

POLICY REVIEW AND PERFORMANCE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

28 NOVEMBER 2012

Present: County Councillor Clark (Chairperson)
County Councillors Bale, Hunt, Keith Jones, Knight, Lloyd,
Robson and Walker

Apologies: County Councillor Mitchell

32: MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting of the Policy Review and Performance Committee held on 24 October 2012 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chairperson.

33: DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

The Chairperson reminded Members of their responsibility under Part III of the Members' Code of Conduct to declare any interest in general terms and to complete personal interest forms at the start of the meeting and then, prior to the commencement of the discussion of the item in question, specify whether it is a personal or prejudicial interest. If the interest is prejudicial Members would be asked to leave the meeting and if the interest is personal, Members would be invited to stay, speak and vote.

34: CONNECT TO CARDIFF

The Committee at its work programming forum agreed to consider the work of the Connect to Cardiff service (C2C) which is the main point of contact for all customer services including:-

- Council Tax (online forms, payments, reminders/summons, payment agreements and Council Tax benefit);
- Waste Management Requests (non collection reports, bulky collections and street cleansing);
- Highways (street lighting, drainage and highway defects);
- Housing (benefit, housing repairs);
- Parking (enforcement, permits).

The Chairperson welcomed Councillor Lynda Thorne Cabinet Member, Communities Housing and Social Justice, to the meeting together with

Isabelle Bignall, Head of Customer Services, Rachel Bishop, Contact Centre Manager, Emlyn Nash, Assistant Contact Centre Manager and John Agnew, Corporate Customer Services Manager.

Councillor Thorne gave a brief statement in which she advised the Committee that she would like to see C2C as part of the wider strategy to be developed over the next three years so that the people of Cardiff can contact the Council by their preferred choice. C2C are looking to open up ways in which people can contact it face to face; there are many people who would like to contact the Council and electronically via the web and e-mail. She wants to make it more accessible and save money.

Councillor Thorne highlighted the issue of businesses closing down because they had stood still and not embraced electronic means. The Council does not want to be in this position but must recognise people still want the option of face to face contact. This is part of the overall strategy.

Rachel Bishop, Contact Centre Manager gave the following presentation in which she advised Members that the Contact Centre is able to deal direct with requests for information and advice about all Council services.

The following channels are available to the public:-

- Telephone (English or Welsh);
- Face to Face;
- Internet;
- Mini com;
- Voice Mail;
- Outreach;
- E-Mail or E-Fax;
- SMS – Text Messaging;
- Web Chat;
- Letter.

The Contact Centre operates extended opening hours as well as offering an out of hours voice mail service and 24 hour web access. Members received a breakdown of the total number of contacts (52909) during October 2012.

The top reasons for contact were in respect of Council Tax; Housing and Council Tax Benefits; Housing Repairs and Waste Management.

Members were advised that there was a diverse workforce at C2C including 5 Welsh Speakers. They are currently recruiting to provide more; 41 Full Time Employees; 6 Part Time Employees; 1 Term Time Employee; 2 Redeployed Staff. This totals and 48 Customer Service Representatives.

C2C achieved Investors in People (Gold) Award in 2011 which places them within the top 1% of all nationally recognised Investors in People Organisations.

Statistical information relating to Staff Performance together with the results of the Staff Satisfaction Surveys between June 2011 and August 2012 was provided to Members for information.

Customer Satisfaction Results for 2012 were reported, it was noted the results are checked daily and any unsatisfied or very unsatisfied customers are contacted back the same day to try to resolve the dissatisfaction. The results of the Customer Satisfaction Survey showed 67.80% (Very Satisfied); 29.60% (Satisfied); 1.70% (Unsatisfied); 0.80% (Very Unsatisfied).

In conclusion, an outline was given of the Compliments and Complaints received by the service. Whilst there are many compliments the service area also values complaints and takes feedback on board. All complaints are dealt with in line with Corporate Complaints Timelines.

The Committee made the following observations:-

- In response to a query about the number of enquiries received and reasons for the enquiries the Committee were advised that C2C receives 50 thousand enquiries per month. It is important to look at the type of enquiry and reasons for the enquiry i.e. circulation of Council Tax demands would cause an increase in the volume of enquiries. These can be planned for and managed by working with the various service areas. The processes have been evaluated and it is intended to include a portal at the beginning of the website to enable people to track their payments, however, this has not yet been formally launched;
- With regard to communications sent out from the various Council departments, it was suggested that the language be made clearer to avoid confusion. In response Members were advised that the Council now employs a Plain Language Officer. It was noted that the biggest

challenge was always around benefits. The correspondence includes a large amount of legal wording, in order to simplify the process C2C work with the originator of the letters to enable staff to be in a better position to deal with enquiries;

- Information was sought as to whether C2C had the capacity to deal with additional work from outside the Authority. In response the Committee were advised that there had previously been a contract with GP ‘out of hours’ service, Consumer Direct and the 101 service in partnership with South Wales Police. The funding was withdrawn for Consumer Direct and also for the 101 service which was then withdrawn. The value of the contract for the operation of the GP ‘out of hours’ service was insufficient to cover the costs. As a result the Council chose not to bid for this contract. Members were advised that C2C are always looking for external work. However the service now works in collaboration with others and does not currently have income generation work. C2C works in collaboration with Vale of Glamorgan for the Community Alarm provision, and income comes in from housing schemes;
- A Member enquired whether C2C proactively ‘call out’ to Council tenants regarding repairs. It was explained that in respect of customer satisfaction survey they currently utilise the time between 6pm and 7pm as it is a cheaper rate for external calls. They work closely with the research team and the survey is undertaken internally for the outgoing calls;
- The Cabinet Member advised the Committee that she has been discussing the possibility of expanding the housing repairs service to generate income from the private sector and also make it available for pensioners and other residents as part of the roll out of that service. C2C would be used to contact tenants to ensure they are content with the work and the repairs carried out;
- Members were advised that customers do not hesitate to inform C2C if the service areas do not deliver and this would be followed up directly with the appropriate service areas;
- Information was sought about the satisfaction rates in respect of people contacting C2C via e-mail as it was lower than by telephone. A Member enquired about what had been done to improve satisfaction rates via new media. It was confirmed that this is still done via e-mail. The feedback shows an 85% satisfaction rate. There is a link for

people to feedback to C2C. Members were assured that the telephone service was second to none. The service through social media is not currently available but the aim is to drive this forward over the next 12 months;

- Reference was made to the staff suggestions box and information was sought as to how much this had been developed and suggestions taken on board. Members were advised that C2C staff supported the staff suggestion option and often come up with great ideas. However it was not always possible to take on board all the suggestions. It was confirmed that between 5 and 10 suggestions per month were received from C2C staff and there is a tracking system. The suggestions are always taken to the Business Improvement Meetings (BIMS) as improvement actions as to whether they can be taken forward. Front line staff outline what works and what doesn't. In response to a query about feedback to staff suggestions, it was confirmed that feedback is always given following a suggestion;
- With regard to the more detailed enquiries that take longer to process, information was sought as to how staff are trained and how much knowledge they have that they can pass on and the impact on the timescale when aiming to meet targets;
- A Member advised that his experience of dealing with call centres had not always been a positive experience. It was his view that call centres tend to be basic customer service on the cheap with staff that are not sufficiently equipped to deal with and resolve queries. However, the Council seems to have adapted well to call centres and is equipped to deal with enquires. There appears to be less satisfaction with e-mails. Concern was expressed about the possibility of there being a two tier system where some people have access and can receive information quickly and others that do not have access to computers may receive a lesser service. The Member was particularly concerned about the elderly and also those who might be in poverty;
- It was noted that C2C had dedicated Welsh speakers for calls and this was welcomed. Information was sought as to whether there were facilities for other languages and people that were trained in these languages. Members were advised that C2C use a translation service. C2C had experienced difficulty in recruiting in the languages needed. A number of recruitment drives had been undertaken without success to provide a service for the languages needed, Members were advised

that people with the appropriate languages had been recruited for the Community Hubs in Butetown.

The Cabinet Member advised that by developing the electronic form of communication it would free up time to concentrate on providing a face to face service to people that prefer it. The point made about benefits is crucial i.e. where there are universal benefits there needs to be a facility for people to be able to claim online and a need to ensure there are trained staff available to deal with the enquiries, complete the forms and provide the preferred service either on-line or face to face.

- Members appreciated their tour around C2C and accepted that the centre was a pleasant and good working environment. It was noted that the service is target driven, however where there are more complex enquiries it was important that staff are given sufficient time to deal with these enquiries, Members emphasised the importance of targets being quality driven and not just quantity driven. Members were advised that in the case of longer more complex calls, these would be remotely monitored at two minute intervals. If it was appropriate to do so the call would be moved on;
- Members were interested in the provision of the 24 hour service and how this could be expanded, and would like to receive further information about this service when appropriate;
- In response to a query regarding data collection, it was confirmed that it was possible to have a breakdown of contacts to the centre by geographical area and this is carried out on a week by week basis, particularly in terms of waste management. It was simple to provide a breakdown by ward, postcode and area. It was also highlighted that there are some areas that don't contact the centre, some people might not be aware of the service. It was confirmed that mapping could be carried out to identify the areas that don't use the service;
- With regard to the Citizen Hubs, which provide a wider service to the community in terms of advice and access to services, services are monitored and although staff are trained to advise they are generic advisers and conduits to deal with enquiries received and are monitored regularly. It is important to ensure there are bespoke services to meet demand, C2C also link in with other agencies such as citizens advice service and can signpost people to other services where appropriate;

- Information was sought as to whether the volume of calls to C2C had been affected by the introduction of the Community Hubs. Members were advised that C2C had not seen a reduction in the contacts. The people who would wish to use the Community Hubs are not the same as those who use the telephone. It was confirmed that there had been a reduction in footfall to Marland House and increase in the use of the Community Hubs.

The Chairperson thanked the Cabinet Member and Officers for their responses to Members' questions, following discussion on the Way Forward it was

AGREED – That a letter be sent by the Chairperson on behalf of the Committee to Councillor Lynda Thorne, Cabinet Member, Communities, Housing and Social Justice thanking her and her Officers for attending the Policy Review and Performance Scrutiny Committee on 28 November 2012 and to convey the following observations of the Committee:-

- The Committee wish to pass on their appreciation to Officers for providing a tour of C2C which they found most informative and helped to set the scene for the consideration of the C2C service;
- The Committee noted that the operation of Connect to Cardiff is to be seen as part of the wider Customer Management strategy, which will progress a 'channel shift' to promote web-access as the preferred method for contacting the Council. The Committee was reassured to hear that the strategy would continue to allow customers to contact the Council via their method of choice, including face to face (for example through citizen Hubs) or by telephone if desired;
- Members reiterated comments made by the former Committee membership and emphasised their strong feeling that the Council must avoid the creation of a 'two-tier' contact system, favouring those who have easy access to the internet;
- Members requested further details regarding customer satisfaction levels of those contacting C2C via webchat/email versus those who telephone (although Members noted comments that, as emails from C2C always include a link to a satisfaction survey, this may elicit a higher level of negative comments);

- The Committee would like to be kept informed regarding further expansion of twenty-four hour and out of hours provision and may schedule a further consideration of the service into its work programme at an appropriate point;
- Members noted comments that some calls which C2C receives may result from difficulties or defects stemming from lack of clarity in communications sent out by other sections of the Council, and hope that wherever possible C2C will work with service areas to address these issues;
- The Committee was impressed by officers' enthusiasm and dedication to the effective delivery and with the initiatives which have been put in place to encourage C2C staff to become involved in the improvement of the service, such as the suggestion scheme. Members would like further information regarding the Service Improvement 'Rapid Improvement Event' which has been undertaken in the area, following comments that it is essential that change initiatives involve staff directly;
- The Committee noted officers' comments regarding the potential effect of Welfare Reform and that the high number of advice letters which will be sent out in December to those affected may result in a dip in C2C performance. For example in terms of the number of calls which are abandoned before they are answered. The Committee will bear this in mind when considering Quarter 3 performance reports;
- Members of the Committee queried whether there are any opportunities to generate income via C2C, noting officers' comments that the service is actively looking at partnership and collaborative working, including work with the Community Alarm service, and the potential to use the service to dial out to undertake surveys of housing repair recipients. The Committee would recommend that this is investigated further;
- The Committee requests a ward-by-ward and service area breakdown in terms of types of enquiry C2C receives.

35: CORPORATE COMPLAINTS POLICY

The Council has operated a Complaints Policy and Procedure that requires all service areas to report on a monthly basis the numbers of

complaints about the service received and processed. From this information an annual complaints report is produced, giving the key outcomes of the operation of the Complaints Policy and Procedure and a service area breakdown of complaints received.

A review of the current Complaints Policy and Procedure has been undertaken and improvements have been recommended to ensure that the Council's policy fully reflects guidance from the Welsh Government (WG) Model Policy and Guidance Paper for handling complaints as well as guidance from the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales.

The Policy Review and Performance Scrutiny Committee were invited to take part in a pre-decision scrutiny by considering the Council's draft revised Complaint Policy Guidance Notes and provide observations to the Cabinet prior to consideration of the revised Policy at Cabinet on 21 February 2013.

The Chairperson welcomed Philip Lenz, Corporate Chief Officer (Shared Services), Isabelle Bignall, Head of Customer Services and John Agnew, Corporate Customer Services Manager who were in attendance to present the report and answer Members' questions.

The Committee were advised that the current policy was implemented in 2007. There are 2 stages: (Stage 1) Initial complaint investigation and (Stage 2) Independent Review. The policy requires complaints to be acknowledged within 10 working days and then 20 working days for a substantive answer. The WG paper proposes a five working day turnaround and 20 days to answer the complaint in full. The Council are seeking to bring down the acknowledgement time. A more significant change is around independent reviews. If a person makes a complaint and the Council responds in full they have a right to request a review/appeal. Currently the practice is to nominate another service area, via the Chief Officer who will nominate an Officer to undertake the review, this has been problematic and timely, the Committee were advised that a commitment has been made to remove this stage and the Ombudsman has confirmed he is happy with the process and are supportive of the recommendation to 'investigate once and investigate well' as detailed in the WG Model.

The message maintained in the WG guidance 'investigate once and investigate well' i.e. when responding to a complaint it should be investigated in its entirety and there should be no need for an independent

process. Therefore the need for an independent process has been removed from the policy.

The policy reviewed the vexatious policy and this is currently with legal services, when the report is presented to Cabinet in February 2013 this will form part of the policy. Members were advised that people tend to like having a 'safety net' of the independent review but the proposal is 'to do well and to do once'.

The Committee were advised that last year there were 22 independent reviews. However this year there had already been 34 which is substantial in comparison to last year.

The Chairperson invited the observations of the Committee as part of the pre-decision scrutiny:-

- A Member suggested there needed to be a strong differentiation between different sorts of complaints and that there should be a definition, people sometimes make mistakes and therefore difficulties arise as a result of that, it is important to separate between mistakes and complaints about something not being done which might be as a result of legislation. Some service areas might receive complex complaints such as housing benefit or council tax benefit complaints;
- The Cabinet Member advised that complaints should not be seen as a bad thing. If it is made easier for people to complain it could be helpful and can be positive in terms of driving improvements;
- In terms of the engagement process information was sought as to the method of engagement following receipt of the complaint, i.e. letter or telephone contact. Members were advised that it was personal choice, the Council engages with the complainant and they will be advised of the timescale for the complaint to be resolved;
- The Committee was advised that it was hoped to have the same system in place for complaints as for customer enquiries i.e. that they can be uniformly documented, tracked and followed up;
- The issue of complaints to Ward Members was highlighted, when a Member gets a complaint they take steps to resolve the issue but it is not recorded as a complaint;

- The Cabinet Member advised that once the Member enquiry system was in place it would have the ability of recording;
- With regard to publicising the complaints procedure it was confirmed that this is in the Communications cycle for next year. It was suggested that this should be an item in the Capital Times monthly. Members were advised that there it was likely that the service had insufficient resources to adequately deal with the increased volume of calls which would result do this. Members were advised that every time an article was published it resulted in a surge of calls to C2C who are barely coping with the standard of calls currently received and would struggle to keep within the targets.

The Chairperson thanked the Cabinet Member and Officers for their responses to Members' questions. Following discussion on the way forward it was

AGREED – That a letter be sent by the Chairperson on behalf of the Committee to Councillor Lynda Thorne, Cabinet Member, Communities, Housing and Social Justice thanking her and her Officers for attending the Policy Review and Performance Scrutiny Committee on 28 November 2012 and to convey the following observations of the Committee:-

- Committee Members were largely content with the draft Complaint Policy and Guidance note, welcoming the reduction of timescales in terms of acknowledgement of complaints;
- The Committee was concerned that public familiarity with the current Policy may be low and hopes that the new Policy will be sufficiently publicised and accessible to members of the public. Members recommend that a regular piece is included in the Capital Times in order to ensure ongoing and greater visibility of the Complaint procedure;
- The Committee also questions whether the Policy could be merged into a more general 'feedback' policy, so that the public have a clearer way to contact the Council with any complaints or compliments;
- The Committee noted officers' comments that the Ombudsman has steered away from independent review, advocating instead the earliest possible resolution for complaints, but that this may change again in

future. The Committee will monitor this situation in any further considerations of the Complaint Policy and Annual Complaint report.

- Members also heard that there is some variation across service areas in terms of handling complaints and hope that these discrepancies can be rectified as the new Policy and guidance notes are more widely publicised across the Council and trust that Officers will work with Service Area Complaints Managers to ensure this.

36: ATTENDANCE AND WELLBEING POLICY

Members received a report and presentation on the draft Attendance and Well Being policy to give Members of the Committee an opportunity to make observations prior to its consideration by Cabinet on 6 December 2012.

An outline was given of the background to the issue of sickness absence. Members of the new Committee were advised that in September 2011 the Policy Review and Performance Scrutiny Committee published an Inquiry into Managing Attendance that had been undertaken by a task and finish group of the Committee. The task group reported on sickness performance, policy, responsibility, improvement, prevention and schools, arriving at 19 recommendations from 41 key findings. The final report was considered by the Executive in January 2012. The Executive in February 2012 accepted 13 recommendations, partially accepted 5 recommendations and rejected 1 recommendation. Following the response, the Committee had written to the Executive Member Finance and Service Delivery to capture some outstanding concerns the new Committee might wish to reflect upon when planning their work programme for 2012/13.

Members noted that the new Administration had indicated that the Management of Attendance would be a key consideration for the Council and that a draft policy has been developed that complies with the Equality Act 2010 and benchmarked with other Authorities. A Working Group has been set up with representatives from service areas and schools as part of the consultation process.

The Chairperson welcomed Councillor Russell Goodway, Cabinet Member, Finance Business and Local Economy to the meeting together with Philip Lenz, Corporate Chief Officer (Shared Services) Lynne David, Centre of Expertise Manager. Also Sarah Maunder, Preople

Partner HRPS, and Anna Freeman (WLGA - Welsh Local Government Association) Angie Shiels and Ken Daniels (GMB - General, Municipal, Boilermakers, and Allied Trade Union) also attended.

The Cabinet Member made a brief statement in which he advised that Cabinet acknowledge the importance of this matter and that it is a priority issue for the Cabinet to continue to address, the Leader and Cabinet recognised that there has been a significant amount of work undertaken by the Scrutiny Committee over the past few years and wish to continue engaging fully with Scrutiny in development of Council policies. The Cabinet Member confirmed that his colleagues had taken the view that it was only right for the draft proposals to be considered as part of the scrutiny process. The Cabinet Member advised the Committee that Cabinet had not yet taken a position on any of these matters, but does not want to stifle the views of the Scrutiny Committee. Cabinet are keen to see a hard working and high performance workforce, therefore they wished to give this Committee an opportunity to assist in the development of employment policies to support this.

Philip Lenz, Corporate Chief Officer Shared Services gave the following presentation including an overview of the background to the process:-

Consultation Timescales:

- Service Area Managers – 18 and 26 October 2012 on principles of key changes;
 - Equality Networks (Black Minority Ethnic, Women’s Groups, Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transsexual, Carers and Disability Networks) – 19 October 2012;
- Trade Unions 5 and 8 November 2012 (requested sight of what is finally going to Cabinet);
- Scrutiny – 28 November 2012: to include update on sickness absence review;
- Report to 6 December Cabinet;
- Planning, preparation and training January – March 2013;
- Implementation from 1 April 2013.

Overall Proposed Changes

- Change to Attendance and Well Being Policy;
- Include section on how the Council will address health and well being of employees;

- To include Special leave and Critical Illness policies included rather than separate documents (could also incorporate Time off for Dependants and Parental Leave policies);
- Additional guidance on mental health issues and reasonable adjustments.

Health and Wellbeing

- Broad statement of intent on health and wellbeing;
- In discussion with Public Health Wales and Cardiff and Vale UHB about initiatives such as
 - Smoking cessation classes proposed trials at 2 Council locations;
 - Alcohol and substance misuse;
 - Nutrition/healthy eating options;
 - Developing Mental Health promotional material
- Some could be activity and some could be publicity materials being made available;
- Proposal is that a managed plan to be developed in order that a rolling programme can be implemented in the near future.

Sickness – Short term absences – Key Proposed Changes

- Spelling out the implications for managers who do not properly manage sickness absence;
- Return to work interviews – becomes informal stage;
- Reduction of stages from 4 (5 trigger points) to 3 (3 trigger points);
- Reduction in number of instances to hit triggers;
- Addition of duration of absences, not just number of instances to hit trigger (at Stage 2 and 3) – Agrees with scrutiny recommendation and in line with benchmarking information;
- Non payment for the first 3 days of sickness absence (this was a recommendation of Policy Review Performance Scrutiny Committee to be explored but not supported by the Executive at that time).

Short Term Sickness Triggers

A detailed outline was given of the Current Triggers for stages 1-4 together with the Proposed Changes including Return to Work Interviews and details of the actions for Stages 1-3 (reduced from the previous 4 stages).

Long Term Absence – Proposed Changes

- Bringing forward contact visits (from 4 weeks to 2 weeks);

- Earlier referral to Occupational Health Service (OHS) (straight after first contact visit);
- Earlier case conferences (from 6 and 9 months to 3 and 6 months respectively);
- Extension of the current arrangement with University Hospital Wales for a further 3 years of Mental Health partnership arrangement.

Issues raised by Managers, Networks and Trade Unions in the Consultation process

Issues around Non Payment of first 3 days

- Service Area Managers, Networks and Trade Unions object to this proposal;
- Seen as draconian at a time of other perceived threats;
- Concern is around this being introduced to tackle the few that abuse the sick scheme but penalising those who have genuine absences;
- Could have a severe financial impact upon individuals plus could encourage them to come to work when unwell, with an adverse impact on productivity, other employees and service users;
- Variations on this could be:
 - Non payment for first 3 days for those on any trigger (similar to 1 Local Authority in England);
 - Non Payment for first day and then 80% for 2 days (1 Local Authority in England has introduced this);
 - Excluding certain absences from the non payment e.g. where covered by Equality Act, where an employee is instructed not to attend work or where a Fit to Work Note obtained or where employee is hospitalised;
- Statutory notice would need to go to all employees before the end of December 2012 if this proposal were agreed.

Issue raised by Trade Unions – Trade Unions objected to the proposal regarding reducing the number of stages in the short term absence process as well as the decrease in the number of days to hit triggers. The proposal is a significant change to current arrangements and it was thought that alternatives could be considered.

Conclusion

- Service Area Managers, Networks and Trade Unions are clear that something needs to be done about sickness absence;

- Whilst ‘non payment for First 3 Days’ was not supported and TU opposition to reduced stages/tighter triggers, there was general agreement to earlier referrals to OHS, earlier case conferences, guidance on mental health and reasonable adjustments;
- Clear that it is not just about the policy and we need to ensure compliance (NB – Some Trade Unions want to retain the current policy and ensure full implementation/compliance);
- Need to follow any policy change with manager and employee communications;
- Training for Managers is key – if we are to emphasise disciplinary issue for those that do not follow – mandatory training for managers should be considered (minimum e-learning);
- Need to determine transition arrangements for those “in the current sickness process” at 31 March 2013.

Full details of the comments from Trade Unions at meetings on 5 and 8 November 2012 were contained in the additional information circulated to Members. To enable the Trade Unions to have the opportunity to make detailed observations it was agreed to go through the policy in detail to allow comments to be made on each section of the policy.

Ken Daniels (GMB) addressed the Committee and outlined the reasons for the views of the Trade Unions during the consultation. Their main reasons for concern included:-

- Special Leave for Bereavement – GMB wanted to retain the existing provision ‘from date of death to date of funeral’ to take account of a person with sole responsibility of the arrangements, Members noted that BME network in particular had raised this as an issue due to the fact that some religions have the funeral the day after the death;
- Management of Sickness Absence – if it were to be a disciplinary issue for Managers who did not follow the correct procedure, there should be mandatory training for Managers;
- Triggers for dealing with Short Term absence – The TUs were opposed to reducing the number of stages.

Anna Freeman (WLGA) advised the Committee that the evidence shows that sickness absence can be improved by better management of absence. It should be recognised that many staff take little or no sickness absence whereas other sections of the workforce have higher levels than other parts of the public sector comparisons. People who undertake physical jobs, social care workers, and people with stressful jobs often have high

levels of sickness that tend to skew the figures for all workers. The complexity of the workers makes it more difficult when developing policy and practice.

The Chairperson thanked the Officers for their presentation and comments following which the Committee were invited to put forward their observations:

- The Chair of the Committee's inquiry into Managing Attendance gave an overview of the history of the Inquiry carried out by the task and finish group of the previous Policy Review and Performance Scrutiny Committee together with its findings. Witnesses included representatives from Cardiff Council's Waste Management and Adults and Childrens' Services who confirmed they had high levels of sickness within their respective areas and that this was reflected nationally for these occupational groups. The Service Area representatives were of the view that the existing procedures did not allow them to address sickness adequately and they ideally wanted to have additional options available to deal with people found to be abusing the system. Some Managers supported the proposal for the right to withhold payment where they felt it to be fair and this would assist the Authority the Managers to deal with the absence. Whilst this particular recommendation was not supported by the Executive in February 2012, they accepted the other targets set. The most important was to reduce absence from 9.7 days to 9 days for 2013/14 8.5 days for 2014/15, the Executive had broadly accepted these figures as well.

The main point of discussion was in respect of non payment for the first 3 days. The Inquiry Chair advised that the Committee had concluded it could not be recommended to be applied across the board, but that they had listened to Managers who wanted to have this as an option in consultation with the Chief Executive. This was turned down by the last Executive. The Inquiry Chair indicated that he did not think this was a problem, as many of the agreed recommendations had the tools within them to enable them to make improvements.

- The Cabinet Member was asked whether Cabinet would accept the recommended annual target to reduce the figures in sickness absence from 9.7 in 2012/13 to 9 days in 2013/14 and 8.5 days in 2014/15. This was seen as crucial in order to be robust over the next 3 years. In response, the Cabinet Member advised that Cabinet had not considered the proposals for sickness absence at this stage, but if this Committee felt these targets were important and critical, he would

want to take this to the Cabinet. This would be the first time Cabinet had formally given consideration to this matter.

- A Member expressed the view that rather than taking a punitive approach, whereas the Council needs to support staff and bring about the situation where people are able to work. There should be a more robust analysis of the information available. It was previously stated by a Member that there were directly comparable organisations that had made progress in managing absence. The Member questioned the term ‘directly comparable’. The point that has been made was that as there is a wide complex range of employment within the Authority, it is difficult to compare with other organisations such as the Police, Royal Mail or Welsh Government. Whilst they might have some manual workers job groups and context won’t be appropriate for the purpose of comparison;
- It was confirmed that as part of the Inquiry a number of Local Authorities were invited to take part as witnesses;
- It was suggested there should be comparison with particular types of jobs and with workers with the same types of jobs in the voluntary and private sector, and also to compare ‘like with like’ elsewhere. It was suggested that the Council should start again with a different analysis of the figures and approach the situation in a more positive way. In response, the Cabinet Member advised the Committee that the management of absence continues to be a priority for the Council and we have to give some consideration to how this is managed, but the Council should be honest with the staff about the adverse impact that these sickness levels are having on the Authority;
- The TU representative expressed concern about the level of stress caused by downsizing of the workforce and the impact on remaining staff. Concern was also expressed about the triggers and the possible dismissal when reach stage 4 is reached. This is seen as a problem with the policy. A scenario was outlined that if a person was on a final warning for 18 months and was sick, irrespective of the policy, the person would be dismissed.

The Corporate Chief Officer Shared Services sought clarification on the above comments and asked whether the above comments were suggesting that in these very difficult cases there is no flexibility. It was confirmed that a Critical Illness policy had been introduced and had been in place for 4 years and would be incorporated into the new

Attendance and Wellbeing Policy so there would still be support to deal with such cases sensitively. This was agreed with the TUs;

- The Cabinet Member confirmed he would seek confirmation from Officials precisely what the arrangements are, particularly in respect of how staff with critical illness are supported.
- With regard to previous comments that the measures were punitive the Cabinet Member advised that he did not think the measures Cardiff had in place or were proposing were punitive as long as implemented properly. He also supported the fact that the Council should compare like with like with other Authorities;
- Clarification was sought about the recording of sickness absence. It was explained that for a number of years sickness absence had been managed by SAP (the Systems, Applications, and Products system used by the Council) and the back office whereas now recording is managed through DigiGov although this has not yet been rolled out to all service areas. It was confirmed that DigiGov includes the current trigger points, etc. so that any changes would need to be built into the system so that revised arrangements can be implemented from April 2013.
- It was requested that sickness as a result of industrial injury should be clearly identified in the recorded data.
- The Cabinet Member advised that this recommendation had not been consulted on previously, there are some people in the Cabinet that voice support on that basis. The Cabinet Member did not feel that this could be eliminated from the consultation process, as it was never endorsed by the Cabinet;
- The need to consider motivation and retention of staff as well as the benefits of providing a good sickness policy when attracting people to the Council should be considered when implementing new policies and care should be taken to ensure they are not too prescriptive;
- A Member suggested that the Council should look at the statistics for other Authorities. Although it was highlighted that Monmouth and Anglesey have the highest number of days lost to sickness absence. It would be beneficial to compare to Authorities outside of Wales as there are no other Authorities in Wales as large as Cardiff. For

instance, more meaningful comparisons could be made with the Core Cities.

- Reference was made to the practicality of the timescales for long term sickness absence particularly in the schools. The Corporate Chief Officer confirmed that there was sufficient capacity to bring forward case conferences if required and that the Council are able to operate to the shorter timescale;
- Information was sought about the costs of wellbeing initiatives. It was confirmed that in terms of working with Partners, there were no cost implications. It was a question of aligning our programme with Partners. Prevention is given priority. It is about aligning what the Partners do and offer this service to Council staff;
- In response to a query about the contribution of the initiatives in terms of Mental Health Partnerships, the Committee was advised that the Council had reduced the number of long term sickness cases from 560 to 360 as a result of these preventative initiatives with partners;
- With regard to career breaks, it was confirmed that the Council has in place a Sabbatical Leave Scheme which allowed individuals to request a period of unpaid leave from 3 months to 2 years;
- With regard to a query about the recommendations, it was confirmed that all the Committee's recommendations from the previous scrutiny were in the report, some have been actioned already, some are showing as amber pending Cabinet's final decision;
- With regard to the effect of the recommendation on the terms and conditions, it was confirmed that with the exception of the non payment for the first 3 days, all the other recommendations would not involve changes to the terms and conditions;
- In response to a request for further information on the Mutual Fund it was confirmed that Head Teachers and Officers were working on proposals which would come forward at the Head Teachers Conference in January 2013.
- Reference was made to the benefits of the Employee Counselling service to staff which had been well received and had a positive effect

on those who accessed. It was requested that consideration be given to extending this service;

The Chairperson thanked the Cabinet Member and the Officers for their responses to Members' questions. Following discussion on the way forward it was

AGREED – That a letter be sent by the Chairperson on behalf of the Committee to Councillor Russell Goodway, Cabinet Member Finance Business and Local Economy thanking him and his Officers for attending the Policy Review and Performance Scrutiny Committee on 28 November 2012 and to convey the following observations of the Committee:-

- The Committee welcomed the Cabinet Member's comments regarding the value which the Leader and the Cabinet places on engaging fully with Scrutiny in the development of Council policies, in particular where these affect Council staff;
- The Committee wished to make clear Members' unanimous opposition to the proposal to withdraw pay for the first three days of any sickness absence. Members were of the view that such a course would unfairly penalise genuinely ill staff and in particular would affect the lowest-paid officers. Members remain unconvinced by the evidence available to support the implementation of such a suggestion. They noted that only a very small number of English local authorities have put this in place and that no supporting data was provided to prove that this had resulted in lower levels of sickness absence. Furthermore, while the Committee notes that some private sector organisations have followed such a policy, Members would question whether this is necessarily an example which the Council would wish to emulate.
- The Committee noted the Cabinet Member's statement that he did not feel it would have been appropriate to remove the option of non-payment from the proposals prior to their consideration by Scrutiny and that there was support for this course from some officers. However, as the Managing Attendance inquiry recommended that the *option* to remove sick pay for the first three days should be available for line managers where other measures had not been successful, and only on the authority of the Chief Executive, Members would like clarification as to how this was developed into a proposal for removal of payment in all cases.

- Members were concerned that Council employees may have become aware of this proposal via media reports following the publication of committee papers and the accompanying draft policy, feeling that this would have caused great concern among members of staff. The Committee emphasised the need to ensure that in future there is a sensitive communication plan in place around proposals of a similar nature, making it clear to staff when matters are still under consultation rather than firm Cabinet intentions.
- The Committee welcomed that regard had been made to the September 2011 'Managing Attendance' task and finish report of the Policy Review and Performance Scrutiny Committee report. Rather than comment on each specific element of the current draft policy under consultation, the Committee wishes to highlight the following areas:
 - Members wished to commend the more positive approaches contained within the draft Policy, particularly in terms of earlier referral to the Occupational Health Service; the increase in preventative initiatives; and work around mental health issues. The Committee would in particular like to lend its support to the comment from Trade Union colleagues that the Employee Counselling Service should be extended if possible, and would hope that this will be considered as part of the Cabinet's budget proposals.
 - Members welcomed the Cabinet Member's openness to communicating the Committee's recommendations to the Cabinet in terms of future targets for the reduction of sickness absence levels. They therefore wished to endorse the recommendation of the Managing Attendance inquiry that a target of 9 days should be set for 2013/14 and a target of 8.5 days for 2014/15 and hoped to see this reflected in the draft Corporate Plan when we consider it in February.
 - The Committee also noted the query from Trade Union colleagues as to whether the draft Policy had undergone Equality Impact Assessment. The Committee would be interested to receive the results of any Assessment undertaken, so that Members can monitor any differential impact.

- The Committee noted that the Corporate Chief Officer for Shared Services felt there is sufficient capacity to bring forward case conferences as outlined in the draft Policy and will keep a watching brief on this aspect.
- The Committee wished to monitor the effectiveness and implementation of the training which is available for line managers on the sickness absence policy.
- The Committee requested further information regarding the Mutual Fund, once Headteacher conferences have taken place in January 2013.
- Members asked that the sickness figures clearly identify absence which is due to industrial injury.
- Members asked that the current commitment to the critical illness policy be maintained and fully implemented.
- Members asked for flexibility and discretion to be applied in the implementation of the policy if particular circumstances merited it.
- Members asked for an explanation of why the overall sickness absence levels seemed to have remained static despite long term absences reducing.
- One member of the Committee was not convinced by the evidence base which is available in terms of comparative sickness data, across other local authorities and similar employment sectors, and wished this concern to be voiced.
- The Committee wished to closely observe the implementation of the Policy and will look to schedule this into its work programme for 2013/14. Members will pay particular attention to the effectiveness of any changes in triggers/stages at this juncture.
- The Committee would be grateful if the Cabinet Member would ensure that the Committee's comments are considered prior to the presentation of the draft Attendance & Wellbeing Policy by the Cabinet on 6th December, in particular the Committee's recommendation that non-payment for the first three days of sickness absence should be removed from the proposals.

