

MATTERS FOR REPORT

5/05 - RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION: DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNITY

SERVICES: The Chair introduced the Director of Community Services (Mr Les Williamson) and Business Support Officer, Ruth Pridmore who had attended the meeting to respond to Members' questions in relation to recruitment and retention and the Department of Community Services. The Chair invited the Director of Community Services to highlight the salient points highlighted within the report and any conclusions that could be drawn as a result.

The Director advised that it was, to some extent, difficult to draw any conclusions from the work undertaken to date, since this information had not been previously available in this format and indeed, had not in the past been routinely available. Turnover remained stable within the Department at around 15%, however, a number of anomalies existed particularly within Leisure, Museums and Arts and certain swimming pools as a result of the interest taken in these areas by students before leaving to attend University. The time spent by students in these posts was therefore limited, which had increased the turnover in staff. The Director also referred to problems experienced as a result of the high cost of living and housing in the Harrogate District. It was noted that the Department had experienced a trend where the recruitment of individuals who were not the principle wage earners in a household and therefore the Department was reliant on the career progression of the principal wage earner in the household and which it could not affect. The Director advised as to differing approaches taken in using campaigns to advertise vacancies, and it was noted that in some organisations, it was not uncommon to allocate approximately 25% of a post's salary to advertising costs. It was acknowledged that by virtue of employing those who were not the principle wage earners, Harrogate Borough Council were in competition with other organisations for certain staff. It was acknowledged that in terms of administrative and clerical levels the Council paid well in comparison to other organisations. The Chair queried whether it could be demonstrated that there was a higher turnover of staff in certain trades. The Director advised that it was not so much the trades that dictated the turnover of staff, more so the individual's predicament; for example, there was a good degree of stability within refuse collection where salaries tend to be lower when compared to administrative or clerical posts. The Director also referred to the level of staff turnover in the Knaresborough and Hydro Swimming Pools which relied upon the employment of pre-University students as lifeguards and who tended to be rather more transient in nature. The Director referred to the longer and shorter term jobs available within the Council. The Director was asked to identify and comment upon those areas of the department which indicated a higher than expected turnover of staff. The Panel members were concerned with the ways in which staff could be persuaded to stay, or whether the Council could provide a dis-incentive to staff to move on. In response, the Director advised as to ways in which staff could be encouraged to stay within the employment of the Council using career grades and training courses. One of the issues which had arisen as a result of recent exit interviews, was that staff by and large felt developed, having worked for Harrogate Borough Council. In any event, it was acknowledged that ambitious people did tend to move on and would consider whether it

was in their interests to stay within the employment of an authority or organisation or leave to seek promotion. The Director referred to information collated, setting out the number of people, leaving the employment of the Council within the first five years. It was acknowledged that a larger number left the employment of the Council within one year and by and large those people tended to be under the age of 25.

It was acknowledged that there were certain areas where it was expected that staff would leave to pursue their careers due to the level of work and opportunities for advancement.

Councillor Hawkins referred to a post established by Harrogate Borough Council working within Knaresborough with the Community Association which had seen six or seven postholders over the last 6-7 years. It was acknowledged that this post offered good opportunities for progression and promotion that explained the turnover.

In response to Members questions, the Director referred to the use of market supplements which could be applied to those positions where the Council found difficulty attracting the right number or calibre of applicant. The Chair asked the Director whether he felt that there were any major issues in relation to recruitment and retention within the Department of Community Services. The Director advised that whilst there were concerns about potential difficulties in keeping hold of staff, there were no problems attracting new employees, more so keeping existing staff in post. By and large, it was possible to manage vacant posts without any detrimental impact on service provision. The Director advised that it was possible to treat staff fairly and equitably, provide them with rewards and opportunities for development whilst working for the Council, however, one of the most difficult aspects in recruiting and retaining staff was the Council's ability to match an individual's ambition. It was only possible to provide certain outlets for ambitious staff. In response to members questions the Director advised that in general, staff working in smaller teams tended to build a stronger team spirit and display a greater sense of job satisfaction.

Councillor Hawkins queried whether it was apparent that staff working in area offices felt a sense of isolation in working away from the centre. The Director advised that this was possible, however, there were ways and means of managing that predicament. Councillor Hawkins also queried the apparent number of layers of management within the Council and the Director referred to the current management system within the Council consisting of three and sometimes four tiers of management. The Panel referred to the outcomes of a staff opinion survey in relation to turnover of staff, job satisfaction and pay and reward as perceived by those taking part. In attempting to make sense of the information received in the survey in relation to those issues, the Chair referred to the transient nature of certain employees within the Community Services Department. The Chair queried how staffs were brought together for social events within the Department of Community Services. It was acknowledged that to bring together the number of staff working within that department in one place at one time was impossible. However, there were events, such as the Council Christmas parties and other events organised within smaller teams, which provided staff with a social

outlet and means of getting together. The Director advised that he personally scheduled his own attendance at all staff meetings up to twice per year to ensure that he got the opportunity to see staff during the course of the year. Departmental Management Team minutes were available on the Intranet, and advised that in his experience staff felt reasonably well informed about issues taking place within the department. One way or another issues tended to emerge, however, the Chair referred to a need for a sense of belonging amongst staff working for an organisation, and that was considered important in retaining staff, and indeed provided the kind of dis-incentive referred to by the Chair earlier in the meeting.

In relation to social and sport events, and similar activities, the Director advised that the size of the organisation tended to dictate how people socialised and that they tended to socialise within smaller working teams. The Chair offered the Director an opportunity to raise two issues which he felt might assist the Department in improving its level of recruitment and retention. The Director referred to a number of issues which were not within the ability of the authority to change, such as Government initiatives, which tended to de-motivate staff and whilst considered to be essential by management, were seen as staff by "getting in the way of the job". In conclusion, the Director referred to his past employment within Harrogate Borough Council as the Director of Health and Housing, during which he had managed to direct the department through a four year period of uncertainty as a result of the possible transfer of housing stock and other issues affecting the fundamental existence of the department, during which time these issues had prevented him from restructuring the department, which had in turn led to a higher than desired number of temporary contracts. The Director advised that in this predicament, it would normally be expected that efficiency would drop, however, the reverse was true and efficiency had increased during that period of time. Whilst the Director was not advocating the use of temporary contracts of employment, there were, perhaps issues in relation to the kinds of motivation that staff required to work efficiently.

It was concluded that a high turnover of staff was not necessarily an issue within the Department of Community Services.

The Chair thanked the Director of Community Services for his attendance and contribution to the Panel meeting.