

## **PLACE AND RESOURCES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

### **MINUTES OF MEETING HELD ON TUESDAY 12 SEPTEMBER 2023**

**Present:** Cllrs Shane Bartlett (Chairman), Andy Canning (Vice-Chairman), Jon Andrews, Piers Brown, David Shortell and David Tooke

**Apologies:** Cllrs Rod Adkins, Barry Goringe, Brian Heatley and Bill Trite

**Also present:** Cllr Les Fry and Cllr Andrew Parry

**Also present remotely:** Cllr Jill Haynes, Cllr Laura Beddow, Cllr Cherry Brooks, Cllr Ray Bryan and Cllr Jane Somper

**Officers present (for all or part of the meeting):**

Chris Matthews (Head of Human Resources), Julian Wain (Strategic Property Advisor), Lindsey Watson (Senior Democratic Services Officer) and John Miles (Democratic Services Officer)

**Officers present remotely (for all or part of the meeting):**

Matthew Piles (Corporate Director - Economic Growth and Infrastructure)

#### **22. Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting held on 4 July 2023 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

#### **23. Declarations of interest**

There were no declarations of interest.

#### **24. Chairman's Update**

In response to a request at the last meeting of the committee, the Head of Human Resources provided an overview of levels of sickness absence within the council and the activity being taken forward to support the workforce in remaining fit and well. The full text of the update is provided at appendix 1.

Councillors considered the information provided and comments were made in the following areas:

- Return to work interviews following a period of sickness – work was being undertaken around the validation of data to ensure that there were systems in place to capture data, particularly in the case of remote workers
- Recognition of the impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic

- Benchmarking with similar local authorities – the availability of data to make comparisons between the situation with staff – a benchmarking network with other local authorities was currently being formed to share information
- A further report was to be provided to the committee at the November meeting regarding staff turnover and further information on sickness benchmarking could also be provided.

The Chairman thanked the Head of Human Resources for the update and asked that the thanks of the committee be passed to the team.

## 25. **Public Participation**

There were no questions or statements from members of the public or local organisations.

## 26. **Questions from Councillors**

There were no questions from councillors.

## 27. **Property Strategy and Asset Management Plan Update**

The committee received and considered a report of the Corporate Director for Assets and Property which provided an update on progress in relation to the Property Strategy and Asset Management Plan adopted by Cabinet on 3 November 2020. The committee was invited to review and comment on the progress made in achieving the actions in the plan.

The Portfolio Holder for Assets and Property and the Chairman of the committee thanked Peter Hopkins, former Corporate Director for Assets and Property for his work and contribution to Dorset Council.

Councillors considered the issues arising from the report and during discussion the following points were raised:

- Current surplus freehold and leasehold assets identified for disposal or termination would be subject to separate reports
- Examples were provided of ongoing issues and it was noted that some disposals were complex
- Larger assets would be dealt with through the processes set out in the report and would include consultation with relevant ward councillors. Smaller assets would be dealt with through the Corporate Landlord model
- It was important to ensure that smaller council owned assets were included within the database and maintenance regime. The role of ward councillors in this area was recognised
- There was a request for further information regarding the appointment of Public Intelligence and access to the report produced
- There was a need to consider both the capital value of an asset and the social gain value
- The report by Public Intelligence had confirmed that the right process had been identified and that the council should move forward with it. Assets would be reviewed and ward councillors would be involved

- Examples of the use of the Corporate Landlord model in the areas of libraries and housing were provided. Work was being undertaken to establish user agreements to ensure there was a clear understanding of responsibility and usage
- The relationship between the property and assets team and the service departments was considered and it was noted that there was a need for flexibility within the agreed framework
- There was ongoing engagement with service departments and external partners and regular meetings with Cabinet members to discuss issues
- In respect of RAAC (Reinforced Autoclaved Aerated Concrete) it was noted that there were ongoing surveys with no problems identified to date
- Information provided on business partners working in this area, 'One Public Estate' and the workplace utilisation study
- A question was asked as to whether councillors would be able to access the property database.

At the conclusion of the discussion, the Chairman provided a summary of the key points arising as follows:

- Councillors were assured by the information included within the report, details of the property strategy and that the council had the right processes in place
- A request for a series of webinars to be arranged to keep councillors informed of issues regarding property and assets and information to be included as part of the May 2024 induction – to provide an overview of the strategy and what the council was hoping to achieve – and use of informal cluster meetings with ward councillors where relevant
- Information relating to the appointment of Public Intelligence to be provided to committee members following the meeting and a request as to whether councillors could view the report
- The position with whether councillors were able to access Tech Forge (new cloud-based property database) would be clarified following the meeting
- It was noted that an agile working review was in progress including the use of hot-desking and remote working and was linked to the review of future accommodation requirements
- The strategic plan needed to ensure that duplication was not taking place but recognised the need for flexibility.

The Chairman thanked the Strategic Property Advisor and the team for the work they were undertaking.

## 28. **Place and Resources Scrutiny Committee Work Programme**

Councillors reviewed the committee's work programme and noted items to be considered at forthcoming meetings. In addition to the items included on the work

programme, an item relating to tourism issues would be brought to the November meeting.

It was noted that Cabinet had asked the committee to undertake a review of car parking charges within the context of the Council's adopted policy and the timescale for consideration of this report would be confirmed.

**29. Cabinet Forward Plan and Decisions**

Councillors considered the Cabinet Forward Plan and decisions of the meeting held on 25 July 2023, which the committee could use to identify potential areas for post decision review.

Reference was made to the Cabinet decision of 5 September 2023, 'Home in on Housing: Dorset Council's role and response for the new and emerging Housing Strategy' and whether there was a role for scrutiny in this area. The Chairman noted that a discussion would be held with the relevant portfolio holder and officers.

**30. Urgent items**

There were no urgent items.

**31. Exempt Business**

There was no exempt business.

**APPENDIX 1 - CHAIRMAN'S UPDATE**

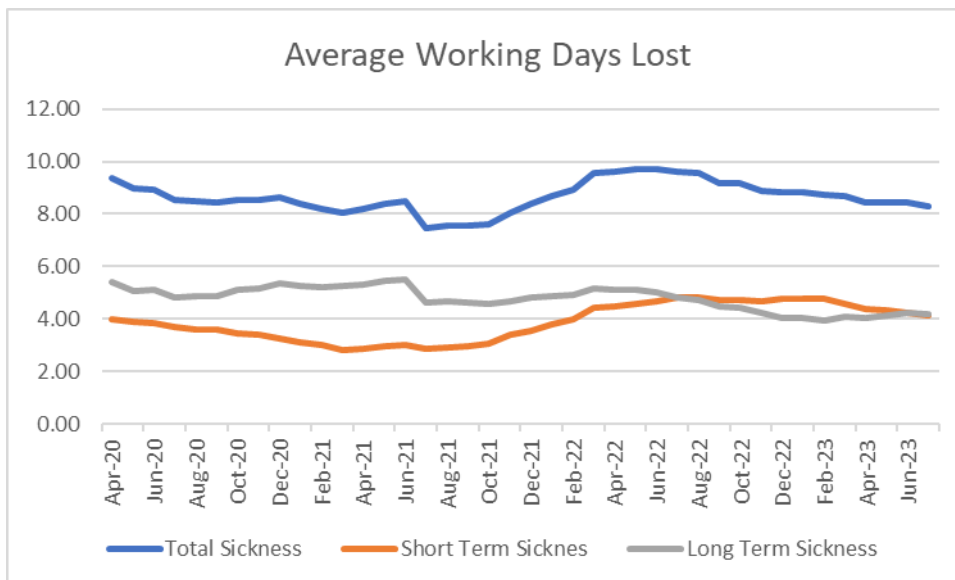
**Dorset Council Sickness Absence – August 2023**

**Introduction**

This briefing note provides an overview of levels of sickness absence within the council and the activity being taken forward to support the workforce in remaining fit and well.

**Sickness Absence Trends**

In line with the national picture, the pandemic introduced unprecedented challenges for Dorset Council, causing a significant disruption in workforce attendance. The implementation of remote working, lockdowns, and quarantine measures directly influenced absenteeism rates. In 2020, the sudden shift to remote work led to a significant reduction in short term absence. However, the pandemic's prolonged nature resulted in an increase in mental health-related absences and burnout, resulting in an increase in long term absence.



Whilst levels of short-term absence have increased to pre-pandemic levels, because of increased social connection and the continued prevalence of Covid, long term sickness absence has reduced, equating to roughly half of overall absence compared to two-thirds in 2021.

Mental health related absence continues to be the biggest contributor to long term sickness absence across most directorates, with the Place directorate having proportionately more Musculoskeletal related long-term absence compared to other directorates, which is not unexpected due to the physical nature of roles within the directorate (i.e., Waste Collection, Highways etc.).

### Action

Levels of attendance are monitored as part of the Council’s Performance Management Framework, with appropriate commentary provided at a directorate level to provide a better understanding of cause and action.

Supporting employees to remain well and at work is a key priority for the council, as reflected by the inclusion of specific actions in this area within the council’s People Strategy Delivery Plan.

Each directorate has developed an employee wellbeing plan, working closely with employees to identify activity that can be taken forward to help people stay well. This includes a range of activity, including the delivery of specific mental health training and increased promotion of routes to support.

Having skilled, experienced, and confident managers in place to support colleagues is crucial and a range of opportunities to develop skills and experience in this area have been developed and introduced. The Council’s Leadership and Management Development Academy, accessible to all managers in the Council, includes a range of modules to help increase awareness of good practice. The Council’s HR Advisory Team have also delivered face-to-face sessions with managers in areas experiencing high levels of sickness absence, to ensure full

awareness of our policy and procedure and to help increase the confidence of managers in its application.

A key element of the Council's Attendance Management Procedure is the need for an interview to take place when employees return to work from any absence. This ensures that employees are well supported and that any actions can be identified and implemented to help ensure attendance can remain as high as possible. Levels of return to work interview completion are monitored as part of the council's performance scorecard, with current completion rates sitting at 86%. Work is underway to validate the data and identify areas for improvement.

**Duration of meeting:** 10.05 - 11.37 am

**Chairman**

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