

**The Highland Council**  
**Audit and Scrutiny Committee**  
**Scrutiny Working Group**

Minutes of Meeting of the **Scrutiny Working Group** held in Committee Room 1, Council Headquarters, Glenurquhart Road, Inverness on Friday, 13 February 2015 at 2.00pm.

**Present:**

Mrs M Davidson  
Mr B Fernie

Mr M Reiss  
Mr C Fraser

**Officials in attendance:**

Mr N Rose, Head of Audit and Risk Management  
Ms D Sutherland, Audit and Risk Manager  
Ms E Barrie, Human Resources Manager  
Miss C Maragh, Administrative Assistant

**Mr B Fernie in the Chair**

**Business**

**1. Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were intimated on behalf of Mr I Brown, Mr A Mackinnon, Mr T Prag, Mr G Rimell, Mr R Saxon and Mrs G Sinclair.

**2. Declaration of Interest**

The following declaration of interest was **NOTED** at the meeting -

Item 4 – Mr M Reiss (financial)

**3. Minutes of Meeting**

There had been circulated the Minutes of the last Meeting held on 20 November 2014 - which were **APPROVED** – subject to confirmation that these Minutes (and the Minutes of all future meetings of the Group) would be submitted to the next scheduled meeting of the Audit & Scrutiny Committee in each case.

**4. Managing Staff Absences**

**Declaration of Interest: Mr M Reiss declared a financial interest in this item on the grounds of a family member being an employee of Highland Council but, having applied the test outlined in Paragraphs 5.2 and 5.3 of the Councillors' Code of Conduct, concluded that his interest did not preclude his involvement in the discussion.**

There had been circulated Report No. SWG/1/15 dated 9 February 2015 by the Head of Audit and Risk Management which provided an outline of how the Scrutiny

Working Group's review of the Council's arrangements for managing sickness absence would be progressed.

During discussion, Members raised the following issues:-

- in considering the Council's Attendance Management Policy, it was also important to provide a focus on health and wellbeing issues which were an integral part of the process;
- communication with staff and the trade unions had to be undertaken as part of the scrutiny exercise as the latter in particular had been very supportive of the Council in terms of focusing on the wellbeing of employees and assisting wherever possible in ensuring a successful return to the workplace;
- in terms of the Induction process, it was important that all employees were required to sign a checklist to confirm that they had been advised of relevant procedures by Line Managers and it was suggested that it would be helpful if a copy of the main points of the online policy could be circulated to the Group;
- in terms of Implementation of the Policy, and specifically Recording & Analysis, it would perhaps be more appropriate to make reference to 'quarterly' reviews (as opposed to 'regular' reviews) as this more correctly reflected current practice;
- in regard to Managing Attendance Checklist, it would be helpful to have more information on the arrangements in place to record and monitor sickness absence and on 'return to work' interviews undertaken with employees within Council Services;
- in relation to Sickness Reporting and Certification, and particularly the length of time in which employees were able to self-certify, it was acknowledged that this was often due to GP requirements;
- in respect of absence due to alcohol and/or drugs, it was suggested that the wording in the current policy could perhaps be strengthened to allow for more robust and immediate action to be taken if required;
- in discussion on Mental Health issues it was acknowledged this is a complex area which can be difficult for managers and staff;
- it would be helpful to see statistics in regard to Unauthorised Absences within the Council;
- it would also be useful if further information could be provided on Frequent Short Term Absence and Long Term Sickness Absence;
- in regard to Termination of Employment due to Ill Health, and specifically Dismissal on the Grounds of Capability, it would be helpful if further information could be provided to highlight how such cases were dealt with within the Council;
- in stressing the importance of the Group being satisfied that the current policy and procedures were operating effectively, it was suggested that more detail was required on the Monitoring of Absence and specifically the cost and rate of absence within Council Services;
- in noting the National Statistics on Sickness Absence within Councils which had been tabled at the meeting, it was acknowledged that some improvement had been made by the Council but that it was important not to become complacent and to keep monitoring the position; and
- in terms of monitoring and review of the policy, it would be helpful if the Group could have a copy of the statistical returns and reports to the Chief Executive.

Thereafter, the Working Group otherwise **NOTED** the timetable for taking the scrutiny exercise forward as detailed in the report.

The meeting concluded at 3.45pm.