

DIGNITY AT WORK AND COMPASSIONATE LEAVE

Item 6

LEAD MEMBER: Councillor Keith Hitchen
REPORT AUTHOR: Neil White

Recommendation: that

(A) in respect of the Council's Dignity at Work Policy:

1. The Dignity at Work Policy be renamed the Respect at Work policy.
2. The importance of Dignity at Work needs to be communicated effectively to all employees, managers and members across the Council.
3. Training should be introduced on Dignity at Work across the council for all managers and members and periodically refreshed.
4. Regular assessment and monitoring of the number of informal and formal complaints under the Council's Dignity at Work policy be regularly reported to the Executive.
5. Human Resources undertake an audit within the next twelve months to:
 - (a) establish how the introduction of a range of Work Life Balance policies would support the Council's future service priorities and help to promote the Council as an employer of choice, and
 - (b) explore the feasibility of using "informal" advisers to allow staff to air concerns informally and confidentially.
6. Corporate Team highlights the Council's successes more effectively through the Team Brief process and encourages Head of Departments to use that process to highlight successes within their own teams.
7. New members of staff receive a formal induction programme that includes a section on Human Resources policies and the importance of Work Life Balance within three months of beginning work at the Council.

(B) in respect of the Council's Compassionate Leave Policy:

1. the new draft Bereavement Leave and Family Illness policies be supported subject to the addition of Grandparents and Grandchildren

within the definition of “close family member” in the Bereavement Leave Policy.

2. Human Resources ensure that Trade Union involvement at an early stage and consultation with employees and the Personnel Panel is standard practice in developing the Council’s Human Resource policies.
3. The Compassionate Leave Policy be renamed the Special Leave policy and all the policies within this area be included in one document in a similar manner to the South Lakeland Special Leave Document.

1. BACKGROUND

The Committee will recall that at its meeting on 5 October 2007 it agreed to establish a new task and finish group to look into the Council’s Dignity at Work and Compassionate Leave policies.

The terms of reference of the Task and Finish Group were to:

Review the Council’s current Dignity at Work and Compassionate Leave policies and to develop new policies so that the:

- (1) Dignity at Work policy entitles all the council’s employees to conduct their work without harassment, bullying or victimisation in their workplace and generally to be treated with dignity and respect, and
- (2) Compassionate Leave policy reflects an effective work life balance which benefits employees, the organisation and the community it serves.

The membership of the task and finish group was: Councillors Mrs Y R T Clarkson, P Connolly, K Hitchen and J Kane.

The Task and Finish has met on two times and heard evidence from:

Len Gleed (Human Resources Manager),
Hilary Mitchell (Head of Policy and Performance),
Alan Southward (Unison),
Mrs M Jewell (GMB),
Liam Murphy (Chief Executive).

It also considered Dignity at Work policies from Chester-le-Street District Council, Lewes District Council, Wear Valley District Council and Compassionate Leave policies from South Lakeland District Council and Boston Borough Council.

2. EVIDENCE CONSIDERED

A. Human Resources

The Task and Finish Group considered evidence from Len Gleed (Human Resources Manager) and Hilary Mitchell (Head of Policy and Performance).

Dignity at Work

The Group was informed that the Council's Dignity at Work policy was created in 2000. It had been introduced to incorporate national concerns on bullying and harassment and included an equal opportunities section that had existed for some time.

The policy had not been regularly reviewed although there had been updates to take account of changes in terminology or post titles. However there had been some recent discussions at the Cumbrian Chief Executives and Leaders Group about the possibility of harmonising human resources policies across Cumbria. It was anticipated that this would take at least 18 months to be completed.

The policy was available to employees through the Council's Intranet and was referred to in the staff induction process.

The Group was advised that it was crucial to catch problems early and to have independent confidential advice. This advice was currently available from two support officers within human resources or the trade union representatives.

The Human Resources team had received specialist training when the policy was created which was kept up to date through the Continuous Professional Development Programme.

The Group noted that there had been seven formal complaints under this policy that had resulted in a formal investigation. There had also been a similar number of instances of informal confidential advice being given to employees.

The recent Staff attitude survey, which had been completed by 39% of staff, had shown eight instances where staff felt they were subject to bullying and harassment. Five had indicated that they had reported the matter but three had not. The Human Resources Manager stated that these figures had surprised the department as they were not aware of many of these cases.

The Group were advised that it seemed that there wasn't a general correlation between the level of staff sickness and long term harassment and

bullying. However in those cases which had been the subject of formal investigation there had been generally been long term sickness absence on the part of the alleged victim.

The Group noted that the willingness of staff to report instances and having confidence in the process was crucial to making the policy effective.

In light of this the process could be improved through increasing the willingness and confidence of employees to report and tackle problems early. Making more use of “neutral” external advisers to avoid any staff concerns of the lack of confidentiality could help to resolve this concern.

The Group were advised that Copeland had been the first District/Borough Council in Cumbria to recently undertake a staff attitude survey and it should be possible to get some comparative figures from the other authorities in the next few months.

The Human Resources department had been concentrating on the Job Evaluation Process and it was intended that once the work had been completed that there would be greater emphasis on the work life balance policies.

Compassionate Leave

The Group was informed that the Council’s Compassionate Leave policy was created in 1989, revised in 1997 and amended for terminology in 2006. It had been introduced to allow employees to have time off work without loss of pay at times of great personal difficulty or stress such as a family bereavement.

The policy had been recently reviewed by an officer working group led by the Head of Policy and Performance. The Group had agreed that the policy should be split into two policies covering Bereavement Leave and Family Illness. A draft version of these policies was made available to the group.

It did not seem that there had been a large number of requests for more than the five days stated in the policy although recently there had been more requests.

The Group were advised that the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development had made a business case for improving work life balance. The benefits to business when introducing policies to underpin work life balance issues were:

- Higher productivity and competitiveness
- Increased flexibility and customer service
- Raised morale, motivation, commitment and engagement

- Reduced absenteeism
- Improved recruitment and retention of a diverse workforce
- Wanting to become an “employer of choice”
- Meeting legal requirements

A survey by the Health and Safety Executive had found that work life balance was rated as the second most important factor by employees after job satisfaction.

B. Staff Side

The Task and Finish Group considered evidence from the staff side representatives Alan Southward (Unison) and Mrs M Jewell (GMB).

Dignity at Work

The Group was advised that the staff side were aware of some cases of alleged bullying and harassment but that the official channels were rarely used. It was considered that this was an issue within the council but that it was a smallish one.

There was not a great deal of staff confidence in the council's policy and there was a need for more practical help from Human Resources. There were instances of discrete forms of bullying or a misinterpretation of management requests where the chance to talk things through informally with someone confidential was required.

It was not always appropriate for the formal procedure to be started or for a round table meeting of the affected parties as a confrontational situation was the worst possible solution in some cases.

It was important that there was an independent person to talk to as it was not certain how much trust there was in Human Resources. There had been staff champions in the past who had received training and staff could go to get counselling rather than going through formal channels.

This could have been one of the reasons for the low response of the staff attitude survey as staff did not think, despite the assurances, that the results would be confidential.

Compassionate Leave

The Group noted that the staff side had been involved in the drafting of the new Bereavement Leave and Family Illness policies and were happy with the outcome.

There was a concern that the Human Resource policies were not applied consistently across the council. Furthermore there appeared to be little emphasis on work life balance.

An example of this was the core hours in the afternoon (2 to 4) within the flexible working policies which did not allow parents to pick their children up from work.

There was also an issue relating to communication of these policies and with the number of staff leaving the authority were creating capacity problems for the organisation which had a resultant stressful impact on the remaining staff.

C. Management

The Task and Finish Group considered evidence from Liam Murphy (Chief Executive).

Dignity at Work

The Group noted that there was very little training for managers on Dignity at Work although Corporate Team was kept up to date on any changes to the council's procedures. There had been little work done on work life balance policies as Human Resources had concentrated on Job Evaluation.

The Chief Executive advised that following the results of the staff attitude survey he had pledged to address the Dignity at Work issues.

It was confirmed that managers performance in this area was not assessed, regularly monitored or reported to members.

Furthermore, the attitude and culture of staff was important. There was a need for staff to feel more valued and involved than they do at the moment. The report from the IDEA on their recent Ethical Governance Health Check had shown that there still remained an element of blame culture within the authority.

It was also apparent that some members still had a tendency to micro-manage and that the council does not celebrate success sufficiently.

A consistent management approach was also essential and there was some work needed to ensure that happened. Regular assessment and monitoring of performance was needed to ensure this happened.

There was also some work to do on making sure managers do enough management work rather than "the day job". Managers should be aiming to

spend 40% of their time on management. An important skill managers could do with is coaching people, so that they can help to support and develop staff.

Compassionate Leave

The Group noted that the two new draft policies were due to go to Corporate Team soon for its comments.

The Council should be offering equal and flexible work that made it an attractive place for members of the local community to want to work for.

The policies that the Council introduces should be flexible enough to reflect the way that different members of staff as well as different professions work best. This should include the flexible working policy with the aim that it enables staff to produce their best work.

There was no induction for new managers on the Compassionate Leave policy and not enough training for existing managers.

There was little work being done by Human Resources on overall strategy at the moment but it was intended to increase the training budget by 10% that would enable the appointment of a training officer. This officer could then be involved in helping to develop an outline strategy for workplace development.

3. RECOMMENDATIONS

The Task and Finish Group, after considering all the evidence, agreed that there were a number of recommendations it would wish to make. These were:

(A) Dignity at Work

1. The Dignity at Work Policy be renamed the Respect at Work policy.

The Group felt that the policy dealt with the respect that all people involved with the council should show to their colleagues and with outside contacts. Respect was an easier concept than Dignity to understand and accurately reflected the purpose of the policy. It also was in line with the Government's give respect get respect campaign.

2. The importance of Dignity at Work needs to be communicated effectively to all employees, managers and members across the Council.

The Group felt that the lack of staff confidence in the council's process needed to be addressed. One way was to address this would be through

giving greater profile to this issue and to promoting work life balance throughout the council.

This should be promoted by Corporate Team and all members of the council and cascaded down to all staff through a communications exercise.

3. Training be introduced on Dignity at Work across the council for all managers and members and periodically refreshed.

The Group considered that it was important for a consistency of approach of all managers across the Council to ensure that the application of the Dignity at Work policy was seen as fair and to reinforce the raising of profile of this issue.

It is recommended that training be introduced on Dignity at Work across the council for all managers and members and be periodically refreshed. Attendance at the training be monitored corporately by Human Resources to ensure attendance at the training.

Furthermore Dignity at Work and Work Life Balance policies be included within any induction for new managers.

4. Regular assessment and monitoring of the number of informal and formal complaints under the Council's Dignity at Work policy be regularly reported to the Executive.

The Group agreed with the Staff Side views that there was an issue with bullying and harassment at the Council but that it was a small issue. In light of this it is considered appropriate that a process of regular assessment and monitoring of complaints, both informal and formal, be started corporately and regularly reported to the Executive.

5. Human Resources undertake an audit to:

(a) establish how the introduction of a range of Work Life Balance policies would support the Council's future service priorities and help to promote the Council as an employer of choice, and

(b) explore the feasibility of using "informal" advisers to allow staff to air concerns informally and confidentially.

The Group noted that it was intended to do more work on Work Life Balance policies in the next twelve months. An audit would provide information to support the business case for Work Life Balance initiatives, for example, establishing how many employees care for dependant children / relatives,

rates of staff turnover, existing working arrangements, travel arrangements, religious observances etc.

The issue of lack of confidence by the staff in the confidentiality of the process was of concern to the Group. To improve this aspect the council should consider introducing “informal” advisers, internally or externally where staff could go informally and confidentially.

6. Corporate Team highlights the Council’s successes more effectively through the Team Brief process and encourage Head of Departments to use that process to highlight successes within their own teams.

The culture of an organisation can have a large impact on the success of Work Life Balance initiatives. Whilst this would take time to change one of the points from the IDEA report on their recent Ethical Governance Health Check that the council does not celebrate success sufficiently could be addressed.

The Group considered that Corporate Team should use the Team Brief to identify successes to the staff. Furthermore it should encourage Head of Departments to use that process to highlight successes within their own teams.

7. New members of staff receive a formal induction programme that includes a section on Human resources policies and the importance of Work Life Balance within three months of beginning work at the Council.

The Group felt that it was essential for the council to introduce a formal induction programme. This would enable key messages to be communicated to new staff from a corporate point of view. This should include Human Resources policies particularly Work Life Balance as they were important in establishing the ethos of the council.

Compassionate Leave

Trade Union involvement at an early stage and consultation with employees is important in developing Human Resource policies and the Group were pleased that the Staff Side representatives had been involved in the drafting of the new Bereavement Leave and Family Illness policies. This should be standard practise along with consulting the Personnel Panel in drawing up new Human Resources policies.

The Group felt that the new policies should be supported with the addition that Grandparents and Grandchildren should be added to “close family member” within the Bereavement Leave Policy.

The Group considered that the South Lakeland Special Leave Document was particularly easy to follow and considered that all the relevant policies should be brought together into one new Special Leave policy.

- (A) The new draft Bereavement Leave and Family Illness policies be supported subject to the addition of Grandparents and Grandchildren within the definition of “close family member” in the Bereavement Leave Policy.**
- (B) Human Resources ensure that Trade Union involvement at an early stage and consultation with employees and the Personnel Panel is standard practice in developing the Council’s Human Resource policies.**
- (C) The Compassionate Leave Policy be renamed the Special Leave policy and all the policies within this area be included in one document in a similar manner to the South Lakeland Special Leave Document.**

4. CORPORATE PLAN

There are no applicable actions in the Council’s Corporate Plan.

5. CONCLUSION

The Committee is invited to consider the recommendations of the Dignity at Work and Compassionate Leave Task and Finish Group at the head of this report.

List of Appendices:

Appendix “A” – South Lakeland District Council Special Leave Policy

List of Background Documents:

None