The Highland Council

Audit and Scrutiny Committee

Minutes of Meeting of the **Scrutiny Working Group** held in Committee Room 1, Council Headquarters, Glenurquhart Road, Inverness on Thursday, 26 February 2015 at 2.00pm.

Present:

Mrs M Davidson
Mr B Fernie
Mr I Brown
Mr C Fraser
Mr A Mackinnon

Mr T Prag
Mr M Reiss
Mr G Rimell
Mr R Saxon

Officials in attendance:

Mr N Rose, Head of Audit and Risk Management
Ms D Sutherland, Audit and Risk Manager
Mr C Clark, Head of Environmental and Regulatory Services
Miss C Maragh, Administrative Assistant

Mr B Fernie in the Chair

Business

1.   Apologies for Absence

An apology for absence was intimated on behalf of Mrs G Sinclair.

2.   Declarations of Interest

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

Item 5 – Mr M Reiss (financial)

3.   Minutes of Meeting

There had been circulated the Minutes of the meeting of the Scrutiny Working Group held on 13 February 2015, which were **APPROVED** – subject to that management training to be investigated on handling Mental Health issues.

4.   Key Points Arising from Last Meeting

The Head of Audit and Risk Management discussed with Members the key points arising from the last meeting.

During discussion, Members raised the following issues:-

- there appear to be some inconsistencies within the Absence Management Policy and Guidance which need to be raised with HR in due course;
- in relation to the management tools available to manage sickness

absences, specifically the 'Bradford Factor', it was highlighted that this was a complex process and didn't provide timely and meaningful information;

- the existing processes relating to the monitoring of absence needed to be explored within the Services, in particular to establish whether the financial impact is being considered, in terms of complying with the Attendance Management Policy , it was important to establish that periodic or random audits were being undertaken and that evidence is available to this effect;
- although sickness absence reports are being provided to respective Committees, the costs of absence are not provided
- in respect of benchmarking with other local authorities, it would be helpful if examples of best practice monitoring reports could be provided, particularly those detailing the costs of absence and confirming compliance with policy;
- the percentage of employees taking unauthorised absence as well as staff turnover leaving was queried;
- it was recognised that training new staff resulted in a revenue impact and that unauthorised absences be reviewed to potentially reduce this impact;
- in terms of return to work interviews, it was suggested that the NHS sickness policy be explored on their working practices; and
- it was expressed that there are various other HR management analysis systems i.e. Scope which provide a good level of information regarding sickness absence.

5. Presentation – Absence Management in Waste Management

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.

The Head of Environmental and Regulatory Services undertook a presentation which considered the management of sickness absence within Waste Management and how this had improved significantly in recent years. In particular, use was made of return to work interviews which were completed for all periods of absence.

In discussion, the Head of Environmental and Regulatory Services suggested that the guidance was lengthy and was unlikely to be read in any detail. He also suggested that this was generally used as a reference guide.

The Head of Environmental and Regulatory Services also circulated performance information he had devised to manage absence which did not originate from any Council reporting system

During discussion, Members raised the following comments:-

- in terms of the Services' bespoke absence system, it was explained that this system was devised by the Service as a simplified way to combine the absence stats percentages with the costs; and
- in relation to return to work interviews, it was acknowledged that these had shown benefits within the Service.

Following further discussion, the Working Group **NOTED** the presentation.

6. **Community Services – Absence Management Performance**

Quarterly and accumulative performance information regarding sickness absence within Community Services was presented to Members.

During discussion, Members raised the following comments:-

- it was queried as to the processes in place once the statistics were presented to the quarterly performance meetings; and
- in recognising the length of time to capture information, the measures of improvement was queried which could be implemented to make it work better with the staff.

Thereafter, the Working Group otherwise **NOTED** the performance information as provided.

7. **Key Points Arising**

The Head of Audit and Risk Management discussed the key points arising from the meeting together with the timetable for the remainder of the review.

During discussion, Members raised the following comments:-

- in considering the Environmental and Regulatory Section as the benchmark, it would be useful if the Head of Audit & Risk Management would consider the processes in place within the remainder of Community Services;
- in the interest of hearing alternative views, it was suggested that Senior Union representatives be invited to a future meeting; and
- it was highlighted that the real gain was catching, helping and having productive people working within the Council to assist individuals with higher levels of stress.

Thereafter, the Working Group **AGREED** that the Head of Audit and Risk Management would invite Occupational Health and also Union representatives to the June meeting.

The meeting concluded at 3.45pm.