

**POLICY AND CORPORATE RESOURCES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**  
**Monday 11th September 2023**

**PRESENT** – Councillor Kevin Connor (in the Chair) Councillors Liddle, Taylor, Hussain S, Slater N and Floyd.

**ALSO PRESENT** – Officers – Tony Watson, Jill Readfern, Ros Billingham and Phil Llewellyn.

**RESOLUTIONS**

**6. Welcome and Apologies**

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting.

Apologies were received from the Chair, Councillor Tony Humphrys, and from Councillors Fielding and Fazal.

**7. Minutes of the meeting held on 17<sup>th</sup> July 2023**

The Minutes of the meeting held on 17<sup>th</sup> July 2023 were submitted for approval.

Councillor Neil Slater indicated that he had asked the Executive Member for Finance & Governance, Councillor Vicky McGurk for a breakdown of all assets sold and their value, since 2016, at the last meeting, which had not been reflected in the Minutes, and he had also not received the requested breakdown. Whilst those in attendance could not recall hearing or witnessing this request, it was agreed that this would be noted and the request passed to the Executive Member.

**RESOLVED** – That the Minutes of the meeting held on 17<sup>th</sup> July 2023 be approved as a correct record, with the inclusion of Councillor Neil Slater's comments.

**8. Declarations of interest**

No Declarations of interest were submitted.

**9. Sickness Absence – April 2018 to March 2023**

As agreed at the last meeting, the main agenda item was Sickness Absence, and Jill Readfern delivered a presentation that detailed staff absence data from April 2018 to March 2023.

The presentation highlighted the following key information:

- The average number of days absence per employee in the 5 year period was 9.33 days
- The total number of days lost were 96,081.30 days

- The total cost was £11,457,216
- It was hard to compare to other Councils in Lancashire, such as the other Unitary Councils as there was not comparator information available, as other LA's do not always share data and the other comparators were District Councils that did not have the breadth of services provided by BwDBC.
- The top reason for absence across the period was stress, depression & anxiety, with Covid-19 being the highest in 2020-2021
- Proactive Wellbeing Support is in place, including 80 Mental Health First Aiders and Wellbeing Champions, and support relating to Menopause.
- The current support for staff is also available from EAP (Employee Assistance Provider) and Able Futures
- Challenges, in particular, the impact of Covid-19, and issues relating to Occupational Health
- Management Development for attendance management and awareness of Absence Impact are ongoing

Following the presentation, Members asked a number of questions or made statements on the topic, and these fell under the following areas:

- The breakdown of absence data between Clerical and Manual Staff – Jill Readfern agreed to look at this and provide details to Members.
- Return to Work interviews – frequency and how these were conducted, with Jill Readfern advising that the Managers were required to complete these before closing off absences and within 5 days of a return to work.
- Non-teaching school staff were not included in the absence data, as they were paid from School budgets.
- Absences were now dealt with in stages, rather than being time bound, which reduced the opportunity to have confusion in the system and to remove the punitive impression of warnings.
- Long Term Absences (over 20 days or more) over the last two years – Jill agreed to provide this information to Members.
- Occupational Health Service – the issues with the service were noted, including generic reports, and it was felt that the hours of the Council's own part time in-house Occupational Health Advisor could be increased and that the increased cost would potentially be offset by improved attendance.
- The importance of having the right staff in the right jobs – recruitment to the Council's TRACK values was assisting this, as well as the usual probation periods for new staff. It was also felt important that as Manual staff got into their 50's that their roles could be reviewed, as happened in the Environment Department, with staff being moved to less physically demanding service areas, as appropriate.
- Office based staff who had Covid-19 symptoms, but were able to work, were encouraged to stay at home and these type of cases were not reflected in absence statistics.
- 1,817 days had been lost to Covid-19 in 2022-23.
- Sickness absence had been better handled in the period around 2016-18, when there was dedicated staff in HR to project manage it, with HR contacting the absent staff on day 1 asking what support the individual needed

- Whilst there was a lot of activity and targeted support, the Chair was concerned about its effectiveness, and indicated that the Unions had an integral part to play, and were a very important part of the process, and stressed the need for flexibility.
- Mental Health/Neuro-Diversity and the Menopause needed a proactive focus, before people needed to access Mental Health First Aiders.
- Managers had a crucial role in the absent management process, but were being pulled in many different directions.

Ros Billingham, on behalf of the Joint Unions, submitted a list of questions and comments, and Jill Readfern agreed to respond to these, and Phil Llewellyn would then circulate the responses to the Committee.

In anticipation of the next meeting, which would focus on Finance, Councillor Neil Slater requested that the Executive Member for Finance & Governance update the Committee at that meeting on the current forecasted overspend of £1.7M which he indicated that the Executive Member has stated would be met by in-house savings rather than use of Reserves. Tony Watson advised that there would be a comprehensive budget update at the next meeting, which would contain information on plans to meet overspends.

#### **RESOLVED-**

1. That Jill Readfern be thanked for the detailed information presented;
2. That Officers be requested to provide information on the breakdown of absence data between Clerical and Manual Staff, and of Long Term Absences (over 20 days or more) over the last two years, and provide answers to the questions presented by the Unions;
3. The Committee recommend that consideration be given to increasing the hours of the Part-time in-house Occupational Health Advisor, and also that the arrangements relating to Occupational Health support be reviewed;
4. The Committee recommend that more proactive support be given in regard to Mental Health/Neuro-Diversity and the Menopause needed a before people needed to access support such as Mental Health First Aiders; and
5. The Committee recommend that consideration be given to re-introducing dedicated HR support to project manage sickness absence.

Signed: .....

Date: .....

Chair of the meeting  
at which the minutes were confirmed