

## **HUMAN RESOURCES COMMITTEE**

Minutes of a Meeting of the HR Committee held in the Luttrell Room - County Hall, Taunton, on Tuesday 13 December 2022 at 2.00pm

**Present:** Cllr L Leyshon (Chair), Cllr E Pearlstone, Cllr L Redman, Cllr M Stanton, Cllr D Rodrigues, Cllr A Kendall, Cllr S Wakefield, Cllr S Ajula, Cllr D Fothergill, Cllr T Butt Philip (substitute for Cllr G Oakes).

**Committee members attending virtually:** Cllr A Dingwall, Cllr T Robbins

**Other Members present:** None

**Other members attending virtually:** Cllr R Woods, Cllr M Lovell.

**Absent:** Cllr M Healey

Cllr Liz Leyshon welcomed all to the meeting including members of the public and explained that she was chairing in her capacity as lead Member for Finance and Resources. She stated that this was the third monthly meeting of this Committee and that the Committee has powers delegated to it by Full Council in the area of human resources, meeting as and when required, reporting as necessary to Full Council. The principle functions of the Committee are to determine monitor, review and amend staffing policies and practices to secure the best use and development of the Council staff, including the power to deal with all matters relating to staff terms and conditions.

### **12. Apologies for absence – Item 1**

Cllr A Dingwall (also attending online), Cllr G Oakes (sent substitute), Cllr T Robbins.

### **13. Declaration of Interest – Item 2**

- a) Cllr Leyshon and Cllr Kendall declared a personal interest as members of the Local Government Pension Scheme.
- b) Cllr Dingwall declared that in relation to item 5 LGR HR Policies for Approval - Parental Bereavement Leave, he has raised a significant amount of money for charity fundraising.

### **14. Minutes from the previous meeting held on 17 November 2022 – Item 3**

The minutes were approved as a true and accurate record.

### **15. Public Question Time – Item 4**

There were no public questions, statements, or petitions.

### **16. LGR HR Policies for approval – Item 5**

The Chair welcomed the Director of Customers, Digital and Workforce – Chris Squire to the meeting and thanked him for his attendance at this busy time. The Officer introduced HR Policy and Projects Service Manager – Sarah Welland who highlighted the following:

- Summary table (appendix 1) with two categories of policies where those marked yellow shows no substantive changed from the existing policies to the proposed Somerset Council policy from April 2023; and those marked blue where there is a significant change to the existing policies or a contentious issue for consideration.
- Four 'yellow' policies were presented for discussion.
- **Parental Bereavement Leave Policy** – No district currently has a formal specific policy so the proposed policy is a continuation of the SCC policy. Questions were invited. A Councillor asked if this policy would be in addition to the maternity policy in the case of still birth. The Officer confirmed that was correct (see first paragraph) and also the Compassionate Leave Policy. It would also apply to late abortion. A Councillor asked for consideration in the policy of the increasing role that grandparents play in many children's lives and who may offer a large supporting role in such circumstances. The Officer agreed to consider the implications of grandparental leave and stated that compassionate leave would also apply. It was stated that such policies directly reflect the culture of an organisation and should direct the behaviour of managers. The Committee noted the new policy.
- **Fostering Policy** – No district has a formal policy so the working group has taken the existing SCC policy and worked with the Fostering Team to formulate the proposed policy offering 8 days paid leave (Sedgemoor previously offered 5 days, other districts did not specify). Questions were invited. A Councillor asked whether the policy offers 8 days per year in total and questioned how this would impact a short-term foster career with multiple placements over the course of a year. The Officer said that the policy currently reads as 8 days per child per year but that the impact of this would be considered and period of leave clarified to the committee at a future meeting. It was suggested that reference could also be made to the varying multiple fostering arrangements, including short-term arrangements such as respite care. Cllr Butt Philip declared an interest that he was being considered as a Special Guardian. The Chair stressed the importance of this policy, particularly with regard to the Council Tax 50% reduction for Foster Carers. A Councillor asked for an indication of how often foster parent leave had been granted and the level of leave required from a Foster Carers perspective. The Officer explained that these

discussions have taken place and that workplace data could be presented. A Councillor stated the need to offer adequate support to Foster Carers via uncomplicated guidelines. The Chair was in agreement with this suggestion and of managerial discretion. The Fostering Policy will be re-presented at a future meeting.

- **Disclosure Policy:** The proposed policy is primarily based on the Code of Practice and refers managers and other staff who are using the DBS checking system to the gov.uk guidance to ensure the most up to date guidance on disclosure. The Committee noted the policy.
- **Recruitment of Ex-offenders Policy:** The proposed policy is very similar to the existing SCC policy with a reference to acting as an umbrella body. Where this is the case, and access to DBS checks is given to non-registered organisations, those organisations would be required to have a clear and positive statement about the recruitment of ex-offenders, and also cover the issue in contractual arrangements. Questions were invited. A Councillor agreed that this policy represents a positive change and asked if recruiting managers, particularly when from districts with no pre-existing policy, would receive further data protection training to handle sensitive information. The Officer agreed to discuss the requirement with the Recruitment Team for recruitment of ex-offenders and also for disclosure. The Committee noted the policy.
- One 'blue' policy was presented for discussion.
- **Flexible Working Request Policy:** All existing districts and SCC were broadly in line with existing policies regarding employees right to request flexible working arrangements, a statutory entitlement, which require a minimum of 26 weeks service before a request can be made, with SCC having a day one right to request flexible working. It is likely that the statutory right will reduce to day one, and it is proposed that Somerset Council allow requests to be made from day one as a flexible employer in line with the current employment market. The substantive change to the policy is the removal of information regarding business-led request from an employer, with the policy retaining employees' rights to request flexible working. Questions were invited. A Councillor asked for clarification of flexible working, hybrid working arrangements and contractual home-working, and whether reference should be made that this is an employees' personal choice whether or not to request flexible working. The Officer referred to current work of the Dynamic Ways of Working Strategy which relates to an employee working where work is best completed, not necessarily where the employee chooses. Benefits of working from home or from different locations can be great for employees and employers, particularly in terms of morale and motivation, which has been particularly

important for social workers. Dynamic Ways of Working enables discussion where employees are reluctant to be office-based to determine the best location for work to be completed. Examples were given of work best completed at home such as report writing and online meetings, and tasks best completed in the office such as staff supervision. Evidence shows that the quality of supervision has declined in the pandemic, where emotional connections and interventions were not taking place. The policy offers a consistent approach across the five to enable sensible discussions to allow the continuation of some of the huge benefits of home working to without this becoming a fundamental right. Pilots are taking place in a number of areas which currently involve teams agreeing effective ways of working and then developing a charter to document this. With the re-opening of B Block, there is now a genuine choice of work location. A Dynamic Ways of Working Policy will be formulated in the coming months. The Officer stated that dynamic working can allow greater accessibility and equal opportunities for employees which is clearly documented by other organisations. A Councillor asked for data on the present level of flexible working within SCC, post-pandemic. The Officer agreed to provide data from HR Advisory in terms of number of flexible working requests and what proportion are supported. It is thought that the vast majority of employees are working flexibly. A Councillor asked for clarification on flexible working patterns. The Officer explained that this is how an employee chooses to complete their contracted hours, for example, a full time employee may choose to work three long days and two shorter days, or extend their work hours over nine days a fortnight. In general, working pattern is a contractual arrangement and dynamic working is how you approach those hours such as occasional evening working hours, offset by a later morning start as a short term response. The Officer stated that management of recording work hours can be administratively heavy. A Councillor asked how this is monitored to ensure employees are not working additional hours over contract, and if devices can track work hours. The Officer stated that this is an area that managers are expected to manage as part of regular line management supervision, and that staff are not centrally monitored routinely but that this can be done if required. An awareness of excessive working hours is important to safeguard employees. It was noted that a large amount of unpaid additional hours are currently being worked as part of LGR. A Councillor re-iterated that there must be high regard for employee wellbeing at all times. Reference was made to employee email signatures where it is stated that emails may be sent out of usual working hours but that a reply is not expected until the recipients usual work pattern. A Councillor expressed concern about

informal dynamic ways of working arrangements and questioned the development of a policy as opposed to a culture of permissive dynamic working in a tribunal situation. The Officer explained that the Dynamic Working Strategy also considers travel and climate change for example. The Officer confirmed that the policy relates to the statutory right to make a request for flexible working. There was support for the policy and the right to request flexible working from day one as a general improvement in the culture of the new council. There was however, concern about the LGR pressures that some staff are finding themselves under. It was agreed that the culture of the new council should be set from day one and should draw good practice from all five councils. Work on culture, including the workshops has the full support of the Chief Executive which will continue after Vesting Day. The Officer explained that some HR functions will migrate to Microsoft Dynamics (from SAP). The Committee unanimously approved the policy. The Chair thanked the Officers for attending and for their committed work.

**The members of the HR Committee formally approved the new employment policies which meet the previously agreed criteria for use in the new Somerset Council with effect from 1 April 2023.**

**The members of the HR Committee noted for information purposes only, the new policies listed, fall into the category of being a change to one or more of the District Council's existing policies, but no significant change to the existing SCC policy.**

## **17. LGR People Workstream Update**

The Committee received a presentation from the Director of Customers, Digital and Workforce – Chris Squire as the Lead Officer of the LGR People Workstream.

The following points were highlighted:

- Behaviours and Cultures – The progress of Culture Workshops have been affected by staffing capacity where staff resources have been prioritised to payroll, appointments, day one readiness etc but continue to receive the full support of the Chief Executive. There are plans for two further Culture Workshops ahead of Vesting Day with work also continuing in the new authority. 50+ Culture Navigators will continue their role particularly with the Dynamic Working Strategy
- Diversity and Inclusion – A small number of policies have been sent to the Joint Negotiation Forum and to trade union colleagues. All current

accreditations, such as disability and gender equality are being checked to ensure post-Vesting statutory reporting on gender pay gap for example. Tier 2 and tier 3 appointments are taking place imminently following Members equalities training. In addition, Health and Safety training and guidance will be added to the online training portal, TLC as well as Be Safe for risk management. Loan worker protection device contracts will be merged and remain an option for elected Members as well as for staff to raise an alarm in an emergency situation. Information is currently being collated about the H&S function in each of the districts (whether centralised in the district or service specific) to enable assessment of future need, with further training.

- Wellbeing and Ways of Working – Work is being undertaken with Public Health on a Staff Volunteering Policy, Substance Misuse Policy as well as the Health and Wellbeing Survey to be rolled out to NHS organisations and care providers. In addition, there early conversations with providers regarding gym memberships and other benefits. Work is also being done with Property Services looking at the provision of office space including possible surplus desks and chairs, with links to the Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP). Work is also considering at a car-parking offer to staff to look for some equity from 1 April for all employees, and the subsequent impact on culture, morale and motivation from an unequal offer. A Councillor asked for such discussions which raise an engaged response, to be brought to Committee.
- Employee Cost of Living Support – There are now a small number of designated desks that staff can confidentially book to guarantee an office workspace if employees are struggling with household heating bills. These 'warm desks; are being well used.
- Organisational Development – All districts are now on the learning management system provided by government, with an upturn in non-mandatory training which has broadly been well-received by staff. An Employee Support Toolkit is being written to include guidance on wellbeing, resilience, interview training, CV writing and other skills. The 30-day consultation on the new organisation structure has now closed whereby all staff were invited to comment on the proposed structure. The Chief Executive is responding to these personally. The Appointments Panel have met to agree job descriptions, salary levels, interview processes and other details, ahead of the Appointments Committees that will involve members, stakeholders and trade union reps for internal appointments. A matching process will then be undertaken where an employee can be considered for a new position where they believe their current role is a 75% or greater match. A Councillor asked if the stakeholder involvement

would be decided by the Appointments Committee. The Officer confirmed that this will be discussed at the Appointments Committee meeting on 22 December. A Councillor asked whether all recruitment would be internal. The Officer replied that following advice, the initial focus would be on internal staff to fill vacancies. The Officer stated that each Appointment Committee is not obliged to appoint. If no appointment is made, the post will go to external advertisement without delay. There is an implication of later start dates with external appointments. In this situation, an acting up arrangement would be likely, filled by an officer due to leave, to allow tier 3 recruitment and a team to be built.

- All districts will be paid via SAP by the end of December. All vacancies (districts and SCC) are now on single platform. Temporary labour contract has been awarded and will be operational for SCC from January 2023 and training for District managers will take place ahead of April.
- There was discussion about the concerns around delays to the culture work. Work is still to be completed on pay grade systems with early conversations with trade unions taking place.
- The Chair acknowledged the extreme workload and the commitment of staff. It was also acknowledged that LGR presents many opportunities for service improvement.
- A Councillor asked for recognition of the new Armed Forces Covenant and questioned whether this new legal duty will be taken into full consideration. The Chair confirmed this would be fully considered.
- The Chair wished for the Committee's sincere thanks to be passed to workforce colleagues who have been working on policies, strategies and other work.
- The Chair thanked all present for attending.

### **19. Any other urgent items of business**

There were no items of urgent business.

All Councillors wished to record thanks to all staff in their commitment to the additional work of LGR.

Meeting closed at 3.32pm