specific genders.
- The mean Ethnicity Pay Gap for 2022 was 2.25%.
- Prue Bray commented that much of the workforce was female but a lot of those in senior posts were male, although more females were starting to be seen in senior posts. She questioned how the Council compared with other councils, and if there was more that the Council could be doing to decrease the gap. Sally Halliwell commented that the Council was broadly similar to other councils. Louise Livingston stated that work was being done around recognising unconscious bias and job evaluation. Stephen Conway added that unconscious bias when considering internal promotions also needed to be addressed.
- Lindsay Ferris stated that the report was not very easy to understand. Louise Livingston indicated that improvements would be made to the style in future iterations to make it more readable.
- Pauline Jorgensen agreed that the format could be improved. She suggested that salaries by job families be compared as opposed to specific roles. Louise Livingston indicated that this would be included as part of the work around job evaluation.

**RESOLVED:** That the Gender and Ethnicity Pay Gap Report be noted.

## **12. AGENCY AND TEMPORARY WORKER REPORT: QUARTER 3 2023/24**

The Board considered the Agency and Temporary Worker Report Quarter 3 2023/24.

During the discussion of this item, the following points were made:

- It was hoped that the new style of report would improve the focus on what the Council was paying its temporary and agency staff and contractors. Previously the report had been considered in Part 2 session, but the new style of report would allow public scrutiny of the issue and create a strategic focus. Members were asked to consider whether the new format met requirements or whether any further improvements were required. It was suggested that where issues were identified that these be taken back to the specific department for consideration.
- It was recognised that there were skills shortages in certain areas and that it was sometimes necessary to appoint agency or temporary workers.
- A corporate mandate of only hiring agency workers through the Matrix framework had taken effect from 1st April 2023. This meant that the Council spent less money in recruitment as fees had been previously negotiated. Sally Halliwell added that through procurement, a number of agencies had been removed that the Council no longer used because they would not sign up to the framework or were costly. An Agency Contracts Manager would be starting in July and would work with teams to bring down the level of agency workers where possible.

- Sally Halliwell indicated that there was often an increase in agency workers in Q3 and 4 following the receipt of government grants for projects which had to be quickly completed, necessitating the use of agency staff due to the length of the recruitment process for permanent staff.
- A steering group was in place which met fortnightly to discuss agency usage.
- As on framework contracts started to increase the agency costs would start to reduce further.
- The Chair questioned whether those areas where agency workers had had to be appointed, for example as a result of a short term project or a national skills shortage, could be highlighted and the spending on this pulled out within the report. This would help to focus the Board's discussions on areas that required the most challenge.
- Pauline Jorgensen believed it would be helpful to receive information about the proportion of agency workers by role.
- Stephen Conway felt that it would be useful to receive information on how the Council compared with other unitary councils. It was appreciated that different councils had different pressures. He added that the Council was proactive at bidding for external funding, but this funding was often short term and required the use of temporary or agency workers to undertake associated projects. The use of agency or temporary workers or contractors could sometimes be a sign of success, i.e., the successful achievement of external funding. The Chair suggested that this information be included in the narrative.
- Lindsay Ferris commented that Personnel Board had been looking at this matter for a number of years, and that there were always certain areas which had been difficult to recruit to. The cost of living crisis had made it even more difficult to recruit, particularly in areas such as Wokingham Borough which had a higher cost of living. Lindsay Ferris anticipated that consequently the rate of agency and temporary workers may increase. He suggested that trends be looked at to identify areas where agency staff could be anticipated. He went on to question whether there were new areas of concern, which the Council had historically been able to recruit to but were now experiencing problems with. The Chair agreed that it would be helpful to highlight new areas where it was now difficult or more expensive to recruit, but also where it was more cost effective to use agency and temporary staff.

**RESOLVED:** That the content of the report be noted, and the new style of reporting be agreed.

### **13. EXCLUSION OF THE PUBLIC**

**RESOLVED:** That under Section 100A(4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the public be excluded from the meeting for the following items of business on the grounds that they involve the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in Paragraphs 1 and 2 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Act (as amended) as appropriate.

### **14. DIRECTORATE PLANNING**

The Board considered a report regarding directorate planning.

**RESOLVED:** That the recommendations contained within the report be agreed.

### **15. CHIEF EXECUTIVE REMUNERATION**

The Board considered a report regarding the Chief Executive remuneration.

**RESOLVED:** That the recommendations contained within the report be agreed.