

POLICY REVIEW AND PERFORMANCE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

16 MAY 2023

Present: Councillor Williams(Chairperson)
Councillors Ash-Edwards, Chowdhury, Henshaw, Hunt, Stubbs
and Thomson

66 : APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

None received.

Cllr Henshaw advised she would be late attending the meeting.

67 : DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Cllr Henshaw declared a personal interest as family members work for the Council.

Cllr Williams declared a personal interest as a family member works for the Council.

68 : MINUTES

The minutes of the meetings held on 1/3/23 and 22/3/23 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chairperson.

69 : WORKFORCE STRATEGY 2023-2027

The Chairperson advised Members that Cabinet approved the Workforce Strategy 2023-27 in March 2023, setting out a framework to ensure a flexible, skilled, engaged and diverse workforce. This was therefore an opportunity to gain a full understanding of the Workforce Strategy, a foundation for the development of the Hybrid Working Policy. Whilst the Workforce Strategy has already been agreed Members comments and observations are sought as a starting point for informing action planning and a benchmark for measuring progress over the next 18 months

The Chairperson welcomed Councillor Chris Weaver, Cabinet Member Finance, Modernisation and Performance; Paul Orders, Chief Executive; Chris Lee, Corporate Director, Resources and Tracey Thomas, Chief Human Resources Officer, for this item.

Cllr Weaver and the Chief Executive were invited to make statements after which Members were provided with a presentation.

The Chairperson invited questions and comments from Members.

Members advocated for the option of working from various locations, not just home or the office, including other council buildings and public service partner locations where appropriate. They emphasised that staff should not be forced to work from home and that managers should not insist on a specific location, as it may harm the manager-staff relationship.

Members stressed that managers should have an equal relationship with staff whether they are interacting on screen or in person, while respecting the fine line between work and home privacy. Protocols and protections to ensure employee confidentiality and manager support need to be established.

Concerns were raised about the potential loss of collaboration and inspiration from extroverted staff when working from home. Members considered that the Hybrid Working Policy should include guidance for managers in cases where remote employees are not performing well.

Members expressed the view that staff should not be financially disadvantaged by working from home due to increased living costs. Members were advised that the policy will evolve over time, and staff can return to the office if working from home becomes too expensive. Members were further advised that a reduction in travel costs can offset the increased expenses of home office utilities.

Assurances were sought regarding security protocols for employees living abroad, including proper recruitment processes and the necessary work visas.

Work/life balance was discussed, with a suggestion to address the demands of consecutive online meetings and the need for breaks to protect employee health and well-being.

Members felt that individuals have a right to privacy in their own homes and may have valid reasons for keeping their camera off during remote work. However, it was agreed that appropriate attire should be maintained during virtual meetings.

Members considered that accurate data on the number of employees choosing to work from County Hall each day is needed before revising the policy. Members requested access to any existing data on staff working from core office buildings to inform the development of the Hybrid Working Policy.

Members discussed the importance of setting a cut-off time from work while ensuring team coverage throughout the day. Members felt strongly that employees should not be expected to be available beyond normal office hours, and team members should share their working plans with managers to ensure adequate coverage.

AGREED: that the Chairperson, on behalf of the Committee, writes to the Cabinet Member conveying the observations of the Committee when discussing the way forward.

70 : HYBRID WORKING POLICY FRAMEWORK

Members were advised that this item offered an opportunity for policy development scrutiny of the Council's approach to developing a Hybrid Working Policy. The report attached at Appendix 1 of the papers proposes a framework for the Council's approach to developing a Hybrid Working Policy, and delegates detailed development of the policy to the Head of Paid Services, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Finance, Modernisation and Performance. Members were invited to offer ideas as to the content of the Hybrid Working Policy, with a focus on the broad principles listed in the report, and to identify additional areas for research as

the Council continues developing the policy. Committee has undertaken previous scrutiny on this subject, including its own research on Home and Agile working so Members were also invited to consider whether their recommendations on Homeworking had informed the policy framework developed to date.

The Chairperson welcomed Councillor Chris Weaver, Cabinet Member Finance, Modernisation and Performance, Chris Lee, Corporate Director, Resources and Tracey Thomas, Chief Human Resources Officer, for this item.

Cllr Weaver was invited to make a statement after which Members were provided with a presentation.

The Chairperson invited questions and comments from Members.

Members discussed the need to review the organisation's cultural values as part of the Workforce Strategy. They were pleased to hear that managers will receive guidance on managing staff based on outcomes rather than on presence. Members stressed the importance of shared cultural values and their integration into action planning for the Workforce Strategy.

The Chief Executive acknowledged the need to revisit organisational values and develop an employee charter with an emphasis on openness, fairness, and unity. Staff conversations and surveys will be prioritised to gather views.

Members noted that the new working model will require managers to understand organisational culture, recognise the significance of their interactions with staff, and serve as role models. A management competency framework linked to cultural position will be developed, outcomes will be rewarded, and the framework's effectiveness will be constantly reviewed.

Members welcomed the positive approach to social partnerships and the existence of good relationships. They were assured that robust discussions within appropriate boundaries will continue and that the balance and embedding of these partnerships are unlikely to change.

Members stressed the importance of face-to-face engagement with staff to ensure managers have a thorough understanding of their team members. Members were advised that this focused engagement will be outlined in Directorate Delivery Plans, offering flexibility to suit both managers and staff.

Members sought assurance that frontline staff have been trained in a trauma-informed approach and were advised that Occupational Health works closely with managers, particularly in areas such as Children's Services.

Members welcomed the forthcoming HR guidance on managing neurodiverse conditions and the Council's focus on mental health conditions. Members were advised of the planned development of online awareness training for various neurodiverse conditions.

Members were assured that consultation with trade unions, employee networks, and management fora took place before the Workforce Strategy was presented to Cabinet and that the strategy's content has been communicated to all staff.

Members discussed the capacity and skills base of the HR service to provide appropriate support. They were informed about a recent restructuring within the HR service, which brought in new skills through newly appointed managers.

Flexibility was highlighted as important, and Members welcomed the aspiration to retain staff through flexible retirement options and career development opportunities. Members were pleased to learn that the Council aims to retain and attract older employees (65+), and conversations and consultation with staff will be valuable in this regard. Members noted and welcomed that restructures present opportunities for increasing the number of apprenticeships.

Members noted that the Council operates in a highly competitive job market with a high number of job vacancies nationally and public sector pay awards that do not match private sector awards. Members were advised that communication efforts need to be more competitive to address recruitment and retention challenges. Members considered that the non-financial benefits of working in the public sector should be emphasised. Members noted that simplifying the application process for Council jobs and encouraging staff to share their work experiences are underway.

AGREED: that the Chairperson, on behalf of the Committee, writes to the Cabinet Member conveying the observations of the Committee when discussing the way forward.

71 : DIGITAL & CUSTOMER SERVICES

The Chairperson advised that this item gives Members an update on developments in respect of the Council's Customer and Digital Services. Committee's Terms of Reference confer responsibility for scrutiny of the overall operation of the Council's programme for improvement, including Contact Centre Services, Service Access, Information and Communication Technology. This scrutiny presented the latest position in both Customer and Digital worlds, recognising their interdependence, and that they are central to the Council's post pandemic improvement programme. Given the digital transformation of this topic, Members were invited to test the direction of travel was in line with the well-being of future generations whilst ensuring the Council is inclusive to all its customers. Members were also invited to reflect on opportunities for further scrutiny engagement as part of the Committees 2023/24 work programme.

The Chairperson welcomed Councillor Chris Weaver, Cabinet Member Finance, Modernisation and Performance, Chris Lee, Corporate Director, Resources, Isabelle Bignall, Chief Digital Officer, and Rachel Bishop, Customer Services Manager, for this item.

Cllr Weaver was invited to make a statement after which Members were provided with a presentation.

The Chairperson invited questions and comments from Members.

Members emphasised the importance of preserving accessibility for all as the Council progresses with digital services, particularly for those who speak minority languages and individuals with sight loss. They requested access to the accessibility report for the digital strategy to ensure inclusivity.

Members welcomed the arrangements with other local authorities to share expertise in services such as Commissioning & Procurement and encouraged officers to explore further collaboration with digital services.

Members acknowledged the extensive work done to ensure effective delivery of Bobi, the Council's chatbot, in the Welsh language. They encouraged officers to explore commercial opportunities to share this expertise but noted the challenge of recruiting and retaining software developers in the current climate.

Members expressed interest in an awareness-raising visit to frontline customer services, C2C. Members also requested training on digital awareness, Bobi the chatbot, AI ChatGPT, and how AI can assist the Council in handling complaints.

Members sought assurance that the personal data of Council customers shared on social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter is not stored. They recognised the value of using social media for public engagement but emphasised the need for oversight and appropriate channels for service requests, such as redirecting planning-related comments to the Planning Portal.

The Committee sought assurance that the Council has appropriate coverage in the event of a data breach, given the sensitivity of the data it handles. Members were informed about robust processes for detecting cyber threats, recent external audits of cyber security arrangements, and the identification of weak links such as retaining cyber security staff and mitigating the risk of staff opening phishing links. Members were advised that the Council conducts phishing tests and offers online cyber security training modules.

AGREED: that the Chairperson, on behalf of the Committee, writes to the Cabinet Member conveying the observations of the Committee when discussing the way forward.

72 : DATE OF NEXT MEETING

To be confirmed.

The meeting terminated at 7.30 pm

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