

GENERAL PURPOSES COMMITTEE

Minutes of the meeting held on 4 November 2022 at 12.00 pm in Council Chamber, Council Offices, Cecil Street, Margate, Kent.

Present: Councillor Ash Ashbee (Chair); Councillors Albon, Austin, J Bayford, R Bayford, Ovenden, Rawf, D Saunders, M Saunders and Wright

19. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillor Everitt and Councillor Stuart Piper.

20. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

21. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

Councillor David Saunders proposed, Councillor Austin seconded and Members agreed the minutes as a correct record of the General Purposes Committee meeting that was held on 5 July 2022.

22. HR POLICY REVIEW - PHASE ONE

Sonia Godfrey, HR Manager and Ffion Pepper, HR Business Partner introduced the report and made the following points:

- The HR function was brought back in-house in September 2021;
- The HR team has been working on the review of a number of HR Policies;
- The team used best practice in producing the policies and uses best practice to support managers and staff;
- Each of the reviewed policies had guidance notes for reference and a key points section for highlighting the main aspects of the policy;
- In the new policy it has been clarified at which stages of the process staff have a right to be accompanied by a colleague or union member to a hearing;
- The new policy now had a process for dealing with absence from work, removing it from the disciplinary process;
- The new Grievance Policy now had a section dealing with vexatious complaints;
- The informal process for disciplinary matters was now less prescriptive to remove any confusion the previous arrangement might have caused.

The Chair thanked officers for the report and detailed policy documents which were more advanced in detail than the previous policies. Members made comments and asked questions as follows:

- Managing staffing matters through an appropriate HR policy was one of the issues that had been raised by the Section 24 report;
- The challenge with the informal process of a disciplinary procedure was making it work;
- HR team was asked to take that issue away and find ways of ensuring that the informal process will work in the new policy;
- With regards to bullying, managers should conduct their behaviour and lead by example, i.e. respectful behaviour. Could this wording be added to the Bullying and Harassment Policy? The language used in this part of the policy should be supportive rather than disciplinary;

- Was there no member involvement even at a senior management level?
- One Member said that the language used in the documents was fair;
- Robust policies were necessary to manage discipline in an organisation;
- Another Member said that both staff and trade unions were happy with the draft policy;
- Has this policy been run past ACAS?
- S151 Officer, Monitoring Officer and CEx arrangements were outside this HR Policy and were covered in separate arrangements. Were these arrangements in place?
- Annex 2, para 5: Would it help if there was a specific form that could be logged to capture information coming in?
- Could there also be an official form for the formal procedure described in para 10.3?
- Why was bullying not listed as part of whistleblowing?

Ffion Pepper, Sonia Godfrey, Hannah Thorpe and the Chair responded to Member comments and questions as follows:

- Officers could have a look at the language used in the absence management policy. However it was worth noting that the language used in the policy should be able to manage expectations between both staff and managers;
- Since the HR function was brought back in-house, the General Purposes committee would be the interface between Members and staff;
- The role of GPC was to ensure that HR procedures were followed when managing staff matters;
- The Head of Paid Services would administer the HR Policy;
- The policy was there to protect the council as much as it would protect staff;
- The language used in policy documents should therefore be succinct;
- The proposed HR Policy was in line with ACAS best practice;
- The HR team had consulted with trade unions, staff and colleagues around Kent;
- HR were currently working with managers to ensure that cases were handled appropriately;
- Statutory officers were in theory covered by the disciplinary process in this policy but it needs to be in a separate policy. This was work to be done by the HR team;
- Officers would look into the issue of having the forms as requested by Members;
- Bullying was previously listed under Dignity at Work. This time it will be covered under Bullying and Harassment;
- Bullying would only become part of whistleblowing if it was widespread with the organisation or if a victim was not reporting the case;
- HR will role this policy out through informing managers and staff. Soft messaging will be used to send around the corporate message to staff.

Councillor Ashbee proposed, Councillor Bob Bayford seconded and Members UNANIMOUSLY agreed to adopt the revised HR policies with effect from 1 December 2022.

Meeting concluded: 12.41 pm