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Bristol City Council Minutes of the Human Resources Committee (Remote/Virtual Meeting)

17 December 2020 at 10 am



Members Present: -

Councillors: Richard Eddy, Gary Hopkins, Ruth Pickersgill, Paula O'Rourke, Jon Wellington (Chair)

Officers in Attendance: - Mark Williams (Head of Human Resources), Mark Jefferson (Workforce Analytics Manager), Stephanie Griffin (Head of Internal Communications and Organisational Development), Steve Gregory (Democratic Services)

1. Welcome, Introductions and Safety Information

The Chair welcomed all parties to the meeting and introductions were made. The Chair set out the process about the meeting being held via Zoom facility.

2. Changes to Membership

Following the resignations of two Councillors during the municipal year, a review had taken place of the proportionality and representation of different political groups and changes to committee memberships. This was approved at Full Council on 10 November 2020.

The updated membership of the Human Resources Committee was now as listed below.

Councillors Richard Eddy, Gary Hopkins, Jeff Lovell, Ruth Pickersgill, Paula O'Rourke, Jon Wellington.

Members noted the update.

3. Apologies for Absence

No apologies had been received.

Councillor Jeff Lovell was not present.

4. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

5. Minutes of the previous meeting

Resolved – that the Minutes of the previous meeting held on 24 September, 8 October and 29 October 2020 be agreed as a correct record.

6. Public Forum

None received.

7. Work Programme

The Committee received and noted the updated Work Programme for 2020/21.

Additional points made/clarified –

- a) Possibly reduce number of items for next meeting as five might be too many;
- b) HR Committee Terms of Reference to be considered informally by all HRC members after the next HR agenda meeting in January;
- c) SLG meeting to be arranged in the new year;
- d) Report on Senior Management Structure review, from last four years to present, to be brought to a future meeting of the HR Committee.

8. Recruitment update

The Committee received a detailed report from the Director of Workforce and Change updating on the work of the HR recruitment team on recruitment since it was last reported to the Committee in December 2019.

The Committee's attention was specifically drawn to the following points –

1. The diversity of the organisation was a key priority of the new Workforce Strategy and the advancing Equalities Action Plan, this was being achieved through attracting, promoting and retaining diverse talent;
2. Since the last report significant progress had been made with an increase in the appointments of women and those who had identified as being from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic and LGBT groups. There had been a reduction in the number of appointments from those who identified themselves as Disabled but the rate of internal career progression for Disabled employees had improved;
3. There had recently been a 33% reduction in the amount of recruitment taking place across the organisation, in response recruitment processes had been strengthened to ensure that diverse talent from under-represented groups would be attracted. As part of this work the requirement for employees to secure managerial approval to apply for secondments had been removed;
4. The recruitment advertising contract for 2021 had been recommissioned to deliver social value, expert diversity knowledge and cost efficiencies;
5. The Covid-19 situation had a significant impact on the recruitment process significantly reducing the turnover rate and the work being done on the diversity of the workforce. However overall, the work had made positive progress.

Key points highlighted during discussion were –

- a) With regard to the recruitment of people with criminal records the Head of Human resources stated that the Council was the first local authority to ‘ban the box’ in 2018 so that job applicants were not required to disclose any convictions until the end of the selection process. By end of 2019 the Council had employed twenty-five employees who had a previous criminal record;
- b) The apparent significant decrease in the application numbers of disabled candidates had, following further investigation, revealed issues in relation to the recent implementation of the Council’s new i-Trent recruitment system. The Head of HR stated that the report would be adjusted accordingly, and future reporting would be accurate;
- c) The Council regularly audited its recruitment process including that relating to ‘Headhunting’. The Council’s agent for this group, ‘Guidant’, had a good track record of securing the best candidates and performance of this was routinely monitored;
- d) Managers were trained to ensure mitigation of unconscious bias within the recruitment process. Other mitigations included the use of ID number for candidates with names not being seen by selection panels until the interview process had begun;
- e) Timescales for the recruitment process varied between work areas with some areas apparently taking significantly longer which had an impact on existing staff and workloads. A member suggested that formal targets could perhaps be instigated to improve the timeliness of the recruitment process. After further discussion it was agreed that a report be brought to the HR Committee in the new municipal year to identify areas where the recruitment process was slower with a view to exploring remedies. This was agreed. **Action: Head of HR to include in Work Programme for next municipal year;**
- f) Declaration of disability, religion and ethnicity could be misleading depending on how people described themselves and that some candidates preferred not to give full details. It was acknowledged that this could miss important trends and that appropriate amendments should be made in future to improve on accuracy of reporting;
- g) Regarding secondments, no longer requiring approval from a line manager, the process had commenced in July 2020 and there was some evidence that the new scheme was working well. Future reporting would provide more granular detail to identify trends amongst groups of employees eg, ethnic groups.

Resolved – That the content of the report be noted.

(Councillor Eddy left the meeting at this point)

9. 2020 Employee Engagement Survey

The Committee received a detailed report from the Head of Internal Communications and Organisational Development updating the Committee on the results of the 2020 employee survey and the interim wellbeing surveys undertaken during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Committee noted in particular –

1. That the Survey had been conducted in March 2020 and therefore provided a snapshot of views prior to the pandemic, and that the lockdown was announced whilst the survey was open;
2. That the percentage of colleagues who had responded positively had increased for every question. This was a direct result of the work of colleagues across the organisation to address the areas identified for improvement following the 2019 survey;
3. That during the pandemic period two interim surveys were also undertaken to try and understand how employees were coping with the new working arrangements that had been implemented and what further support might be needed. The information gained would be used to develop employee's health and wellbeing and help shape plans for future workplace arrangements;
4. There had been an improvement in all areas compared to the last survey;
5. That further work was needed in building confidence in the senior leadership team. Whilst the results had improved significantly on last year, they were lower than the results for line managers. In response the senior leadership team had been working hard to connect with staff eg visiting sites, attending Zoom team meetings, hosting webinars, writing thankyou letters to all staff, blogs each week from Directors. An interim survey had since found that confidence in the senior leadership team had improved.

Key points highlighted during discussion were –

- a) That small gestures had made a large impact on the overall morale of employees;
- b) The number of performance reviews and 1-2-1's was lower than expected, partly attributable to the Covid-19 impact, however interim work had shown they had since increased. It was acknowledged that more work was needed to improve on this area of performance;
- c) Regarding survey questions in relation to protected characteristics, members were advised that there was an option for employees to select the 'not applicable' option so that the data was reflective of the relevant group, but more work would be done to improve on this;
- d) Whistleblowing was a new question this year and the relatively low confidence in the process had demonstrated that more work was needed to raise awareness. This would include focus groups to find out the reasons for the low confidence results so this could be fed into the ongoing work to address employee concerns;
- e) Future surveys would include comparisons from previous years so that trends could be identified and where necessary addressed.

Resolved – That the 2020 Employee Engagement Survey update be noted.

10. Covid-19 – workforce update

The Committee received an update report from the Director Workforce and Change in respect of the Covid-19 crisis which had been identified as the most significant incident the Council had faced in living memory and to which it had responded quickly and effectively.

The Committee noted that –

1. Comprehensive advice to all employees and voluntary workers on health and safety implications had been given and was updated regularly in line with national advice;
2. Currently 81 employees had been redeployed from their substantive jobs to support the Council's response to the crisis;

3. 283 employees had been furloughed through the national retention scheme which had been introduced on 1 November 2020 and an additional 69 casual workers had been included in the scheme;
4. Fast track testing had been introduced for all critical workers and staff in schools who were found to be symptomatic.

Key points highlighted during discussion were –

- a) Employment records were kept of all employees and volunteers both within the Council and external organisations regarding where they had been redeployed to and what they had done so that this could be used to support their career development opportunities in the future;
- b) Vaccinations of key workers was driven by national policy and this primarily included health and social care workers. Concern was expressed that higher death rates had occurred amongst some blue-collar workers eg taxi drivers and security/caretaker staff. The Head of HR confirmed that the Council did not have any control over the process but undertook to investigate the matter to see if there was any way this could be improved upon.

Resolved – That the Covid-19 update report be noted.

CHAIR

Meeting ended at 11.25 am