

Minutes of the meeting of the Corporate Policy and Scrutiny Committee, held in Committee Room 1, County Hall, Chelmsford, CM1 1QH on Tuesday 25 June 2019

Present

Cllr M Mackrory (Chairman)

Cllr R Pratt

Cllr M Buckley

Cllr A Sheldon

Cllr M Garnett

Cllr M Steptoe

Cllr J Moran

Cllr J Young (Vice-Chair)

Apologies

Cllr M Hardware

Cllr V Metcalfe

Cllr W Schmitt

Richard Buttress, Democratic Services Manager was supporting the meeting.

1. Membership, Apologies and Declarations

Apologies were received from Cllr Hardware and Cllr Metcalfe.

There were no substitutions.

2. Minutes of previous meeting

The minutes of the meeting held on Tuesday 28 May 2019 were approved by the committee as an accurate and signed by the Chairman.

3. Questions from the public

There were no questions from the public received.

4. Absence and Absence Management

Cllr M Mackrory welcomed Cllr M Durham, Deputy Cabinet Member for Customer, Corporate Culture and Communities and Pam Parkes, Director for Organisation Development and People attended to the meeting.

Pam Parkes provided the following introduction:

- This report gave the opportunity to consolidate a number of things that are being worked on in terms of capturing data around employee sickness absence
- It was disappointing that Essex County Council (ECC) only received 'limited assurance' following an internal audit on sickness absence. Four areas were identified as requiring improvement:
 1. Poor technology and management behaviours towards recording and managing sickness absence.

2. Not all sickness absences were recorded and is therefore not a true reflection of ECC's sickness absence performance.
 3. There was a 7.6% year on year increase in absences relating to stress, depression and mental health.
 4. The management of individuals triggering the absence processes to formal casework are lower than expected and improved guidance for managers around the management of sickness absence is required.
- ECC will remain with TCS for another year until the contract expires. It is not an intuitive system and cannot provide informative reports for manager
 - Once the technology has improved, the reporting and recording of sickness absence will improve across ECC
 - ECC is not competent at drawing up effective I.T specifications.

The committee noted that it was interesting to see the differences across service areas within ECC.

ECC have an obligation under law to identify whether or not stress is attributed to an employee's work environment.

The figures provided in the report do not identify what the causes of stress related absence are. If it relates to their line manager then the matter is referred to HR if changes to line management are not possible.

Evidence provided from the Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) and other data suggest that work related stress has peaked in the last two years as a result of organisational redesign, change in roles and poor I.T resources.

The lack of ability to provide high quality I.T services to employees can be stressful.

It was also noted that society and life in general is more stressful than in previous years.

Formal absence is defined as a planned absence – e.g. knee/hip replacement, planned treatment for recognised illnesses. Informal absence occurs for infrequent absences such as headaches, migraines.

ECC previously had its own in-house counselling service where employees were offered an initial six sessions of counselling. This service was admirable but costly and this is now only available to those employees who work in the most stressful of environment (social care). There is also a management referral for those employees who work in social care roles. For all other employees, they have access to a telephone service through the EAP.

Heads of service and director roles have access to private healthcare.

As a result of ECC's flexible approach to working, there are instances where employees decide to work from home instead of taking a day off sick. This is agreeable at the discretion of the line manager.

ECC have only been able to track sickness absence management from early 2019 due to the new system being implemented.

There needs to be very clear standards for sickness absence reporting, particularly around return to work meetings. Managers need to be supported by the organisation.

An employee corporate wellbeing survey was undertaken in April 2019 and received 800 responses. The survey was randomly sent to 2000 employees. This does not replace the staff survey, of which the next one is due to be carried out in January 2020.

There are 1000 employees in a team leader/managerial position. Cllr Moran offered to share his training experiences from the Metropolitan Police with Pam Parkes.

There needs to be very clear standards for sickness absence reporting e.g. return to work meetings. ECC is working with managers to ensure they are sufficiently supported.

ECC's sickness absence levels for 2018/19 equates to 8 days a year per FTE which in terms of cost is £4m.

It is important to have the right interventions around mental health, wellbeing, physical activity and food choices.

Actions

1. Comparative data between 2017/18 – 2018/19 to be provided on absences attributed to stress, depression and mental health.

5. Work Programme

The updated work programme was noted by the committee.

6. Date of next meeting

The date of the next meeting will be held on Tuesday 30 July 2019 at 10:30am.

7. Urgent business

No urgent business was received.

8. Urgent exempt business

No urgent exempt business was received.

The meeting closed at 12:01pm.

Chairman