

MATTERS FOR REPORT

5 - **RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION – DEPARTMENT OF RESOURCES AND CORPORATE POLICY AND IMPROVEMENT:** The Chair welcomed the Executive Director (Corporate Policy and Improvement) Mr Kevin Douglas and Mr Peter Jordan (Head of Legal and Democratic Services), together with the Business Support Manager, Marion Wrightson who had attended the meeting to respond to Members' questions with regard to recruitment and retention issues in their respective departments.

The Chair invited the Head of Legal and Democratic Services to refer to the briefing note circulated at the meeting in relation to the Department of Resources, which comprised the former Departments of Finance and Administration. The Head of Legal and Democratic Services referred to staff turnover rates averaging 13% per annum, representing 70 staff during the period April 2004 to January 2006. The reasons given for this turnover in staff were also given as follows: -

50 were for reasons that the Council was unable to influence.

18 were for reasons that the Council could potentially influence.

2 left as a result of HBC actions, i.e. performance/capability issues.

The Head of Legal and Democratic Services then referred to specific recruitment and retention issues affecting the Revenues and Benefits section, Information Technology, Legal and Democratic Services and Financial Management areas of the department, and then referred to a number of recruitment procedures employed within the Department, which were now implemented by Business Support upon which the Business Support Manager responded to Members questions, together with the impact of changes to the methods of advertising posts within the Department of Resources and Corporate Policy and Improvement which Business Support was also assisted. The analysis demonstrated certain unpredictability in response levels for posts, the increasing use of the Internet as a means of job hunting and the time taken between interview and appointment. The Head of Legal and Democratic Services then referred to specific initiatives aimed at retaining existing staff and attracting new recruits. Examples of flexible working hours, career grades, good working conditions and facilities, training and health and safety care were all cited as means by which this could be achieved. The Chair invited Members questions in relation to the presentation. In response to Members' questions, the Head of Legal and Democratic Services and the Business Support Manager then referred to a generally happy core of people working within the department, together with issues relating to pay levels, which when compared with the cost of living within the Harrogate District would lead to departures in staff. It was noted that one of the issues in the revenues and benefits section was the role of Benefits Assessors, and it was acknowledged that these particular posts were probably some of the most difficult jobs at that level. The upgrading of that post (of which there were 20 similar) had led to improved retention levels in this area.

The Chair then invited the Executive Director (Corporate Policy and Improvement) to refer to any similar issues for the Department of Corporate Policy and Improvement. It was acknowledged that this Department had only been in existence since 1 April 2005, and since that time, two staff had transferred, one internally, but both moves had suited their own specific needs in respect of job satisfaction and promotion. The Executive Director advised that a picture was beginning to emerge of how staff worked in that particular department, using flexible working hours and task and finish type arrangements to retain staff of high skill levels occupied with family care issues. It was also acknowledged that one particular quality which was not often recognised was that of staff loyalty and indeed, the Executive Director referred to the wider issues to be addressed by the Improvement Agenda, which would include staff initiatives such as long service awards, improvements in office accommodation and generally improved working environments. Councillor Theakston questioned whether the Executive Director believed there were particular problems with recruitment and retention within the Council, and whilst it was not considered that there were particular and/or acute problems, there were a number of posts at middle management and junior levels corporately which proved to be consistently difficult in terms of the retention of staff. Once again it was perceived that the issue of house prices and the career prospects of the principle wage earner in a household did tend to affect staff turnover levels within the Council. Neither of these issues were such that be affected by the Council to its advantage.

It was believed that the authority was generally a good employer with regards to training and development and staff development and the importance of acknowledging these strengths when recruiting staff was considered paramount. In terms of those problematic and specialist posts which tended to see a slightly higher than normal turnover rate, an example was discussed where perhaps an accountant would train for a CIPFA qualification for 3-4 years and move on to another employer, once that qualification had been obtained, simply because the opportunity for promotion (once the qualification had been gained) was not readily available in that post. This referred to points made at earlier meetings about the council's ability to meet / match staff / employee aspirations.

The Chair queried the length of time taken to train Benefit Assessors on the basis of the Head of Legal and Democratic Services assertion that it took up to six months to part train these employees, and up to a year for them to become fully operational. The Executive Director advised that there was a vast quantity of rules and regulations that assessors were required to observe which were changed by the Government on an annual basis.

The Chair queried the structure of Business Support, which was now consistent throughout the Council and the centralised function for the advertising of vacancies throughout the Council. In response to Members' questions, the Business Support Manager confirmed that the savings achieved as a result of this structure could be evidenced not only in terms of cash but also the more professional appearance of that element of their work.

In relation to the longer service awards, the Chair referred to the need for the Council to develop its reputation for being a good trainer of people, and to market that as a strength in recruiting staff, not that there was a particular problem in this regard for departments, but that if over the course of seventy posts, two or three could be influenced by such action, then perhaps this would be an improvement. The Chair referred to the analogy of staff working for Disneyworld, which carried out similar works as Local Authorities in terms of Parks and Gardens, Highways and other such services and the need for the Council to market itself as an exciting place to work. The Executive Director referred to work to be undertaken regarding the Council's image and corporate identity as a result of the fact that there were throughout the Council various formats of letter and other documentation, which it was considered, could be much improved under a single corporate identity. This initiative could also be used to promote the work of the Council perhaps not fully appreciated by all, and indeed to sell the Council's achievements or success stories.

The Executive Director referred to the impending review of the Council's corporate identity and the need to ensure consistency across the Council in producing adverts and other publications, which promoted the work of the Council. It was anticipated that work would commence on this review during the next municipal year.

(5.47 pm – 6.42 pm)