



LONDON BOROUGH OF BRENT

MINUTES OF THE GENERAL PURPOSES COMMITTEE

Wednesday 25 February 2015 at 6.00 pm

PRESENT: Councillor Moher (Vice Chair in the Chair) and Councillors Crane, Hirani, Kansagra, Mahmood, McLennan and Pavey

Apologies for absence were received from: Councillors Butt and Denselow

1. Declarations of personal and prejudicial interests

None declared.

2. Minutes of the previous meeting

RESOLVED:

that the minutes of the previous meeting held on 29 January 2015 be approved as an accurate record of the meeting, subject to the inclusion of Councillor Mahmood as substitute member in the list of members present.

3. Matters arising

None.

4. Deputations (if any)

None

5. Establishment of a Pension Board

A report setting out the requirement for the council to establish a Pension Board by 1 April 2015 was presented to the committee by Conrad Hall (Chief Finance Officer). This requirement was introduced by new regulations which came into force on 26 January 2015 and was part of a wider change in governance of pensions nationally. It was emphasised that there had been considerable debate as to whether the additional layer of governance provided value for money; however, the council was obliged to comply with the requirement. Conrad Hall advised that the board did not have decision making powers and could be considered to provide a scrutiny function of the work of the Pension Fund Sub-Committee. The purpose of the board would be to assist the sub-committee in carrying out its function and the board's remit therefore covered both pension administration and investment. The

report outlined a proposed way forward for the establishment of the Pension Board, and highlighted those areas over which the council had a degree of discretion.

The committee noted the views expressed by Unison on the proposed arrangements for the Pension Board and sought further details regarding the suggested level of representation on the Board. It was queried why it was proposed that there be no substitute members for the Board and the committee further questioned what experience and skills would be sought in the recruitment of the Independent Chair. Confirmation was sought that the costs of the Pension Board would be met by the Pension Fund. Further queries were raised regarding the process to be followed should the membership for the board need to be reviewed and/or amended in the future.

Members commented that it was important that there be member representation on the board and agreed that the Pension Board did not appear to be an efficient or cost effective way of improving performance.

Conrad Hall responded to the queries raised and explained that discussions had been held with Unison in relation to the proposals. The view that the size of the Pension Board should be relative to the asset value was not supported by officers. The suggested arrangements before the committee recommended that the Board have seven members, comprising three employer representatives, three scheme member representatives and an independent Chair. As the Council was not the only employer within the Pension Fund it was considered appropriate that one employer representative be drawn from one of the other employers. Two members of the Board would be drawn from the Trade Unions recognised by Brent. The organisations responsible for nominating members to the Board would be responsible for any subsequent changes to those nominations. If the requirement arose for a new independent Chair to be appointed, this position would have to be openly advertised. It was anticipated that a Finance Director or someone with an equivalent level of experience would be suitable for the role of Independent Chair; however it could prove difficult to attract someone to the position with the remuneration offered. The entire cost of the Pension Board would be met by the Pension Fund. A budget of £10,000 was proposed which would include provision for the Chair's allowance and enable the Board the flexibility to commission work.

In response to a further query regarding the Constitution of the Pension Board set out at appendix 2 to the report, Conrad Hall advised that paragraph 2, under the heading 'Procedure at meetings of the Board' had been included in error and should be deleted from the final document.

RESOLVED:

that the constitution of the Pension Board be agreed as set out in Appendix 2 to the Report, subject to the deletion of the second paragraph under the heading of 'Procedure at meetings of the Board'.

6. Local Government Pension Scheme Employer Pensions Discretions Policy

A report from the Director of HR was presented to the committee setting out the requirement, established under the Local Government Pension scheme

Regulations 2013, to publish a written policy statement detailing how discretionary powers relating to certain provisions of the Local Government Pension Scheme (LGPS) would be applied. The policy statement was required to cover five areas; augmentation of membership; awarding additional pension; flexible retirement; allowing early payment of benefits; and, waiving actuarial reduction for early retirement. A summary of the intended positions to be taken with respect to these five areas was set out in the report before the committee and members' attention was drawn to the Draft Employer Pension Discretions Policy attached as an appendix to the report.

In the subsequent discussion, members questioned what might constitute an exceptional case permitting the award of additional pension. A view was expressed that in addition to requiring the authorisation of the Director of HR and Chief Finance Officer, the award of additional pension should require Member approval.

In response to the queries raised, Conrad Hall advised that in very limited circumstances it might be considered appropriate to award additional pension; a possible scenario could involve a long standing member of staff being affected by an unforeseen family tragedy resulting in their no longer being able to work due to caring or parental responsibilities. The concern regarding potential abuse of the process was accepted and this concern underpinned the proposal that approval was required from both the Director of HR and the Chief Finance Officer. It was not considered appropriate that there be member involvement in the process; however, anonymised information on any such awards could be reported to the committee to further ensure transparency. The option of staggered retirement involved the member of staff reducing their hours substantially to prepare for retirement.

RESOLVED:

- (i) that the Employer Pension Discretions Policy as attached as an appendix to the report from the Director of HR be approved.
- (ii) that the HR Director in consultation with the Chief Executive and then in consultation with the relevant trade unions, be authorised to make such other changes as may be necessary from time to time to ensure it remains 'fit for purpose'.

7. Equality Strategy

Sarah Kaiser (Head of Equality) introduced a report to the committee outlining the new Equality Strategy 2015-19. The strategy sought to ensure that best practice was achieved across all council services and set out a refreshed vision underpinned by the values of fairness, respect for people, valuing diversity and excellence in all the council's services. The strategy also supported the work being undertaken by the council to achieve an 'excellent' assessment in the Equality Framework for Local Government in 2015. This framework had been used in the development of the strategy and extensive consultation had been carried out to ensure that the final draft before members was targeted and relevant for Brent. The committee's attention was drawn to the equality objectives and corresponding outcomes detailed in the draft strategy appended to the report. These objectives

were linked to the priorities set out in the new Borough Plan and would be delivered in line with the action plan attached as appendix 2 to the report.

During discussion, the committee sought confirmation that the objectives detailed in the strategy had been designed in such a way as to ensure that any progress achieved could be appropriately measured. A member commented that the strategy should refer to need to improve the numbers of BAME staff represented in the council's senior management. It was queried whether the council collected data currently on the use of services by BAME groups.

Sarah Kaiser acknowledged the importance of ensuring that the objectives set were measurable. The committee was advised that each department had its own equalities action plan, linked to each department's equality action group. Work was currently being undertaken with every council department to create a profile of service users and identify the key outcomes monitored. Sarah Kaiser confirmed that all services were expected to monitor the diversity of service users and this was broadly representative of Brent's population. Cara Davani (HR Director) agreed that the context element of the strategy could be amended to refer to the number of BAME staff represented within the council's senior management.

Christine Gilbert (Chief Executive) reminded the meeting that it had been agreed, as one of the actions arising from the review of Equalities and HR policies and practices, that a member committee would be established at the annual council meeting in May to oversee the progress towards achieving Excellence in Equalities Standard for Local Government. It would be appropriate therefore that the proposed annual reporting against the strategy be submitted to that committee.

RESOLVED:

that the Equality Strategy 2015-2019 and action plan be approved subject to the following amendments:

- (i) reference be made to the BAME representation in the council's senior management;
- (ii) the annual monitoring of the equalities strategy to be reported to the new committee due to be established to monitor progress against the achievement of Excellence in the Equalities Standard for Local Government.

8. Equality Policy

A report was presented to the committee by Cara Davani (HR Director) setting out a draft Equality Policy. This policy would replace and build upon Brent's existing Equality Policy to align with the council's new Equalities Strategy 2015 – 2019. Members were advised that the policy set out the council's commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion as a service provider, employer and local leader and outlined how the council would implement those commitments in its day to day activities. The policy would help to ensure that the council fulfilled its duties under the Equality Act 2010 and was intended to be implemented as of 1 April 2015, alongside the new Equality Strategy 2015 - 2019. Consultation had been held with the Corporate

Management Team, the HR Improvement Group and the trade unions and the feedback received had been incorporated in the draft before the committee.

The committee welcomed the new Equality Policy and the inclusion of a 'health and income status', which exceeded statutory requirements as it was not a characteristic protected from discrimination by law.

RESOLVED:

- (i) that the new Equality Policy be approved;
- (ii) that the HR Director, in consultation with the Chief Executive and the relevant trade unions, be authorised to make such other changes as may be necessary from time to time to the Equality Policy and associated procedures to ensure they remain relevant and 'fit for purpose'.

9. Workforce Strategy 2015 - 2019

A report was presented to the committee by Cara Davani (HR Director) setting out a Workforce Strategy 2015 – 2019 and associated action plan. It was explained that this would be the first council-wide workforce strategy for the council; it would compliment the Equalities Strategy 2015 – 2019 and was closely aligned to the council's Human Resources Strategy. Drawing members' attention to the draft strategy attached as an appendix to the report, Cara Davani explained that the strategy set out the means by which the council would engage, develop and empower its workforce in order to achieve the vision and aspirations of the council and its partners. The priorities highlighted in the strategy were placed both in a local and national context, including reductions to the council's budget, new service delivery arrangements and the changing labour market. Considerable consultation had been undertaken on the strategy and feedback from departmental management teams, the corporate management team, the HR information group, trade unions and the council Investors in People Assessor had been used to inform the content and recommended actions. Members were advised that the action plan supporting the strategy would be reviewed annually.

In discussing the item, members questioned how progress against the action plan would be measured and what actions were being taken to encourage staff to complete equalities information.

Cara Davani explained that progress would be measured using key performance indicators and these could be circulated to the committee as part of the annual reporting process. There was also a commitment to undertake a new staff survey, the last one having been held in 2010, which would provide further information to inform the progress achieved against the action plan. It was explained that the council had moved to a new Oracle system which required all staff to resubmit their equalities information. There was work taking place on a daily basis with staff and managers to encourage staff to complete their information but it was emphasised that there was no obligation for staff to disclose this information.

RESOLVED:

that the Workforce Strategy 2015 – 2019 and accompanying action plan be approved.

10. Human Resources Pandemic Policy

A report detailing the proposed new Pandemic Policy was presented to the committee by Cara Davani (HR Director). Members were advised that the current policy was considered overly lengthy and no longer fit for purpose. Specifically, it did not make clear that the remit of the policy was limited to internal staff management and business continuity, nor did it acknowledge or explain the wider context within which the HR policy would operate. Outlining the key features of the new policy which was attached as an appendix to the report, Cara Davani explained that it set out the wider context of response structures and chains of command that would be established in the event of a pandemic; it made clear that employees might be asked to take on tasks that go beyond their normal roles and responsibilities; and it emphasised the importance of planning for a loss of up to 50 percent of staff via departmental or service-level business continuity plans. The new policy confirmed that flexible working limits could be relaxed to allow staff to work up to five days a week from home in the event of a pandemic and acknowledged that staff could require additional emotional support during such a time. In developing the policy, the Emergency Planning team and the Director of Public Health had been consulted and had supported the proposed changes. Consultation had also been held with the HR improvement Group, Trade Union representatives and the Corporate Management Team.

The committee sought further details regarding the chain of command that would be in place in the event of a pandemic. Members also questioned how the policy had been developed and whether there was any specific guidance or existing policies that were reviewed during the process.

Cara Davani explained that the chain of command was set out in the disaster recovery plan. Christine Gilbert (Chief Executive) added that following a recent training exercise changes would be made to this in order to better utilise members within the structure. Cara Davani further advised that the policy had built upon the existing policy and necessary improvements had been identified in part through examining other pandemic policies and by working closely with public health colleagues.

RESOLVED:

that the Pandemic Policy, as attached as an appendix to the report from the Director of HR, be approved.

11. Appointments to Sub-Committees / Outside Bodies

None.

12. Any other urgent business

None.

The meeting closed at 7pm

CLLR R MOHER
Vice Chair in the Chair