

**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, 5 May 2015 at 2.00pm.

**Present:**

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

Mr T Prag  
Mr M Reiss  
Mr G Rimell

**Officials in attendance:**

Mr N Rose, Head of Audit and Risk Management  
Ms D Sutherland, Audit and Risk Manager  
Ms G Falconer, Occupational Health, Safety and Wellbeing Manager  
Mrs L Dunn, Principal Committee Administrator

**Mr B Fernie in the Chair****Business****1. Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were intimated on behalf of Mr C Fraser, Mr R Saxon and Mrs G Sinclair.

**2. Declarations of Interest**

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

Item 5 – Mr A Mackinnon (financial) and Mr T Prag (non-financial)

**3. Minutes of Meeting**

There had been circulated the Minutes of the Meeting of the Scrutiny Working Group held on 10 March 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 during which he advised that he had examined the absence management reporting arrangements undertaken in North Lanarkshire and Argyle and Bute. He advised that these authorities presented more detailed information in regard to costs and a breakdown of the reasons for absences to Resources Committee and the Performance Review and Scrutiny Committee. Whereas Highland Council reported on an annual basis to Resources Committee as part of their Statutory Performance Indicators but this was only as a key headline figure which indicated that the Council had an average sickness absence of 9.2 days and compared this to the previous year. In terms of

reporting to individual strategic committees, this was only undertaken by the Finance Service and Corporate Development as part of their quarterly performance reports to Resources Committee. However, again this did not contain details of costs or a breakdown of reasons for absences. A quarterly report was also submitted to the Central Safety Committee on Occupational Health with a further annual report which provided slightly more detail.

The Head of Audit and Risk Management indicated that views would be sought from Trade Union representatives on the current Sickness and Absence Management Policy at the next meeting. He further recommended that costing information should be provided in future reports as stipulated in the current policy. In conclusion, he advised that he would present a summary of his findings to the next meeting.

During discussion, Members raised the following issues:-

- more detailed information in respect of absence management allowed trends to be identified, particularly reasons for absences, and proactive measures to be implemented to reduce future occurrences;
- there had been more detailed reporting on a quarterly basis to Strategic Committees in the past and this level of reporting seemed to have slipped since the amalgamation of Services; and
- a business case should accompany any proposals to amend the policy, i.e. include costings and benefits to be gained, such as improved productivity.

The Working Group **NOTED** the update and **AGREED** that a summary of the findings be presented to the next meeting.

## **5. Attendance Management in Health and Safety**

### **Declarations of Interest:**

**Mr A Mackinnon declared financial interest in this item on the grounds of his wife being an employee of the 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.**

**Mr T Prag declared a non-financial interest in this item on the grounds of his wife being a counsellor 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 Occupational Health, Safety and Wellbeing Manager undertook a presentation during which she gave an overview of the outsourced occupational health service including the services offered as part of the contract and additional services available outwith the contract including clinics, training/guidance, counselling, self-management of long term conditions and Posturite.

During discussion, Members raised the following issues:-

- more joined up working was required, particularly in respect of wellbeing, and further work should be undertaken to establish that there was a direct link between wellbeing and improved productivity;
- there was support for the Occupational Health, Safety and Wellbeing Manager's proposal in respect of recharging Services for non-attendance of Occupational Health appointments in order to reduce wastage of resources;
- the current Occupational Health service was not a self-referral system and it was suggested that this could be a barrier to employees not seeking help/support;
- it was essential that further improvements were made in addressing Mental Health issues and the views of the Occupational Health, Safety and Wellbeing Manager were sought on how she would recommend achieving this; and
- it was felt that investing in measures such as an Employee Assistance Programme, as recommended by the Occupational Health, Safety and Wellbeing Manager, to assist in the prevention of long term absences was a spend to save initiative which should be further investigated.

In response, it was confirmed that stress and mental health issues were currently accounting for approximately 50% of all Occupational Health referrals. Some of these referrals were only being made however when staff had exhausted their full sickness pay allowance and were moving to half pay and this was considered to be too late. Also, referrals were able to be made by Managers direct to Scottish Counselling Services without recourse to the Occupational Health, Safety and Wellbeing Manager and, although there were many benefits to the Service, this method of referral prevented confidentiality and was patchy in that it was only available in three areas within the Highlands. As such, it was considered that something more proactive and supportive was required.

In this regard, a course entitled 'Let's Get on with it Together' which was aimed at the self-management of long term conditions had recently been run which had been a success and this had resulted in amending the sickness absence paperwork. It was therefore intended that similar courses would be run in future.

In relation to investing in measures such as an Employee Assistance Programme, it was confirmed that this might cost in the region of £30k but would reap considerable benefits.

Finally, it was advised that further assessment was required of the benefits of referrals as a whole, particularly with regard to how long employees took to return to work. Although the Occupational Health, Safety and Wellbeing Manager considered that she was pro-active in her role, schools appeared to be an area which was difficult to access despite previous offers which had been made in this regard.

Thereafter, the Working Group **NOTED** the presentation and **AGREED** that the Head of Audit and Risk Management examine the briefing note that had already been prepared by the Occupational Health, Safety and Wellbeing Manager on implementing an Employee Assistance Programme.

## 6. Key Points Arising

The Head of Audit and Risk Management advised that a future meeting of the Working Group had been scheduled for June 2015 and Trade Union representatives would be invited to attend the next meeting to provide their views on the Sickness and Absence Management Policy.

He would also present a summary of his findings and set out a number of recommendations/actions. He further clarified that this would help to determine responsibilities in terms of enforcement of the policy and/or policy changes. It was further recommended that the Head of People and Performance be provided with a copy of the findings and this was supported by the Group.

During discussion, it was highlighted that one reason for the policy not being properly enforced could be due to it not being fit for purpose and this should be considered as part of the report. It was further highlighted that, in reviewing the policy, consideration would have to be given to the need for a flexible policy which would enable different solutions to be adopted.

Thereafter, the Working Group **NOTED** the update and welcomed the way forward.

The meeting concluded at 3.03 pm.