

Decision on Absence management referred to council

✘ The Council's [Policy & Strategy Committee](#) deferred the decision on the main item on their agenda this morning which was to approve a new way of managing staff absences. Instead, the matter has now been deferred to the remit of the full council who meet on 2 February 2012.

This potentially exposed the council to having no policy on staff absence for a period of three days, but they have now confirmed that the old policy will extend until a decision is made on a new way of dealing with absentees.

This is an important matter as the current level of absences among council staff costs over £1m. There has been a pilot scheme running since November and administered by an external absence management company, Firstcare. During the meeting it became clear that this is being run on a no win no fee basis, and that there will be no fee payable by the council unless [FirstCare](#) make a saving for the council of at least 10% of the cost of the absences. But it was also clear that the unions have some gripes about the appointment of Firstcare to run the pilot in the first place.

The report on Managing Attendance Procedure is a long one. The basics are that it intends improving the rate of absence among council employees, and allow a process for terminating employment if absence persists. This is coupled with the twin aims of saving money and also ensuring that the council continues to deliver its key services.

This whole matter has been discussed between the council and the unions for some time, and Councillor Wheeler said on two occasions during the meeting that he was disappointed that the

unions waited till now to air their grievances. As mentioned above, part of the unions' objections related to the way that the pilot scheme had been awarded. The deputation alleged that there was some dubiety over the procurement process, particularly as to whether there had been public advertisement and what the details of the successful bid were. Agnes Petkevicius, speaking for UNISON, admitted that there is a scheduled meeting with the Chief Executive of the council arranged for 10 February to discuss this matter further.

Even though the Director of Corporate Governance, who was in attendance at the meeting, suggested an alternative wording to ensure that the whole process would be subject to managerial discretion, the committee still decided to leave the final word to the whole council on 2 February. The Director of Corporate Governance, Alistair MacLean, pointed out that the current Council policy on staff absence runs out on 30 January.

Agnes Petkevicius of UNISON said after the meeting:-“It was good that a debate took place, we will be seeking an early meeting with the Administration, seeking clarity on some of the questions asked and responses given as they differed from the information that was provided to us.

The trade unions recognise the importance of members being at work, we value public services – we deliver them, we recognise the impact on services and colleagues if someone is off but we also recognise that people are off for a variety of reasons which are unavoidable – it would be great if we never experienced any ill health – but it is about being supportive in working with people to ensure attendance at work. “

While this matter took up the first hour this morning the council have published a press release [about their new policy](#) on using sustainable timber which was approved on the nod by the committee.

One other matter which attracted some discussion was the request for permission for the Council Leader, Jenny Dawe, to

attend and address MIPIM, which is the Property Development conference held in Cannes annually. The Green Group leader requested that the Council leader looks carefully at her travel arrangements to ensure that she uses the most environmentally friendly method of getting to Cannes from Edinburgh, suggesting that she uses the TGV rather than flying. Despite opposition from the Labour Group who felt that as four members of staff were already going there was no need for the council leader to go too, the approval was given, and Councillor Dawe will go to the conference on behalf of the Council.