

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 Tuesday, 10 March 2015 at 2.30pm.

**Present:**

Mrs M Davidson  
Mr B Fernie  
Mr A Mackinnon

Mr T Prag  
Mr G Rimell  
Mr R Saxon

**Officials in attendance:**

Mr N Rose, Head of Audit and Risk Management  
Ms S Campbell, Head of Children's Services  
Mr J Steven, Head of Education  
Miss J MacLennan, Democratic Services Manager

**Mr B Fernie in the Chair**

**Business**

**1. Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were intimated on behalf of Mr I Brown, Mr C Fraser, Mr M Reiss and Mrs G Sinclair.

**2. Declaration of Interest**

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

Item 5 – Mr A Mackinnon (Financial)

**3. Minutes of Meeting**

There had been circulated the Minutes of the last Meeting held on 26 February 2015 - which were **APPROVED**.

**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 and also presented sickness absence performance reports from Argyll & Bute Council and North Lanarkshire Council in order to enable Members to see the level of information reported elsewhere.

In this regard, it was **AGREED** that further information should be submitted to the next meeting in relation to the current reporting arrangements across Services and through the relevant Committees in terms of absence management and sickness absence.

It was also **AGREED** that consideration should be given at that time as to whether any changes were necessary in regard to how such information should be presented in future.

## 5. Attendance Management in Care & Learning

**Declaration of Interest: Mr A Mackinnon 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.**

Members were advised that the Head of Children's Services and the Head of Education had been invited to the meeting in order to present performance information in relation to their respective Services and to discuss the arrangements for managing attendance in accordance with the Council's Attendance Management Policy and Guidance.

Ms S Campbell, Head of Children's Services

During discussion, Members raised the following issues:-

- in acknowledging that there were difficulties for staff in managing long term sickness absence, it was felt that there was a need for Human Resources to clarify the current Guidance in this regard;
- better data is needed to manage and monitor sickness absence, following the restructuring of the Service. In particular, the quarterly performance figures show high numbers of staff which could therefore mask some areas of poor performance. In addition the data doesn't distinguish between long term and short term absence;
- the figures in relation to Criminal Justice were particularly high and it would be helpful if more information could be provided for the next meeting to explain the current position;
- there was a need to focus on Stage 3 cases in particular and perhaps to include changes to the current arrangements as part of a future review of the Guidance;
- the difficulties of finding a balance between on-going service delivery and the duty of care to staff was acknowledged;
- consultation was required across all Services to ascertain whether the current aspects of the Guidance could or should be adapted to allow staff to more easily follow procedures; and
- although the Guidance was generally applied, it was acknowledged that return to work interviews were not undertaken in all cases nor was use made of the "Bradford Factors" (as referred to within the Guidance) to manage short term absence. In respect of the former, there was a need for clarity on when return to work interviews should be undertaken.

Mr J Steven, Head of Education

During discussion, Members raised the following issues:-

- it was recognised that there was not a consistent approach across all Schools in recording sickness absence as this was dependent on

resources which were different in different establishments. As a consequence there could be some accuracy issues;

- there was a need for training to be put in place for staff in regard to current aspects of the Guidance and how this could be applied as it was recognised that this currently posed problems for some Head Teachers;
- leadership development was key and should be encouraged and applied wherever possible;
- there was a need to consider whether a different set of procedures and policies were required for the Education Service in future in order to help staff to apply processes within their day to day activities;
- absence management comparisons between Schools could be helpful in future and it was suggested that this could be undertaken through the current SEEMIS System;
- detailed and regular reporting through the Education, Children and Adult Services Committee was required;
- it would be helpful if statistical information could also be provided for Area Committees;
- there was a need to highlight the costs of absenteeism and also Supply Teachers to the Service;
- issues with regard to the length of the current Guidance and the clarity required in regard to return to work interviews were acknowledged; and
- although the level of detail in the performance information was poor in this provided just one line for all teaching staff, it was recognised that the Head of Education had revised processes to ensure that sickness absence was being scrutinised more closely through his regular management meetings.

## **6. Key Points Arising**

The Head of Audit and Risk Management discussed the key points arising from the meeting during which the honesty of both Heads of Service and their willingness to ensure improvement was recognised.

In this regard, it was suggested that there was a need for consideration to be given as to how to ensure more consistency across Services and individual teams in terms of the management and reporting of sickness absence/absenteeism.

It was also noted that Ms G Falconer, the Council's Occupational Health, Safety and Wellbeing Manager, and a representative from a Trade Union would be in attendance at the next meeting.

The meeting concluded at 4.00pm.