

Medway Council
Meeting of Employment Matters Committee
Thursday, 1 May 2025
7.13pm to 8.57pm

Record of the meeting

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

Present: Councillors: Mark Prenter (Chairperson), Cook (Vice-Chairperson), Fearn and Hackwell

Substitutes: Councillors: Crozer and Peake

In Attendance: Samantha Beck-Farley, Chief Organisational Culture Officer
Vanessa Etheridge, Democratic Services Officer
Nick Morgan, HR Business Partner
Nicola Trainor, Head of Council Planning and Programmes

864 Apologies for absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Hamilton and Sands.

865 Record of meeting

The record of the meeting held on 29 January 2025 was agreed by the Committee and signed by the Chairperson as correct.

The record of the meeting of the Joint Consultative Committee held on 29 January 2025, was noted by the Committee.

866 Urgent matters by reason of special circumstances

The Chairman had agreed that Agenda Item 11 - Medpay Review: Outline of the approach to senior officer progression of pay, be considered at this meeting as a matter of urgency as permitted under section 100B of the Local Government Act 1972 to enable consideration of the matter at the earliest opportunity given that the report would be submitted to the next scheduled Full Council meeting on 17 July 2025.

867 Declarations of Disclosable Pecuniary Interests and Other Significant Interests

Disclosable pecuniary interests

There were none.

Other significant interests (OSIs)

There were none.

Other interests

Councillor Cook disclosed that she was a member of the NAHT trade union.

Councillor Peake disclosed that he was a member of the UNISON trade union.

Councillor Mark Prenter disclosed that he was a member of the ASLEF trade union.

868 Workforce Update 2024/25

Discussion

The Chief Organisational Culture Officer introduced the report which provided the latest information on the Council's workforce for 2024/25. The report was the first annual report on staffing levels across directorates, together with comparative information from the previous year. The report also provided information on diversity and demographics.

Agency Staff and retention/recruitment: Concern was expressed as to the high turnover rate particularly within the first year. It was noted that currently those statistics might be pulling in data from internal moves so may not accurately reflecting retention issues.

Concerns were raised about the high number of agency staff and associated costs. The Chief Organisational Culture Officer explained that the overall agency position was slightly higher than the previous year. It was explained that they were used to cover vacancies where there were difficulties in recruiting permanent staff and to cover things such as maternity leave or long-term sickness absence. The figures also covered the use of consultants for specialty expertise, on casual contracts for particular expertise for example educational psychologists. There were areas of constant churn due to the demanding nature of certain roles and efforts were being made to improve recruitment and retention through career pathways and staff engagement, as well as benchmarking activities and exit interviews but there was more work to be done.

It was commented that there was a significant difference between using agency staff for specialist skills and covering vacancies. The Chief Organisational Culture Officer undertook to circulate a breakdown of the data outside of the meeting. She also advised that the difficulty in recruiting to certain roles was not unique to this council.

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It was suggested that salary band Range 2 or below were not incentivised to remain and the Chief Organisational Culture Officer agreed to specifically look at retention data around this range.

The Chief Organisational Culture Officer advised that the reason for the 20% increase in FTE over the last five years was attributed to rising demand and previous cuts to resources. It was explained that additional resources were required to meet demand in various services, including children's services, adult social care, and legal teams.

Exit interviews: In response to questions the Chief Organisational Culture Officer advised that exit interviews could be with the line manager or HR or anonymously online. However, there was an issue on timeliness between being advised of someone's departure and them being present in the office to complete one due to annual leave etc., so this was being reviewed. In Children's Services face to face exit interviews were conducted with independent persons. However more data was required.

Sickness absence: In response to concerns about stress and anxiety among staff it was advised that there were efforts to understand and address the causes through data analysis and collaboration with public health and noted that both work-related and personal factors contributed to stress and anxiety.

In response to further questions, the Chief Organisational Culture Officer advised that a chatbot had recently been trialled to answer low level HR questions, as well as a 'wellbeing' chatbot which used medway wellbeing information as well as NHS sources. This would free up officer's time rather than be used as a replacement for officers. She did not see a need for pulling together lower levels activities into a higher paid position, instead there were just ways to work smarter.

Equality: In response to a query, it was explained that the need for comprehensive data ensured compliance with equality legislation and created a better understanding of the workforce and therefore where to prioritise resources, and this included sexual orientation.

Members noted the Joint Consultative Committee comments from the earlier meeting.

Decision

That the Workforce update 2024/25 and further supported data as set out in the Appendices to the report, be noted.

869 Revised Managing Sickness and Absence Policy

Discussion

The HR Business Partner introduced the report which advised the Committee of the revisions made during the review of the current Managing Sickness Absence Policy. Managing absence was a key area of focus and an organisational priority to support the health and wellbeing of the Council's workforce. A review of the policy and supporting guidance was required to further support employees both when they were absent and when they returned.

The Committee noted that if agreed, a suite of guidance and a programme of training for managers on identified key areas would be implemented alongside the launch of the revised policy which was planned for May 2025.

It was queried why there was no time limit for calling in sick and explained that best practice was to call in before an employee's shift started and ideally as soon as they knew they would not be able to attend work. It was suggested that guidance should be added for calling in sick within one hour of the shift start which the HR Business Partner said he would consider adding to the policy guidance. It was also suggested that further clarification might be required on voluntary roles and level of expenses paid almost equating to 'employment.'

Members noted the Joint Consultative Committee comments from the earlier Meeting, in particular the query raised by the UNISON representative as to the version of the policy being reviewed. The Chair moved that the Policy as amended be agreed subject to evidence being provided in a timely fashion.

Decision

- a) That the revised Managing Sickness and Absence Policy be adopted as set out at Appendix A to the report subject to
 - i) evidence being submitted that the version considered at Committee was not the current version. Such evidence to be submitted within two weeks of the meeting and the report to return to Committee if evidence was forthcoming.
 - ii) consistent language being added to the policy to ensure clarity that an employee could be accompanied by a Trade Union representative or a workplace colleague at every stage of the formal process.
 - iii) reference to the reasonable adjustments policy being made.
- b) That the implementation of a programme of training across the Council as set out in section 5.6. of the report, be agreed.

870 Reasonable Adjustments policy

Discussion

The HR Business Partner introduced the report which sought approval of a Reasonable Adjustments Policy, to ensure that all employees with disabilities were provided with appropriate adjustments to support their needs and enable them to perform their roles effectively.

It was noted that introducing a Reasonable Adjustments Policy would support compliance with legal requirements under the Equality Act 2010 and promote an inclusive and supportive working environment. The policy would help the Council to attract and retain talented individuals with disabilities and support requirements and work towards creating an equitable work environment for all.

The policy was welcomed, and it was suggested that cases that fell outside the eligibility criteria should form part of the monitoring process.

It was confirmed by the Chief Organisational Culture Officer that a request would not be prevented by lack of service area resource and that a centralised budget was being investigated.

Members noted the Joint Consultative Committee comments from the earlier meeting.

Decision

- a) That the introduction of a Reasonable Adjustments Policy as set out at Appendix A to the report, be approved, along with the implementation of the policy across all areas of the organisation.
- b) That the requirement for adequate training provision and awareness communications to allow managers and employees to have an informed insight into how the council would support those who required adjustments, be noted.

871 Maternity and Paternity Policy and the Parental Bereavement Leave Policy

Discussion

The HR Business Partner introduced the report which outlined the review and amendments to the Council's current Maternity and Paternity Policy and subsequent changes required to the Parental Bereavement Leave policy to support the amends.

It was noted that the review included the provision of neonatal leave and pay, a new right for parents of babies born on or after 6 April 2025 into the Maternity and Paternity Policy.

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Keeping in touch days: The HR Business Partner confirmed that keeping in touch days could only amount to 10 instances by law and could not be divided up to 20 half days for example.

Returning to work: Concern was expressed about the negative language which read as a deficit and seemed more appropriate for managerial guidance and training than a policy document. The HR Business Partner agreed with the comment and agreed to amend this.

Neonatal leave: It was noted that the requirement for a hospital stay of 7 days or longer to qualify for neonatal leave was as per the legislation, but this could be monitored and brought back to the Committee for further consideration if required.

Members noted the Joint Consultative Committee comments from the earlier meeting.

Decision

- a) That the revised Maternity and Paternity Policy and the revised Parental Bereavement Policy as set out at Appendices A and B respectively to the report, be approved to ensure adherence with new legislation regarding neonatal leave, subject to
 - i) Section 12 of the Maternity and Paternity Policy, Appendix A, being amended to read 'Miscarriage and Medical Termination'.
 - ii) Section 18 of the Maternity and Paternity Policy, Appendix A, being amended by removing emotive language and making more factual; and
 - iii) a data monitoring report being brought back to Committee after a year, on the application of Neonatal leave.
- b) That the enhancement of Neonatal Leave in relation to pay be approved, and noted that this enhancement would mean pay, as well as leave, was a day one right. This would mean that employees would not have to have met the qualifying period of 26 weeks continuous service to receive pay, and
- c) That the proposed enhancement to eligibility to Parental Bereavement Leave to include miscarriage and stillbirth before 24 weeks, be adopted.

872 Breastfeeding policy

Discussion

The HR Business Partner introduced the report which sought to introduce a Breastfeeding Policy to inform and support employees who were breastfeeding and wished to continue when returning to work. The policy would help to make

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sure the necessary accommodations were put in place, where possible, to enable continuation of breastfeeding upon returning to work. The policy aimed to help inform discussions between managers and employees during maternity leave to allow for provision to be made to support breastfeeding on a return to work.

It was suggested that the notice period for breastfeeding requests should be revised as this was an undue pressure on the mother to predict needs and wanted to ensure that adequate facilities included sinks and electrical sources within the private spaces and would welcome the Public Health Team's involvement. The HR Business Partner advised that the notice period was to try and ensure a timeframe and start a discussion but could consider the additional of the word 'ideally.' In relation to private spaces, the HR Business Partner advised that it would be difficult to ensure such facilities and limit possible locations but could form part of the risk assessment. He also confirmed that these requirements could be considered as part of the Gun Wharf renovation project.

It was also suggested that reference to impact on service delivery could clash with compassion and be a grey area that would require managerial training. The HR Business Partner advised that this was standard wording used in all policies as was about balancing with service delivery.

It was queried whether employees could bring their children in to be breastfed. The HR Business Partner agreed to include this clarification in the policy and emphasised the importance of risk assessments to ensure safety.

Members noted the Joint Consultative Committee comments from the earlier meeting.

Decision

- a) That the introduction of the Breastfeeding Policy as set out at Appendix A to the report be approved subject to:
 - i) including the word 'ideally' to paragraph 5.2, first bullet point with regards to the minimum the notice period; and
 - ii) additional wording to clarify the policy on children attending the workplace to be breastfed.
- b) That the implementation of the policy across all directorates and services, be supported.
- c) That the creation of breastfeeding-friendly spaces, where possible, and the communication of awareness programs, be supported.

873 Review of the Allocation of Committee Seats on Sub Committees and Working Groups

Discussion

The Committee considered the report which set out the outcome of a review of the allocation of seats following a change of political balance on the Council in February 2025.

Decision

That the allocation of seats for the Employment Matters Appeal Panel, Joint Consultative Committee and Equalities Working Group as set out in Appendix A to the report, be agreed for the remainder of the municipal year 2024/25.

874 Medpay Review: Outline of the approach to senior officer progression of pay

Discussion

The Chief Organisational Culture Officer introduced the report which introduced the MedPay Review principles for senior managers (Strategic Service Managers and Service Managers), to ensure that the senior officer pay scales were adjusted to align with the rest of the organisation to enable progression through the pay ranges, based on a career progression framework which would be developed.

A competency framework had been agreed in January 2025 at the Employment Matters Committee as a supporting document to enable development, however this does not enable progression through pay grades and further work now needs to take place to build the progression frameworks for senior managers. The framework aims to address historical problems and legacy issues, ensuring fairness and consistency in performance management and pay progression.

The proposal included a single progression opportunity per year for managers, with extensive performance management requirements.

It was noted that the Corporate Management Team's (CMT) preferred option was Option A, as this mirrored the three progression points of the rest of the organisation and provided continuity of one pay model for all colleagues. With an agreed understanding that there would be one opportunity per year for senior managers to apply for progression, possibly June, which aligned to the rest of the organisation, and it was accepted that progression within the range would be unlikely to happen every year for all, as it was based on performance and not time served. The budget for this work had already been agreed.

The Chief Organisational Culture Officer further explained the challenges of implementing multiple layers within the leadership roles and emphasized the need for a high-performing leadership layer and retaining and valuing the

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leadership layer. It was noted that the leadership layer was expected to be available 24/7 without additional pay or flexi time, which made progression into leadership roles less attractive.

The Committee considered the three different options presented. There was concern about the percentage increase in salary if the CMT preferred option was agreed. The Vice Chairperson suggested that option B might be the more pragmatic choice, agreeing with the need for a fair and consistent approach across the organisation. The Chairperson agreed and stated that he would move recommending option B.

Members also noted the Joint Consultative Committee comments from the earlier meeting.

Decision

- a) That the progress and direction for senior officers pay and performance management, be noted.
- b) That the development of a Career Progression Framework and salary scales for Assistant Directors and Deputy Directors should be undertaken concurrently but implemented subsequently by the Head of Paid Service, be noted.
- c) That the Committee recommend to Full Council Option B for pay progression (as set out in Appendix A to the report) so work could commence on building the professional frameworks for each area.

Chairperson

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