

**NORTHAMPTON BOROUGH COUNCIL**

**LEADER OF THE COUNCIL AND GENERAL PURPOSES OVERVIEW &  
SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

**Wednesday, 3 November 2004**

**PRESENT:** Councillor M Allen (Chair); Councillor C Malpas (Deputy Chair);  
Councillors M Boss, J Caswell, R Church, B Glynane (In place of B  
Hoare) and A Roy

Head of Outdoor Environment  
Head of Human Resources  
Scrutiny Officer  
Chief Accountant  
Head of Overview and Scrutiny  
Employee Relations Manager

**1. APOLOGIES**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors B Hoare and Flavell.

At this point the Chair referred to the 'Handling Complaints' Leaflet. The Committee requested that it be ascertained that the all Members had been sent a copy of the leaflet.

**2. MINUTES**

The Chair signed the minutes of the meeting of 21 September 2004.

**3. DEPUTATIONS / PUBLIC ADDRESSES**

There were none.

**4. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (INCLUDING WHIPPING DECLARATIONS)**

There were none.

**5. NEIGHBOURHOOD RENEWAL STRATEGY**

The Head of Overview and Scrutiny advised that the draft strategy had been submitted to the Chairs and Deputies asking for member involvement on a working party. They had suggested that the political groups nominate members to the working party and that this committee might want to monitor the progress of the draft strategy.

The Committee commented that the Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy could only be achieved on a partnership basis.

Members suggested that once the strategy was completed, the Leader be asked to address this Committee on how NBC could carry out its role and how it could be ensured that NBC complied with the Strategy. It was agreed that it would be beneficial for the Working Party to give a progress report to this Committee early next year.

- RESOLVED:**
- (1) That the Leader be asked to address this Committee at a future meeting on how NBC would carry out its role and how it could be ensured that NBC complied with the strategy across all departments.
  - (2) That the Working Party present a progress report to this Committee at a meeting early in the New Year.

## **6. SICKNESS ABSENCE**

Jennifer Jackson, Corporate Personnel Manager and Sue Croughan, Head of Human Resources addressed the Committee on the Council's Attendance Management Framework and Attendance Management Policy. It detailed NBC's position on sickness absence levels, what the Authority was doing to address absence levels and gave a clear indication of the roles and responsibilities of line managing sickness absence.

NBC's sickness absence levels were higher than average. There had been a steady rise in sickness absence over the past four years to 13 average days (5%) per full time employee for the period ending 31 March 2004. Councils in the upper quartile had sickness absence of eight days (3%) per full time employee. We consistently failed to achieve our own targets with an average 17,000 days lost across the organisation.

Improving sickness absence was a key priority in the Recovery Plan. The target was to be in the upper quartile by 2006/07. The target for 2004/05 was 11.5 days per full time employee. Details of data for the first quartile would be analysed by January 2005.

The impact of absence equated to £1.8 million. If overtime and replacement cover figures were included this figure would increase to £2 million. (Further work on meaningful data was needed.)

Measures that would be introduced as the most effective to reduce sickness absence included: -

- Return to work interviews
- Early Occupational Health referral
- Robust trigger points for management action
- Steps to guide managers through short/long term absences
- Emphasis on monitoring and evaluating data to identify causes of absence
- Training on absence monitoring

The impact of sickness absence included: -

- Impact on Managers' time trying to find replacement cover
- Return to work interviews
- Continuity of service delivery

- Morale and performance of employees left to cover the work

The Committee discussed the following concerns:

- Whether there was a policy of departments only permitting a set percentage of staff to be on leave at any one time
- The proportion of sickness absence due to stress
- Whether employees with stress could self-refer to Occupational Health
- The statutory requirement for time off for ante-natal care
- Whether occupational injury sick leave was monitored separately
- Whether assaults on employees were recorded
- Whether Investors in People (IIP) status was being aimed for
- Whether any employees had been dismissed for absence reasons
- The need to monitor occupational injury to identify the profile of NBC
- Ensuring managers managed this effectively
- How to promote a positive attendance culture, people wanting to work for NBC
- Drilling down beyond 'average' figures (some off 30 days, some none) to get a real picture.
- Absence breaking the contract of employment - sanctions
- Cutting some slack to avoid sickness absence when 'leeway' is needed

Members were informed that: -

- A Council Policy was not in place for percentage staffing levels, other than for health and safety
- Antenatal care and disability treatment was not dealt with under sickness absence but was monitored in its own right.
- Occupational Health Providers would shortly be hosting an Awareness Day on how to best manage stress. Employees with stress could not self-refer under the current system. There would be the opportunity to review the range of services offered by Occupational Health.
- Occupational injury was recorded as part of sickness absence
- Violent instances against employees were reported as part of Health and Safety requirements.
- The target date for achieving IIP was December 2006.
- Details of how many employees had been dismissed due to absenteeism could be given to a future meeting.

The committee thanked J Jackson for her clear and informative presentation on the new system and the data that had informed it. The framework and policy were judged to be very fair.

- RESOLVED:**
- (1) That the analysis of the first quartile of data be presented to this Committee at its 29 March 2005 meeting.
  - (2) That the Committee requested that all Members be advised of the pending awareness day on managing

- stress.
- (3) That the Committee asked that officers consider monitoring absence due to occupational injury to enable comparison with other authorities and to identify our profile.

## **7. RECOVERY PLAN**

Members heard that the Recovery Board would be updating the Annexe to the Recovery Plan at its meeting on 4 November and it was suggested that once this document was updated it be debated at a future meeting of this Committee.

The Chair referred to the Development of Overview and Scrutiny Seminar that had been postponed to accommodate the Call in Hearing on 2 November. It was suggested that the Political Parties discuss a series of convenient dates for re-scheduling the Seminar and forward details to the Head of Overview and Scrutiny as to how effective monitoring could be achieved.

**RESOLVED:** That the updated Annexe to the Recovery Plan be debated at a future meeting in conjunction with the Leader of the Council.

## **8. GREEN BURIALS**

The Chair had placed this item on the agenda, in order that Members could decide if they should carry out a review of green burials, or maybe refer the item to Health and Environment Scrutiny Committee as cemeteries were running out of space and this was a possible solution.

The Chair referred to the privately run green burial site at Olney, commenting that the initiative retained the natural land as a park. Each burial had an oak tree planted and it was envisaged that the site would eventually become a mini forest.

Alan Adkinson, Head of Outdoor Environment, explained that NBC had introduced green burials in 1996, allocating 300 single spaces, 34 of which had been taken and 55 pre-purchased. Green burials were promoted in NBC's cemeteries booklet, which was available at local undertakers. When applying for a grave, individuals were given details of green burials. Monuments were not permitted, but trees, shrubs or wild flowers could be planted and a small embossed plaque that eventually biodegraded was allowed. Trees could not be planted on every grave, as they were only one foot apart. Coffins were made of biodegradable materials.

Graves were currently being electronically tagged to ensure a record of individual sites. Individuals could carry out a green burial without the assistance of an undertaker but would have to notify the Department of Births, Deaths & Marriages of the location of a grave.

The committee discussed issues concerning: -

- Charges for green burials compared to standard ones

- The amount of space being used and the possibility for vertical burial Costs ad regulations for scattering ashes
- The need for a standard coffin
- Whether more burials can be accommodated than in a regular site

The Committee was informed that: -

- The charge for traditional and green burials was the same. For a green burial there would be no monument fee, trees, shrubs or wild flowers were included in the price.
- NBC's green burial site would continue for a number of years. Investigations would take place to expand green burials to other cemeteries within the Borough. There were different burial practices over the country, but burying coffins upright could be contrary to some religious beliefs. If there was a request for a vertical burial it could be accommodated.
- Approximately 2/3 of all disposals were by cremation. Two caskets could be buried in 2' by 2' of land. Ashes could be scattered almost anywhere with the landowner's permission. It was forbidden to scatter ashes on sports grounds. The cost of interring ashes into a plot in a crematorium was £280, £65 for green ashes.
- Bodies did not have to be buried in a coffin but must be covered by a shroud. If the body had a contagious disease it must be placed in body bag.

The Chair was pleased that NBC offered a green burial service but was disappointed that the present service would not help the shortage of land problem; in fact our green burials used more space than the conventional ones. She suggested it might be worth NBC considering alternative options.

The Head of Outdoor Environment advised that alternative ways of running cemeteries was being investigated. Bletchley & Fenny Stratford Town Council had put a ban on any further burials. As part of the South Midlands Study, a large area of land had been asked to be identified that could be jointly run by the Local Authorities. A green burials site would be a pre-requisite.

- RESOLVED:**
- (1) That the Committee make the observation to the Executive that the 20 year problem of lack of burial space be addressed by consideration of dual – use burial sites.
  - (2) That the current system of green burials within Northampton and the proposals as part of the South Midlands Study are noted.

## 9. FUTURE WORK PROGRAMME

- RESOLVED:** That the following items be discussed at the next meeting of this Committee:
- The Role of the General Purposes Committee – P Newham, Borough Solicitor
  - The role of Full Council
  - How Policies are developed and disseminated throughout the Authority

- Budget Preparation – B Hill, Chief Accountant Forward Plan

The meeting concluded at 8:06 pm.

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