

Medway Council
Meeting of Employment Matters Committee
Wednesday, 1 September 2021
7.00pm to 8.20pm

Record of the meeting

Subject to approval as an accurate record at the next meeting of this committee

- Present:** Councillors: Carr, Fearn (Chairman), Hackwell, Khan, Mahil and Prenter
- Substitutes:** Councillors:
Thorne (Substitute for Thompson)
- In Attendance:** Samantha Beck-Farley, Head of HR
Nick Morgan, HR Consultant
Vicky Nutley, Assistant Head of Legal Services
Michael Turner, Democratic Services Officer

287 Apologies for absence

An apology for absence was received from Councillor Thompson.

288 Record of meeting

The record of the meeting of the Committee held on 1 June 2021 was agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

289 Urgent matters by reason of special circumstances

There were none.

290 Declarations of Disclosable Pecuniary Interests and Other Significant Interests

Disclosable pecuniary interests

There were none.

Other significant interests (OSIs)

There were none.

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Other interests

Councillors Khan and Mahil disclosed that they were members of the GMB.

Councillor Prenter disclosed that he was a member of ASLEF.

Councillor Hackwell disclosed that his wife worked for the Council.

291 Staff Survey Results

Discussion:

Members considered a report which provided a breakdown of the most recent staff survey.

The following issues were discussed:

- **Survey** – the Head of HR clarified that 1,131 people had responded to the survey, which was just under 50% of the workforce. In terms of how to address the fact that some front-line staff did not feel the survey was relevant to them, the Head of HR advised that several drop-in sessions to share the survey findings had taken place, which had generated a lot of useful feedback. In addition, the Medway Makers were being relaunched as one way of better engaging with the workforce. This would allow a balanced representation across the whole council who could help make sure the questions in future surveys were relevant to everyone. In addition, paper copies of the survey had been made available, but none had been returned.
- **Issues identified by the survey** - in response to how any issues or concerns raised by the survey would be followed up, the Head of HR advised that all of these (including from the drop-in sessions) had been logged and a leadership programme was being developed to ensure managers had the tools needed to respond. An escalation route had been established to quickly resolve issues.
- **Performance management and productivity** - how productivity was measured was questioned and Members were advised that HR was working with managers to help them how to manage remote teams. However, this would not be a case of employees' activities being monitored in granular detail but rather regular check ins with staff with an emphasis on key milestones, effective communication and collaboration and clarity on how to escalate problems. The policies and guidance needed to support this were being developed. The Head of HR emphasised this new way of working was a significant cultural shift which would need to be embraced by everyone to be successful and would take time to fully embed.
- **Younger employees** – concern was expressed about difficulties young people may face when learning on job and reduced access to mentors.

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Although none of the survey questions had been specifically aimed at younger members of staff, the drop-in sessions had revealed that some young people felt they were constantly at home, in some cases from shared bedrooms.

- **Training** - in terms of access to training when people were working from home, the Head of HR explained that much training was now online but if there was a need to come into the office for training then this would be expected of staff.
- **Social isolation** – in response to the survey finding that many people had experienced social isolation, the Head of HR commented this issue had been more prominent in the drop-in sessions. The Council was looking to create more outside spaces at Gun Wharf for people to socialise. Many teams had still socialised online during the pandemic. In addition, the Council's Make a Difference awards event would take place in November.

Decision:

The Committee agreed to note the report and asked for a paper on Medway Makers to come to the next meeting.

292 Our Ways of Working (Flexible Working)

Discussion:

Members considered a report which advised that the current suite of flexible working policies had recently been reviewed, updated, combined into one policy, and rebranded as the Our Ways of Working Policy and the proposed revisions had been consulted upon.

The following issues were discussed:

- **Public liability cover** - the need for employees working at or from home to ensure that their home contents policy had public liability cover for at least one million pounds was questioned. Members were advised that this requirement was included in the current policy. Employees would still be covered by the Council's public liability insurance policy but this provision had been retained in case of something unexpected happening. In terms of the importance of communicating this to staff, Members were advised that guidance would be produced on the practical arrangements of issues like this and there would be a one-page checklist for employees and managers. However, legal advice would be sought on whether this provision should be retained.
- **Insurance** - it was noted that equipment securely stored in an individual employee's home was covered by the Council's insurance cover, but this cover did not extend whilst the equipment was in transit in the employee's car. Members were advised that this provision was in the

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existing policy, but advice would be sought on the issue of employees commuting to work with council equipment.

- **Technology at home** – whether the Council would pay for the cost of a Wi-Fi extender if connectivity was poor in an employee's home was questioned. Members were advised staff would not be re-imbursed for this. Employees could still choose to come into the office to work unless they were required by their service to work from home.
- **Staff unable to work from home** – noting there were no plans to revert to pre-pandemic working practices, how the Council intended to deal with staff who could not work from home and felt they were missing out on a benefit. Whether they should be compensated in some way was queried. Members were advised this was often a difficult area given the number of roles in the Council, but it was still possible to try and identify how flexible working could be successfully applied to these roles. The Council was looking at what changes in working conditions for front line staff could be made that would make a difference to them.
- **Requests for flexible working** – whether this was still once a year opportunity which should be made clear in the policy was questioned.
- **Reasonable notice for meeting** – reference was made to the requirement that employees working from home would be required to attend meetings and other office-based events as and when required (upon receipt of reasonable notice). It was suggested that some clarity be provided as to what was meant by reasonable.
- **Display Screen Equipment assessments** – how these assessments, which looked at whether individuals intending to work from home had the ability to do so, were carried out was queried. Members were advised that at present inspections were not taking place, but one possible way forward was through photos of the area in the home being used.
- **Accounting period** – it was suggested that the definition of this period used elsewhere be included in paragraph 18.5 of the policy.
- **Working from abroad** – whether the ability to work abroad should be included in the policy was questioned. The Head of HR advised the extent to which employees could work in other parts of the country was still being discussed, noting that in an emergency there was often a need to redeploy people to help the community, and this was in the contract of employment. On a case-by-case basis it may be possible to employ someone who lived some distance away and the minimum expectations around this would be added to the policy.
- **Core hours** – whether there was a need for more flexibility on core hours with people working from home was suggested. In response, Members were advised that core hours were determined at a service level. If people started to work well outside core hours then may not be

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the back-office support available to them. It was important there was some consistency on core hours.

- **Implementation and consistency across the Council** – given much of the implementation of the policy was at service level, how consistency and fairness would be achieved and also whether there was a review mechanism was questioned. Members were advised this would be a challenge. All flexible working requests would be seen by HR to allow for an oversight. There was still the right to appeal, which HR would normally be involved in. In addition, HR would be involved in any service reviews. If necessary the policy and guidance could be changed.
- **Consultation period** - in response to a query about the length of time allowed for consultation, the Head of HR commented the period was shorter than usual by about two weeks and had taken place over the summer holidays. Since the consultation period ended, HR continued to engage with the staff forums and a lot of feedback had been received which would be included in the guidance. The Head of HR felt it had been important to secure approval for the new policy sooner rather than later so that staff were aware of their options and also to help the Council to move forward. The accompanying guidance would play an important part in explaining and embedding the policy.
- **Business Change Team** – noting the work being done by the team to reduce the office footprint at Gun Wharf and with regard to hybrid working, Members agreed a report should come to the next meeting on this. It was queried what would happen if a person working from home chose to return to Gun Wharf but there was no desk for them. The Head of HR advised that the Business Change Team were looking at all Council buildings. There would be a lot of drop-down zones and it was not expected there would be a significant number of people wishing to work in Gun Wharf full time. If that were to change then other premises would be looked at.
- **Termination of flexible working** – in response to a query about when this might happen and what consultation with an individual employee would take place, Members were advised that this was likely to happen where there had been a change in a person's role and flexible working no longer suited the needs of the service. Consultation would take place on the same basis as any other change to a contract.
- **Compressed hours** – the point was made that this arrangement could lead to an increase in stress and mental health issues. Members were advised these were risks that applied to all working arrangements and there would be guidance to help with this situation.

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Decision:

The Committee:

- a) approved the revised draft Our Ways of Working Policy and agreed its implementation, subject to the Head of HR clarifying issues, as set out above and amending the Policy where necessary.
- b) requested a paper on the work of Business Change Team in respect of changes to Gun Wharf and hybrid working.

293 Equalities Board

Discussion:

Members considered a report on the progress of the Equalities Board and associated staff networks.

It was suggested that the Equalities Board should look at the issue of blind recruitment and whether there should be a pilot on this. The Head of HR agreed to add this to the agenda for the meeting of the Board after the next scheduled one.

Decision:

The Committee agreed to note the report.

Chairman

Date:

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