

Staff Consultative Panel

Minutes of a meeting of the **Staff Consultative Panel** held virtually via MS Teams remote meeting platform on **Monday 29 March 2021** at **3.00 pm**.

Present: **Councillors**

Chair David Nettleton (Employer's Side)

Vice Chair Mark Johnson (Employees' side)

Members (employer's side)

Carol Bull

John Griffiths

James Lay

Clive Springett

Ian Shipp

David Smith

Substitutes attending for a staff representative (employees' side)

Richard Smith

27. **Substitutes**

The following substitution was declared:

Richard Smith was substituting for Julie Roberts (Employees' side).

28. **Apologies for absence**

Apologies for absence were received from Lizzi Cocker, Penny Mills and Julie Roberts (Employees' Side).

29. **Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting held on 9 November 2020 were confirmed as a correct record.

30. **Workforce Overview (verbal)**

The Service Manager (Human Resources and Organisational Development) presented this item which provided a 'snapshot' of the West Suffolk Workforce Data as at 31 January 2020 and 31 December 2020.

The Panel discussed the data presented. Since the last update to the Panel, it was noted that there had been very little change to the Headcount and Full Time Equivalent (FTE) data. It was noted that the main differences in the data related to turnover, which had reduced to 6.11% (from 9.14%). This reduction was mainly attributed to the pandemic. The Council had continued to recruit throughout the last year via virtual processes. The stability of the

workforce was recognised, along with the support which the Council had provided to staff during the pandemic.

A further point of note was the reduction in sickness absence, which was at its lowest average of 5.19 days. Again, it was acknowledged that this may be due to much of the workforce continuing to work from home, which meant that they were able to work more flexibly around their sickness.

With there being no decision required, the Panel **noted** the update.

31. **COVID-19 Update (Verbal)**

The Service Manager (Human Resources and Organisational Development) provided the Panel with an update on how the Council was managing the effects of COVID-19 on its own workforce. The update covered the following areas:

- **Managing Vulnerability**

The Council continued to support its staff, who had been vulnerable due to health conditions, to work from home and had re-allocated tasks to others. Support was also provided to those staff who could not work from home and had to remain at home. During the third period of lockdown the Council had continued to support and work with staff, particularly with those who were advised that they were clinically extremely vulnerable.

As of 1 April 2021, those who had been advised to stay at home and could not work would be returning to roles which adhered to strict social distancing guidance.

- **Annual Leave Management**

Managing leave had been very well managed by staff who had engaged with the approach to taking leave throughout the year, with designated amounts of leave being taken for certain periods. A guide was set that all staff should have taken 17 days leave by the end of January 2021, with the normal ability to be able to carry forward the usual five days. Therefore, staff would not be carrying forward excessive amounts of leave into 2021/22.

- **Furlough Job Retention Scheme**

The Council had continued to operate the Furlough Job Retention Scheme, but only for those jobs which were income funded. Opportunities had been taken to flexibly furlough/redeploy staff where able to do so. The number of staff on Furlough would diminish alongside the Government's roadmap guidance.

- **COVID-19 Testing**

Staff working in the Offices were being encouraged to undertake lateral flow testing twice a week. A lateral flowing testing provision was also being provided, twice a week, at the West Suffolk Operational Hub. Unfortunately, it was not possible to roll this service out to the Council's smaller depots, as there were insufficient numbers of staff to be able to support this.

With there being no decision required, the Panel **noted** the update.

32. **West Suffolk Workforce Strategy Update (verbal)**

The Service Manager (Human Resources and Organisational Development) reported on the following actions within the strategic priorities of the West Suffolk Workforce Strategy:

- **Learning and Development**
The corporate training programme continued to be provided by virtual learning, with a greater number of on-line courses and training being made available to staff, for example, via 'Watch and Go' videos and free HM Government digital courses on a range of topics. With the current challenges around providing learning and development, staff had taken the opportunity to upskill and take responsibility for their own learning and development and had engaged in the different offers now available.
- **Equality and Diversity**
The local authorities across Suffolk had also been working together to deliver Equality and Diversity programmes/training. Work was in progress to finalise a video, which had been collectively developed, which highlighted some of the thinking and understanding around unconscious bias and stereotypical issues. Once available, the link to this video would be shared with the Panel.
- **Recruitment**
The recruitment process continued to be supported, with virtual recruitment being rolled out at all levels. A virtual Assessment Centre would be held on 31 March 2021 for recruitment to the forthcoming intern programme.
- **Redeployment and Secondments**
The approach to the utilisation of using the Council's own staff in redeployment and secondment had continued. This had mainly been in the provision of the response to Government initiatives and had also been used for other areas of service demand. The Council was also part of a Suffolk-wide resourcing cell, which met regularly to discuss and share resource demand for all parts of the sector, where able to do so.
- **Networking**
The level of networking across the Suffolk councils had enabled a strong focus on collective responses to some of the issues being experienced and had been invaluable during the current challenges.

In addition, the focus on health and wellbeing of the staff continued to be embraced and the Panel were also provided with an update on some of the health and wellbeing initiatives within the Council, which had centred around:

- Group support sessions
- Parent and carer support group
- Home and working alone support group
- Anglia Revenues Partnership support group (for those dealing with vulnerable and distressed clients)

- E-module training on suicide prevention
- Mental health support
- Domestic abuse awareness training/champions
- Joint pain advisors, including desk physio

The Panel also acknowledged the amount of work which had been undertaken with regards to the health and wellbeing support for staff.

With there being no decision required, the Panel **noted** the update.

33. **Health and Well-being Update (verbal)**

The Assistant Director (Human Resources, Legal & Democratic) provided a presentation to the Panel which outlined the findings from the West Suffolk Wellbeing Pulse Survey which had been undertaken in Autumn 2020 across the whole organisation. The Survey had covered the areas of:

- Workload and productivity
- Work life balance and wellbeing
- Working with others
- Feeling supported
- Working at home

There had been a 51% completion rate of the Survey across the organisation and a summary of the findings were:

- Wellbeing across the organisation was generally positive with regards to how people felt about the contribution they made to the organisation
- A mixed view around acceptable workload levels and how productive people felt.
- As was to be expected, staff had found working during a pandemic challenging and stressful.
- Mixed response with regards to effects on work life balance and wellbeing.
- Positive results with regards to feeling supported by others and management, but mixed response in how well staff felt listened to.
- Working from home had impacted on how people felt about their physical health and how well they were able to stay connected.
- Mixed response on the usefulness of the wellbeing initiatives which had been provided by the Council.

The main points to note/consider centred around:

- People felt engaged with the work and felt that their work was worthwhile and that there was a strong sense of support and positive relationships.
- There were a number of areas where personal responsibility needed to be embedded and leadership skills developed to support staff (ie wellbeing, workload, stress management).
- A need for on-going corporate wellbeing initiatives, working on cultural shift around ownership.
- Monitoring of workloads and resilience.
- Communication and engagement on working to a new 'normal'.

The staff also suggested various areas for improvement on:

- Future working practices and returning back to the office.
- Continued information on safe working practices and PPE.
- Leadership culture.
- On-going connectivity and leadership communications and continuation of opportunities to talk about wellbeing and stress.
- Support for teams where COVID-19 had increased their workload.

As was expected, there were various warnings signs raised within the Survey, which related to personal resilience, workloads, stress management and the continual need to connect and communicate.

Following on from this Survey, the organisation had responded by:

- Granting an additional day's leave (wellbeing day).
- Establishing Health and Wellbeing staff network/Wellbeing Champions to support the wellbeing programme.
- Organisation wide and leadership specific sessions.
- Responding to lockdown roadmap and plans for return to offices.
- Managers encouraged to review their service reports, develop team action plans and to have regular discussions on wellbeing.
- The HR Team were also undertaking various initiatives in response to the Survey, which included health and wellbeing initiatives, ways of working and training.

The Survey was currently being re-run and would close on 1 April 2021.

The Panel acknowledged the results from the Survey and the work which was being undertaken to try to address some of the issues identified. It would be particularly important to be aware of the warning signs which had been raised.

With there being no decision required, the Panel **noted** the update.

34. **Organisational Development Update (verbal)**

The Assistant Director (Human Resources, Legal & Democratic) provided a presentation to the Panel, which outlined the work being undertaken on the roadmap on returning back to the office (*#Work is an activity I do, rather than a place I go*).

It was anticipated that by 21 June 2021, COVID safe working practices would be revised in terms of the restrictions on social distancing and the impact on safe working practices in offices. This would mean that the office-based staff could transition from the current home working requirement to new agile ways of working. However, whilst planning for staff being able to return to offices in June 2021, this would be under review in accordance with the Government's timeframe for moving out of lockdown.

It was explained to the Panel about working differently in the future. It seemed that staff were looking for the following from their working environment:

- A hybrid working approach between home and office
- Ensuring the office provided social interaction and collaborative space
- A working environment that supported wellbeing and mental health

Home working would continue to be an important part of how the Council worked in the future. An agile working framework would be developed, along with ensuring the supporting of health and safety and data protection aspects of longer-term home working. The guidance would be reviewed as the roadmap was developed for future ways of working. There would be no fixed approach for how staff managed the balance between working at home and coming into the office. This would be left to the individuals and their managers to determine.

With regards to the redesigning of the desk space at West Suffolk House, there were plans to reduce the number of fixed desks available for staff. With the removal of these desks, there would be the opportunity for the creation of a flexible, collaborative working space for teams to utilise. Members would also be able to use these desks and participate in the collaborative working spaces.

The Panel also discussed the ability of continuing to hold virtual meetings, as the legislation was only in place until 6 May 2021. A Legal Challenge had been lodged with the High Court. However, if this legislation was not extended beyond this date, then plans would have to be formulated to the holding of Committee/Council meetings, in person, in a COVID safe environment.

With there being no decision required, the Panel **noted** the presentation.

35. **Dates of future meetings**

The Panel noted the dates for future meetings, as listed below. All dates were Mondays starting at 3pm. The venues would be determined nearer to each meeting:

- Monday 19 July 2021
- Monday 15 November 2021
- Monday 31 January 2022
- Monday 28 March 2022

Prior to the conclusion of the meeting, it was also reported that Mark Johnson (Vice Chair) would be retiring from the Council on 16 April 2021. Therefore, the Panel and Officers thanked Mark for all the work which he had undertaken in his role as UNISON Branch Chair and wished him well in his retirement. Mark thanked the Panel and Officers for their good wishes and expressed the importance of the work of UNISON within the Council, including having discussions with Members at these meetings.

The meeting concluded at 4.17 pm

Signed by:

Chair
