

Medway Council
Meeting of Business Support and Digital Overview and
Scrutiny Committee

Thursday, 26 October 2023

6.00pm to 7.50pm

Record of the meeting

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

- Present:** Councillors: Tejan (Chairperson), Myton (Vice-Chairperson), Bowen, Browne, Crozer, Hackwell, Hubbard, Jones, Lawrence, McDonald, Louwella Prenter and Williams
- Substitutes:** Councillors:
Gulvin (Substitute for Joy)
Mark Prenter (Substitute for Animashaun)
- In Attendance:** Samantha Beck-Farley, Chief Organisational Culture Officer
Steve Dickens, Democratic Services Officer
Phil Watts, Chief Operating Officer

344 Apologies for absence

Apologies were received from Councillors Animashaun and Joy.

345 Record of meeting

The record of the meeting held on 31 August 2023 was agreed and signed by the Chairman as correct.

346 Urgent matters by reason of special circumstances

There were none.

347 Disclosable Pecuniary Interests or Other Significant Interests and Whipping

Disclosable pecuniary interests

There were none.

Other significant interests (OSI)

There were none.

Other interests

There were none.

348 Use of Agency Staff and Consultants

The Chief Organisational Culture Officer introduced the report which outlined the use of agency staff where there was a skills shortage in the market and where consultants were employed in project work. She highlighted plans to reduce the number of agency workers through improved recruitment and retention.

The following issues were discussed:

Increase in non-permanent staff – in response to a query why the numbers of non-permanent staff had increased, the Chief Organisational Culture Officer advised Members that during the Covid pandemic, uncertainty relating to sick pay had encouraged staff to take permanent contracts. Now this was no longer the case recruitment and retention had been more challenging, with greater opportunities for home working this had increased competition with neighbouring authorities such as Kent or the Inner London Boroughs. There had also been an increase in project teams to undertake a backlog of work.

Length of Contract – Members were advised that the majority of non-permanent staff contracts were short term and were required to fill established posts. In response to a question how many contracted staff were renewed, the Chief Organisational Culture Officer explained some contracts were renewed periodically on the basis of funding, however, she was not aware of the exact numbers and undertook to provide that information outside of the meeting.

Employee Role – in response to a query, on what roles the 39 agency staff were who were not listed as working in Childrens, Adults or the Legal Department covered, the Chief Organisational Culture Officer reported that they were short term project workers with identified specialist skills which would not be required by the Council over the long term.

Retention of apprentices – in relation to the apprenticeship academy, Members were advised that the Council did look for where apprentices could qualify for 80% of the role so they could find permanent positions within the Council. Further work needed to be undertaken on Medpay to ensure the career progression of apprenticeships.

It was commented that four apprentices for Children's Social Care was a low number compared to the 200 social workers the Council employed, were there any plans to increase this number? It was explained that the number of apprentices were at a level which could be supported by permanent staff. As the number of vacancies reduced the number of apprentices would be increased.

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Exit Surveys – it was asked what action had been undertaken as a result of staff exit surveys and had the Council learned from those lessons. The Chief Organisational Culture Officer noted that data from exit surveys were published and stay interviews were also conducted which looked at why staff remained at the Council and opinion had also been tested through the staff survey with positive results. A key area for development was Medpay, including pay and career progression. The Medpay project delivery team had been increased in response to staff turnover and the staff survey. A new communication and engagement programme had been developed to support staff. There was a workforce strategy for the Council and development of departmental strategies and the Children's strategy had been renewed.

Productivity – in response to a query how the Council ensured productivity was maintained now that home working was embedded in the staff culture, the Chief Organisational Culture Officer stated that in some roles productivity could be measured effectively. For frontline services this was more difficult to measure, however, in the staff survey managers reported that productivity and achievement was higher due to staff being more engaged and an improved work life balance. Individual managers were responsible for productivity.

Vacancy rate – in relation to the current staff vacancy rate, the Chief Organisational Culture Officer undertook to provide the figures to the Committee, it was noted that staff turnover was high.

Children's Social Care – in response to a query why the vacancy rate in Children's Social Care was significantly higher than in the South East region and England, the Chief Organisational Culture Officer stated there may be a number of causes such as working under the pressure of inspection, high caseloads or competition from other local authorities such as Kent which recently received an Ofsted Outstanding judgement.

It was commented that that whilst Children's Social Care was in crisis, the additional funding of agency workers was understood, however, now there was no longer a crisis the Council had to put plans in place to reduce dependency on agency staff. Members were advised that 40 new staff had recently joined, however, 42 staff had left in that timeframe. So, although new staff were appointed turnover remained high. In response to a query whether the Council had learned lessons from previous overseas recruitment, the Chief Organisational Culture Officer explained there were some cultural issues and isolation for those workers which was exacerbated by the Covid pandemic and the Council intended to work with community support groups in the future.

Mosaic – Members noted the investment that had previously been made in Mosaic software and whether this had been completed. The Chief Operating Officer advised that Mosaic investment had been made to streamline a suite of over 40 reports and was ongoing, he undertook to provide an update to the Committee outside of the meeting.

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Management – in response to a query regarding unsupportive management, the Chief Organisational Culture Officer explained that there was a period where the Council did not have permanent managers in post. This had been rectified and positive appointments had been made to challenge standards. There was also a Principal Social Worker in place who provided pastoral support to officers. Managers were highly regarded in staff feedback.

Adult Social Care – a Member requested a briefing note on local authority post numbers for Adult Social Care and the number of posts filled in Medway in the time period 2012-2022.

Reduction in agency lawyers - in response to a query in which roles had the reduction in legal posts taken place, the Chief Organisational Culture Officer replied one litigation lawyer, one property lawyer, three childcare lawyers and one procurement officer had been released. Legal Services had prioritised work. It was asked whether this had affected completion of the 26 week Cafcass target for reports and whether the reduction in staff in the place team had affected the shared legal service. The Chief Organisational Culture Officer undertook to provide this information to Members outside of the meeting.

Pay and Conditions – in response to a question whether agency staff were paid at a higher rate than permanent staff, the Chief Organisational Culture Officer explained that agency staff were paid at a higher rate, however, they did not receive benefits such as sick pay and leave. The cost to the Council of using agency staff was greater than permanent staff but that additional cost was capped for Social Workers by a memorandum of understanding signed by councils in the region.

Decision:

- 1.1 The Committee noted the report.
- 1.2 The Committee requested a briefing note on the effects of the reduction of agency lawyers on the 26 week Cafcass target figures and in the place team on the relationship with the shared legal service with Gravesham.
- 1.3 The Committee requested additional information related to Adult Social Care employment in Medway as related to 6.1 and 6.2 of the report.

349 Work Programme

The Democratic Services Officer introduced the report which set out the Committee's work programme for 2023/24. He referred to section six of the report which provided information about the selection of task group topics. The Committee was asked to agree the priority order for task groups.

Members debated the priority order of shortlisted topics and the membership and size of task groups. In response to a question regarding the political balance of the task group the Democratic Services Officer explained this reflected previous practice between 2015-2019.

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Membership of Joint Task Groups – suggestion was made that a joint task group should have a larger membership and have representation from both Regeneration, Culture and Environment and Health and Adult Social Care Overview and Scrutiny Committees. The Democratic Services Officer undertook to discuss the size of a joint task group with colleagues and provide further information to the Committee.

Membership of single task groups – Members debated the membership and size of single tasks groups and, a proposal was put forward for task groups to have seven members (4 Labour and Co-operative, 2 Conservative and 1 Independent Member). Upon being put to the vote, the proposal was lost.

Medway 2.0 - in response to a query whether the Transformation Board which had undertaken similar work to the remit of Medway 2.0 had been abolished, the Chief Operating Officer confirmed it had been abolished and those reports would be considered by Cabinet.

Task Groups priority order – with regards to setting a priority order for the task group topics, Members discussed and agreed the following order:

Air Quality and Public Transport & Active Travel
Medway 2.0
Child Mental Health
New Social Housing Regime
Education Inequality

Work Programme - a Member raised concern at the number of items scheduled to take place at the November meeting with particular reference to pre decision scrutiny of the 2024/25 Budget. A proposal was put forward to move the items Attendance of the Portfolio Holder for Community Safety, and Universal Credit and Welfare Reforms – Annual Progress Report to a later date. Upon being put to the vote the proposal was lost.

Decision

- 1.1 The Committee agreed the work programme at Appendix 1 to the report.
- 1.2 The Committee noted the work programmes of the other Overview and Scrutiny Committees at Appendix 2
- 1.3 The Committee agreed the priority order of Task Group topics as: Air Quality and Public Transport & Active Travel, Medway 2.0, Child Mental Health, New Social Housing Inspection Regime and Education Inequality and that, with the exception of the first topic, task groups would be set up with a membership of 5 Councillors (3 Labour, 1 Conservative and 1 Independent Group Member for single task groups only).

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- 1.4 The Committee authorised the Head of Democratic Services to appoint the Members to the first task group once nominations have been received from Group Whips in consultation with the relevant Overview and Scrutiny Committee Chairperson, Vice Chairperson and Opposition Spokesperson.

Chairperson

Date:

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