Minutes of: **EMPLOYMENT PANEL**

Date of Meeting: 10 November 2026

Present: Councillor S Thorpe (in the Chair)
Councillors M Walsh, T Tariq, L Smith, D Green, D Hill, K Hussain, A Quinn and A Arif

Also in attendance: Sue Williams – Assistant Director of People, Inclusion and Culture, Kelly Barnett – Democratic Services Officer

Public Attendance: No members of the public were present at the meeting.

Apologies for Absence: Kate Waterhouse – Executive Director of Strategy and Transformation.

EP.1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence are noted above.

EP.2 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest made at the meeting.

EP.3 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

It was agreed that the notes of the meeting held on 23 September 2026 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

EP.4 WORKFORCE POLICY REVIEW

Smoking and Vaping Policy

The Employment Panel Committee received a report outlining proposed updates to the Smoking and Vaping Policy. Sue Williams advised that the revisions primarily reflected changes in language, developments in public health guidance relating to vaping, and general policy housekeeping to ensure the policy remained current and fit for purpose.

Members were advised that informal consultation had taken place with Trade Union representatives and they were supportive of the proposed changes.

Members discussed a number of issues relating to smoking and vaping at Council workplaces.

Councillor Green referred to the provisions regarding smoking and vaping breaks and asked whether the same principles would apply as previous arrangements where smoking breaks were treated as authorised unpaid leave. Councillor Green also queried the rationale behind the Council not providing designated smoking areas.

Sue Williams advised that employees taking additional breaks would be expected to account for that time. The absence of designated smoking areas was linked to the

Council's public image, public health responsibilities and the desire to discourage smoking around Council buildings. It was noted that smoking cessation support was available to employees and that communication around this support could be strengthened.

Councillor Tariq suggested that the Council could consider taking a stronger public health position and supported further promotion of smoking cessation initiatives.

Councillor Walsh noted that the Smoking and Vaping Policy also referred to elected Members and sought clarification as to whether the policy should apply to them. Sue Williams advised that she would welcome the Committee's views and direction on this matter, particularly in relation to any political considerations.

Councillor Smith raised questions regarding contractors and visitors to Council buildings and whether facilities management implications had been fully considered.

Members also acknowledged the importance of elected Members being mindful of the public perception created by smoking outside Council premises.

Councillor Green expressed concern that, while employees were discouraged from smoking outside Council buildings, no alternative designated area was available. It was suggested that consideration be given to a location at the Town Hall that was less visible to residents and visitors.

Councillor Hill queried how the policy would apply in relation to homeworking. Sue Williams advised that existing guidance would continue to apply and that smoking during video meetings would not be appropriate.

In response to the Members questions raised, Sue Williams confirmed that designated no-smoking zones around buildings were common practice in locations such as schools and hospitals. It was acknowledged that the Town Hall's location on a public street presented practical challenges. Members requested that Facilities Management be consulted regarding the feasibility and potential cost implications of providing a designated smoking area at the Town Hall.

Councillor Smith expressed the view that the policy may be difficult to enforce. Sue Williams advised that provisions relating to smoking breaks could be enforceable and further suggested that, should there be concerns regarding the effectiveness of the policy in practice, the matter could be referred back to the Employment Panel for further consideration and review.

Following discussion, the Chair concluded that no amendments to the policy were required at this stage. Members agreed that further consideration could be given to designated smoking areas, whilst maintaining a clear expectation that employees and visitors should be mindful of the public health message and the image of the Council.

The Employment Panel agreed:

1. That the revised Smoking and Vaping Policy be approved.
2. The Smoking and Vaping Policy will go for endorsement to the Council's Corporate Joint Consultative Committee on 16th December 2026 and subject to

approval will then be published on the Council's intranet pages and communicated to staff.

3. That officers explore the feasibility of a designated smoking area at the Town Hall with Facilities Management.
4. That communication regarding smoking cessation support for employees be strengthened and circulate a management and workforce communication regarding smoking and vaping.

Trade Union Facilities Time Policy

Members were advised that amendments had been made to reflect revised national guidance and legislative requirements relating to Trade Union facilities time.

The Employment Panel agreed:

1. That the revised Trade Union Facilities Time Policy be approved.
2. That the Facilities Time Policy will go for endorsement to the Council's Corporate Joint Consultative Committee on 16th December 2026 and subject to approval will then be published on the Council's intranet pages and communicated to staff.

Sue Williams advised members that a work programme would be brought forward to a future Employment Panel meeting outlining planned policy development. This would include consideration of recently implemented policies to ensure they remain fit for purpose and continue to meet organisational needs.

EP.5 REDEPLOYMENT ACTIVITY UPDATE

The Employment Panel Committee received an update on redeployment activity following the introduction of the revised Redeployment Policy in June 2026.

Members were advised that the report represented the first review of available data and was intended to provide transparency regarding redeployment activity and outcomes. Whilst current numbers remained relatively low, Sue Williams emphasised the importance of redeployment in supporting workforce management and avoiding compulsory redundancies where possible.

The Chair welcomed the report and asked whether Members considered the information useful. Sue Williams advised that regular reporting would help maintain organisational focus on redeployment opportunities and allow future trends to be monitored more effectively. It was proposed that the format be refined and brought back to the Panel in six months' time.

Members noted the update and supported continued monitoring.

The Employment Panel agreed:

1. That the Redeployment Activity Update be noted and that a further report be submitted to the Employment Panel in six months.

EP.6 VOLUNTARY EXIT SCHEME

The Chair introduced a report regarding the Voluntary Exit Scheme and noted that, whilst the proposals had been shared with Trade Unions and included within wider budget discussions, formal consideration by the Employment Panel had not taken place as originally intended.

Sue Williams explained that the Council had previously operated a voluntary exit scheme during 2022/23. The current scheme reduced the severance entitlement from four weeks' pay per completed year of service to two weeks' pay per completed year of service, subject to a maximum payment of £30,000. The scheme was being utilised as one mechanism to help address budget pressures.

Members were advised that the matter should have been brought to the Employment Panel at an earlier stage and an apology was offered for that oversight.

Councillor Walsh sought clarification regarding eligibility and whether the scheme was primarily aimed at lower-paid employees. Sue Williams confirmed that the scheme was open to all employee groups, subject to approval and operational requirements. It was noted that higher-paid employees would reach the £30,000 maximum payment threshold more quickly.

Questions were raised regarding the number of applications received, the potential impact on service delivery and whether the applications submitted would achieve the anticipated savings. Sue Williams advised that approximately 140 expressions of interest had been received. She explained that, as agreements had not yet been formally signed, the exact financial savings could not yet be confirmed, however the scheme was expected to make a significant contribution towards addressing the budget gap. She further advised each application had been assessed against operational requirements, service impacts and mitigation arrangements before approval decisions were made.

Councillor Hill asked whether employees currently progressing through the process would receive the two-week calculation. Sue Williams confirmed that the revised scheme terms had been clearly communicated from the outset and that all applications were being assessed on that basis.

Members also discussed whether posts released through the scheme would be deleted permanently. Sue Williams advised that budgets attached to approved voluntary severance requests would be removed from establishment budgets. Whilst services may in future review structures and operating models, any subsequent changes would be subject to appropriate governance processes.

Councillor Tariq queried how the Council would support employees whose applications were unsuccessful. Sue Williams acknowledged that disappointment was inevitable for some staff and confirmed that efforts would be made to maintain engagement and communicate decisions transparently.

The Employment Panel agreed:

1. To note that the draft 2027/28 Revenue Budget and Medium-Term Financial Strategy, considered by Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 13 October 2026

and Cabinet on 14 October 2026, included notification that the Council had launched a Voluntary Exit Scheme as part of its wider savings programme and in an effort to avoid compulsory redundancies.

2. To endorse the associated Voluntary Exit Scheme and authorise officers to progress applications received under the scheme in accordance with the approved scheme, noting the contribution the scheme will make to the Medium-Term Financial Plan.

EP.7 URGENT BUSINESS

There was no urgent business.

COUNCILLOR S THORPE
Chair

(Note: The meeting started at 7.00 pm and ended at 8.00 pm)