

DRAFT

Note: These Minutes will remain DRAFT until approved at the next meeting of the Committee

PERSONNEL COMMITTEE

**MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON
TUESDAY 15 JULY 2025**

Councillors Present: Matt Shakespeare (Chairman), Biyi Oloko (Vice-Chairman), Adrian Abbs, Antony Amirtharaj, Jeff Brooks and Clive Hooker

Also Present: Sam Chiverton, Rebecca Hopkins, Thomas Radbourne and Rebecca Hopkins

Apologies for inability to attend the meeting: Councillor Laura Coyle

PART I

1. Minutes

The Minutes of the meeting held on 14 January 2025 were approved as a true and correct record and signed by the Chairman.

The Minutes of the meeting held on 15 May 2025 were approved as a true and correct record and signed by the Chairman.

Action: Members of the Committee resolved that Officers would review the actions from the Minutes of the meeting held on 14 January 2025 and report the outcome to Members before the next meeting.

2. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest received.

3. Update on HR Activity 2024/2025

The Committee considered a report (Agenda Item 4) which provided an update on HR activity for 2024/25.

Karen Turner introduced the report which covered the period of 1 April 2024 to 31 March 2025 and included annual data for the equality makeup of the corporate workforce as at 31 March 2025.

The report provided an update on recruitment activity, training, employee experience, performance management, casework, and appraisals.

The report highlighted the following items:

- There had been an increase in casework within HR compared to 2023/24. Casework included disciplinary capability, grievances, sickness absence, ill health retirement and related adjustments, Transformation Project restructures and redundancies.
- There had been significant recruitment activity in comparison to 2023/24 with an increase in new starters.
- The voluntary turnover for all corporate staff had decreased to 10.4% from 11.09%.
- Crude turnover had increased to 12.9% from 12.47%.
- Sickness absence had decreased to 10.13 days per worker from 10.69 days for the same period in 2023/24.

PERSONNEL COMMITTEE - 15 JULY 2025 - MINUTES

- As of 31 March 2025, there were 233 vacant posts. Out of the 233, there were 83 live adverts. There were 49 agency workers filling positions. There were 88 vacant posts that were on hold by the relevant department.

Action: Officers would provide a breakdown of the 88 vacant posts that were on hold, and the reasons why they were on hold for the next meeting.

In response to a query from Members, Officers explained that the Council did have a record of all agency workers in care homes. However, it was noted that they were largely used to cover ad hoc absences, and there were significant fluctuations in numbers. Therefore, they were not added into the agency workers excluding care homes as it could be misleading.

Noting the number of vacant posts which had decreased from 380 to 233, Councillor Jeff Brooks assured Members that the 380 posts had been audited, with many of the posts not being actively recruited, and some roles being deleted. 83 roles were being actively recruited as of 15 July 2025.

Action: Officers would inform Members where the data which stated that the ideal average UK turnover of civil service staff was 14% originated from, and whether it referred to the average rate of turnover or the optimised rate of turnover for bringing new people in.

Action: Officers would investigate whether they could provide a breakdown of internal movement vacancies.

Noting the reduction in numbers relating to vacant posts, Members felt that the numbers were healthy.

It was noted that of the 201 staff who left the Council in 2023/24, 17% had completed an exit interview. Leavers who had worked less than one year of service stood at 14.4%.

In response to the 14.4% rate of leavers with less than one years service, Members highlighted that this information had not been available in previous years. Members noted the significant time and resources used to induct and train new starters.

Officers stated that all leavers were asked to complete an exit interview either online or face to face with a member of the HR business partnering team. Once a leaver form was completed by a line manager, it would be sent through to HR services. HR would send a resignation acceptance letter, which included a link to an exit interview form, or a face-to-face exit interview if preferred by the leaver.

Councillor Brooks believed that 17% of leavers completing an exit interview was low and highlighted that he would continue to support having HR contact leavers and ask them to undertake a remote or face to face interview with HR as a matter of routine.

Action: Officers to investigate the data from exit interviews and provide a breakdown of the reasons given for resignation and note any trends.

Members discussed whether exit interviews could be mandated in contracts for new starters, however, it was highlighted that it would be unlikely to be tenable to mandate

PERSONNEL COMMITTEE - 15 JULY 2025 - MINUTES

exit interviews as it would likely only be possible if employees were handling sensitive information pertaining to national security.

In response to a query from Members, it was highlighted by Officers that managers had an induction checklist that they must complete with new starters. The checklist included ordering laptops, ordering ID passes, and mandatory training.

Action: Officers to investigate the barriers to leavers taking part in exit interviews. An option should be included that exit interviews could take place with HR rather than the leavers line manager.

Action: Officers to provide a breakdown of the number of resignations and provide potential actions that could be taken to increase the participation in exit interviews.

Rebecca Hopkins introduced the Talent Attraction section of the report which covered the area of recruitment, early career options and agency.

This section highlighted the following items:

- Recruitment had been moved in the last 12 months to Itrent, and reporting was built from it.
- A new Employee Value Proposition and Employer branding had been rolled out.
- A new careers site had been launch including a dedicated page for schools' recruitment. This site had seen an increase in traffic of 90% from 14,000 users to 26,000 users in the seven months since its launch.
- The number of users landing on the career site from search engines had increased 280%.
- There had been an increase in the Council's presence on social media around recruitment resulting in 1284 users landing on the site from social media, in comparison to 25 users in the seven months before its launch.
- The application process had been simplified, and included accepting CVs, which had reduced the rate of abandoned applications from 63% in April 2023 to 23% in the last six months.
- The Council was spending the full levy amount of £500,000 on apprenticeship courses. There had been a shift from entry level apprenticeships to degree and master's level apprenticeships.
- The commensurate agency contract moved to HR in April 2024 and showed a year-on-year reduction. At the time of the report, 61 agency workers had moved into permanent employment since January 2023 saving approximately £912,000.

Members praised the hard work of Officers and felt this would be transformative regarding the choice and quality of applicants.

Members believed there should be a module of Itrent to stay in contact with certain alumni, as well as people who applied but were not successful, but the Council believed could be beneficial to the organisation in the future. This could allow the Council to reach out to them directly in future recruitment campaigns if applicants and alumni agreed to let their CV stay on Itrent for two years.

Action: Officers to investigate the creation of an Itrent module which would enable the Council to stay in contact with alumni if they agreed to keep their CVs on file for a period of time.

PERSONNEL COMMITTEE - 15 JULY 2025 - MINUTES

In response to the number of apprenticeships, Members believed that more should be done in order to keep former apprentices in the organisation by focussing on career paths and internal mechanisms and systems.

Action: Officers to investigate whether the Employee Value Proposition touched on retention of employees.

In response to the movement of 61 agency workers to permanent employment, Members praised the work of Officers and believed that the movement to direct employment delivered the same value and saved a significant amount of money.

Regarding item 6.2 of the report, Members noted the majority of agency workers were employed through a managed service provider.

Action: Officers to investigate the numbers of agency workers per financial year, and report back to the Committee how many of the 61 agency workers permanently employed since January 2023 fell into the 2024/25 and 2023/24 financial year.

Members noted the positive trend in the reduction of agency workers and the increase in permanent employment, however, it was highlighted that there were positive reasons for having temporary workers in order to scale workloads, and the number of agency workers may not reduce much further from the current figures highlighted in the report.

Karen Turner introduced section seven of the report which included performance management and casework. The report was only on corporate and did not cover schools.

The report highlighted the following items:

- The number of formal and informal cases had increased significantly for 2024/25 in comparison to 2023/24. Formal case work had increased to 65%.
- Formal sickness absence cases had risen in 2024/25 as well as disciplinary and formal grievances, however, any rise was likely due to cases being managed more effectively with the launch of the new performance management framework in the summer of 2024.
- The average number of sickness absence for the whole Council was 10.13 days per employee, which was a decrease from the previous year of 10.69 days.
- During 2024/25, long term sickness absence amounted to 52% of all sickness absence, in 2023/24 it was 64.2%. Short term sickness had increased to 48% from 35.8%.
- The most common reason for long term absence was mental health conditions at 24.8%, and the most common short-term absence were minor illnesses such as colds, coughs and flu at 14.6%.
- The three biggest overall reasons for sickness absence in 2024/25 were mental health conditions at 33.4%, Minor illnesses at 14.6% and muscular skeletal problems at 14.4%.
- A new workplace attendance procedure was introduced on 1 May 2025, and the Council was looking at more educational materials and advice to support a proactive approach to sickness absence.
- The employee experience function had introduced the successful launch of the Employee Engagement Forum to strengthen two-way communication across the organisation.
- Mandatory learning on neurodiversity awareness and the worker protection act had been introduced to support a more informed and inclusive workforce.

PERSONNEL COMMITTEE - 15 JULY 2025 - MINUTES

Action: Officers to compare West Berkshire's data with national sickness absence numbers and feedback to the Committee.

Members debated the absence rates for local government and highlighted that the average absence rate in 2023/24 was 5.8 days.

Action: Officers to investigate and report back to the Committee, before the next meeting, on the reasons why the sickness absence rate was higher than the local government average.

In response to queries regarding return to work interviews from sickness absence, Officers noted that there was a standard procedure for ensuring that employees were referred to occupational health, and included stress risk assessments, wellness action plans, and reasonable adjustments to enable return to work. There would be a return to work interview as a matter of procedure.

Members referred to the sickness absence directorate rate and questioned whether there was a correlation between the mental health conditions and directorate sickness absence rates.

Action: Officers to analyse if a particular directorate or unit had suffered more from mental health conditions.

Members applauded the wellbeing services available to Council employees and suggested that the services could be more user friendly, ensuring that they were available in person and digitally. Furthermore, services could be brought in house to provide additional wellbeing services, in order to support staff to prevent sickness absence.

Action: A full briefing on all the measures taken for pastoral care and the safety net supporting employees to be included at the next Committee.

Members highlighted that there were mental health first aiders trained throughout the Council and believed that this should be reviewed to understand if there was adequate coverage.

Action: Additional research to take place on the number of sickness absence days for local government, to confirm that the average was five days per employee.

Members noted the higher percentage of sickness absence days in Adult Social Care at 15.4 days and felt that case loading placed on social workers was higher than average. Members believed that the introduction of AI software to support social workers would reduce workloads and increase productivity.

Action: Officers to work out the cost of sickness absence across the Council.

Action: The Executive Director for Adult Social Care to be invited to the next Committee to give additional information on sickness absence in Adult Social Care.

In response to the effect of the Ridgeway Council proposal, Members believed that more senior staff were more likely to be consolidated and would be an opportunity for staff.

PERSONNEL COMMITTEE - 15 JULY 2025 - MINUTES

Karen Turner introduced section 8 of the report which related to appraisals.

The following points were highlighted from the report:

- 356 appraisals were recorded for 2024/25.
- There was a change in what was included in the appraisal figure, as it previously included one to one meetings. Itrent now only measured the date of the appraisal.
- The number of appraisals was expected to increase, and a reminder campaign to hold appraisals had been run by HR.

Members were concerned that appraisals were not taking place and believed that they were an important factor in terms of performance and keeping employees happy, as well as future aspirations for employees.

In response to Members' questions regarding the process for appraisals, Officers noted that there was a set process for appraisals.

Members believed that additional work should be done with managers in their compliance with the appraisal process. In regard to the personal development plan that was completed during an appraisal, Members queried where it was recorded, and whether it was written up by the manager.

Action: Executive Director for Resources to be invited to a future Personnel Committee to outline the appraisal process and provide assurance.

Action: 100% compliance on people completing their appraisals to be included as a KPI.

Action: Officers to report back to the Committee regarding the storage of appraisal documentation that had not been uploaded to Itrent.

Members felt that there was a discrepancy between the employee experience, what had been recorded, and what had been reported to the Committee, and believed that the appraisal process was not well captured. Councillor Brooks felt that Members needed assurances that appraisals were taking place and being recorded, and assured Members that senior officers would answer their questions at a future meeting.

Action: Officers to investigate the attachment of appraisal documentation to Itrent.

Karen Turner introduced section 9 of the report which related to training.

The following points were highlighted from the report:

- All training was delivered using a variety of delivery methods and blended approaches.
- The introduction of the e-learning hub for all corporate employees had been successful.
- Course booking through the employee self service section had been successfully rolled out.
- 325 employees attended sessions during the learning at work week between 12 and 16 May.
- There number of courses completed in 2024-25 had been significantly higher, due in part to the introduction of a new suite of mandatory courses.

PERSONNEL COMMITTEE - 15 JULY 2025 - MINUTES

- An internal coaching network, and opportunities for mentoring was available as part of the learning approach for employees.

Action: Officers to investigate the graph in Section 5.2 which indicated 1550 staff currently working, and the paragraph in Section 9.97 which showed 1466 took at least one course, and report back to Members regarding the 84 employees who did not complete training.

Action: Officers to communicate with the Talent team, in order to produce analysis of the equality data received during recruitment.

In response to Members' questions regarding appraisals, Officers highlighted that employees received a form which they must fill out before the appraisal, which reviewed their previous objectives, and must be sent back to their line manager before the appraisal.

4. Date of Next Meeting

The Committee agreed to hold the next meeting on 13 January 2026.

(The meeting commenced at 18:30 and closed at 20:16)

CHAIRMAN

Date of Signature

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