

NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL
JOINT STAFF CONSULTATIVE COMMITTEE
MEETING HELD IN THE VIRTUAL MEETING
ON WEDNESDAY, 14TH DECEMBER, 2022 AT 10.00 AM

MINUTES

Present: *Councillors: Raj Bhakar (Chair), Claire Strong and Tom Plater*

In Attendance: *Ian Couper (Service Director - Resources), Rebecca Webb (Human Resources Operations Manager), Dee Levett (Unison), James Lovegrove (Committee, Member and Scrutiny Manager), Helen Bylett (Learning & Employee Engagement Business Partner) and Caelan Ballard (HR Apprentice)*

Also Present: *At the commencement of the meeting there were no members of the public present.*

46 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Audio recording – 2 minutes 20 seconds

Apologies for absence had been received from Councillors Elizabeth Dennis-Harburg and Terry Hone.

47 MINUTES - 21 SEPTEMBER 2022

Audio Recording – 2 minutes 47 seconds

Councillor Raj Bhakar, as Chair, proposed and Councillor Tom Plater seconded, and it was:

RESOLVED: That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Committee held on the 21 September 2022 be approved as a true record of the proceedings and be signed by the Chair.

48 CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

Audio recording – 3 minutes 08 seconds

- (1) The Chair welcomed those present at the meeting
- (2) The Chair drew attention to the item on the agenda regarding Declarations of Interest and reminded Members that, in line with the Code of Conduct, any Declarations of Interest need to be declared immediately prior to the item in question.

49 SCF MINUTES

Audio recording – 3 minutes 25 seconds

The Service Director – Resources presented the Staff Consultation Forum and highlighted points including:

- The majority of the information within this would be included in the HR Update Information Note.

- The SCF Minutes from the previous three months had covered ongoing Council projects, a recent consultation for a new Council Tax Reduction Scheme, and the Council's purchase of the Churchgate Shopping Centre in Hitchin.
- Also covered were Green Space updates, IT updates and Building Services updates.

There were no questions from Members.

It was:

RESOLVED: That the Committee noted the minutes of the Staff Consultation Forum for September, October, and November 2022.

50 HR UPDATE

Audio recording – 5 minutes 01 seconds

The HR Services Manager presented the HR Update Information Note and highlighted points including:

- A formal document to show how employees work at North Hertfordshire Council was under development. The objective of this document was to inform job applicants on the work culture at NHC. Senior Management continued to work with HR to finalise the document, with feedback from employees and NHC's Inclusion Group.
- There have been 19 advertised vacancies this quarter which received a consistent number of applicants.
- A couple of these posts were not filled in the first attempt, so HR have worked with recruiting managers to fill these roles.
- The Recruitment Refresh project is ongoing and the use of feedback from employees and their managers will be used to improve the Council's job vacancy website as well as inform future recruitment processes.
- Staff Turnover remained consistent, although there have been small pockets of higher turnover in some key service areas. HR is working with these corresponding Service Managers to offer additional support in recruiting and also carrying out exit interviews. The feedback from these exit interviews will be sent back to these Service Managers.
- The number of apprentices currently employed by the Council had delayed the recruitment of new apprentices, as North Hertfordshire Council has a central budget for 8 apprentices only.
- The Pay Negotiations 2023 will begin in February with the Employer Consultation Meetings.
- HR's Benefits Review is underway and there are some changes to staff benefits, as well as some new benefits which will be introduced in the coming months. This is a very positive outcome for employee benefits given the current budget constraints of the Council.
- Graphics of the Council values have been made, which are now displayed in meeting rooms within the Council offices, as well as loading screens on staff laptops.
- Each monthly Personal Development morning in 2023 will be dedicated to a different NHC value. Resources will be provided for each of these mornings. This hopes to allow staff to consider what the values mean to them, and ultimately allow teams to further embed these values.
- Absence levels had increased in this quarter, with colds and minor infections contributing most to these absence levels. Covid absences made up a portion of these absences also, but the levels of Covid absence are currently much lower than their peak in January and March of this year. There was ongoing advice provided to managers regarding short-term

absence, and further advice and support is given to managers who have employees on long-term sickness leave.

- The Steering Group for 'Shaping our Futures' has now ended but North Hertfordshire Council remained committed to developing and maintaining a positive culture. It was felt that the monitoring and review of activity was best achieved through other streams and in other groups, such as this JSCC group.
- HR welcomed comments and feedback from the Committee on the contents of this paper to help it act as the strategic HR forum.

The following Members asked questions:

- Councillor Claire Strong

In response to questions, the HR Services Manager advised:

- The employee headcount found in this HR Update Information Note included all current employees, regardless of whether their position is full-time or part-time. There had been an increase in part-time employees, which is why the headcount has increased since the last quarter.
- HR were aware that sickness levels always rise during the winter, especially in children. The absence policy does not support employees taking sick leave if their dependants are ill, employees must be ill themselves to take sick leave. However, other types of leave are offered to support employees being away to care for their dependants who are ill.

It was:

RESOLVED: That the Committee noted the HR Update Information.

51 DISCUSSION PAPER - MEN'S HEALTH

Audio recording – 14 minutes 08 seconds

The following Members and representatives took part in the discussion

- Councillor Raj Bhakar
- Councillor Claire Strong
- Rebecca Webb

Points raised in the discussion included:

- The suicide rate for men in the UK was staggering, which showed a clear need to create conversation on physical and mental health for men.
- Annual events such as Movember created needed discussion and awareness of common health problems for men, including mental health problems, but there was still a clear need for more to be done.
- Within the Council, the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) offered support and counselling on a wide range of issues which may contribute to an employee's poor mental wellbeing.
- However, evidence suggests that men are less likely to want to speak to someone in person or over the phone about their mental health, so a webchat or text-based service is being explored as an expansion of the EAP.
- Designated Mental Health First Aiders are also available to employees. These are trained members of staff who volunteer to receive calls and messages from employees who need support or advice. These Mental Health First Aiders are contactable over email or

Microsoft Teams chats. Additionally, there should be some further emphasis to outline that employees can send these Mental Health First Aiders a message or an email instead if they would prefer.

- There was now also a page on the staff intranet dedicated to Men's Health specifically. This page is similar to the Women's Health page on the intranet, both respectively signposting a range of specific support.
- Previously, support for employees regarding pregnancy loss and infertility had been targeted more towards women, but there is now an understanding that men are also just as affected by these issues. Pages on the intranet regarding fertility and pregnancy loss now use more inclusive language and link the pages to both women's health and men's health.

In response to questions, Rebecca Webb advised:

- The statistics included in this discussion paper record the most common cancers in men in the UK, being prostate cancer and testicular cancer. It seemed that there was less information on testicular cancer and other health issues in men, which indicates that there may also be a lack of knowledge about these other health problems.
- More signposting on screening programs and health checks for men can be shared on the intranet. Additionally, by sharing information and signposting support, these health issues may become less taboo which will encourage men to have conversations about their health.
- It has been noted that the formation of a Men's Health Forum may also be a helpful scheme to give male employees a safe and confidential space to discuss their health and their problems.

It was:

RESOLVED: That the Committee noted the Strategic Discussion Paper on Supporting Men's Health and Mental Health in the Workplace.

52 DISCUSSION PAPER - APPRENTICES

Audio recording – 19 minutes 46 seconds

The following Members and representatives took part in the discussion

- Councillor Claire Strong
- Councillor Raj Bhakar
- Helen Bylett

Points raised in the discussion included:

- The Apprentice Levy was introduced to North Hertfordshire Council in 2017 and has helped the Council to offer more apprenticeships over the past 5 years. The Levy is taken through our payroll provider and then transferred directly into the Council's apprenticeship funds.
- For each new apprenticeship, HR choose an apprenticeship provider from a list of training providers approved by the Government. These training providers must follow a set of agreed apprenticeship standards, which ensures the education and support offered to the apprentice is of a high standard.
- One of the requirements to become an apprentice at North Hertfordshire Council is that you must live or go to school within the North Hertfordshire district or surrounding areas.

This is so that if the training provider offers in-person classes or workshops, the apprentice is not required to travel out of the North Hertfordshire district to attend.

- Prior to this Levy, apprentices at North Hertfordshire Council used to attend North Hertfordshire College for their classes. The Levy has given an improved range of training providers and since Covid, most apprentices now do not have to travel to their classes in-person and instead do their learning remotely.
- Some training providers will travel to the Council offices to deliver training to the apprentices.
- The current requirement in an apprenticeship is that 80% of the learning completed by the apprentice is 'on the job' learning, and the remaining 20% is 'off the job' learning.
- North Hertfordshire Council offer additional learning support to apprentices, training them to take minutes, giving them the opportunity to work with other council apprentices, and teaching presentation skills.
- The Levy has allowed the Council to offer a wider range of apprenticeships across different service areas within the Council. The service areas which currently have an apprentice include I.T, Business Administration, Digital Marketing, Finance, Grants Administration, Health & Wellbeing, Community Protection, Museum & Cultural Services Support, HR Support, and Revenue Systems.
- A Communications Apprenticeship vacancy has also just started advertising.
- Council apprenticeships have an excellent success rate, with an additional 54% of apprentices being retained after completing their contracts.

In response to questions, Helen Bylett advised:

- The Council's 18 month fixed-term apprenticeship contracts are usually Level 3 Apprenticeships, but there are a couple of apprenticeships including the Communications Apprenticeship currently advertised which are Level 4 Apprenticeships.
- The Levy that the Council pays into also allows existing members of staff to undertake apprenticeships. However, it can be difficult for internal members of staff to adhere to the requirements of current apprenticeships, which state 20% of your working time must be 'off the job' learning, due to a lack of capacity in some teams.

It was:

RESOLVED: That the Committee noted the Strategic Discussion Paper on Apprenticeships at North Hertfordshire Council.

53 FUTURE DISCUSSION TOPICS

Audio recording – 27 minutes 42 seconds

The following Members and representatives took part in the discussion

- Councillor Raj Bhakar
- Councillor Tom Plater

Points raised in the discussion included:

- Future streams of Pay Gap reporting should be looked into further, with analysis of pay disparities and an explanation of the strategies used to monitor and help close pay gaps.
- Progress of the Recruitment Refresh Project should be discussed in future meetings once implemented, along with any findings or feedback on the project.
- For organisational development and the shaping future culture at the Council to be discussed and to have an overview of current related projects.

It was:

RESOLVED:

- (1) That future streams of Pay Gap reporting shall be looked into further and a discussion topic of how we are analysing and dealing with Pay Gaps are included in future meetings.
- (2) That the Recruitment Refresh project is discussed further in future meetings.

REASON FOR DECISION: To allow the Committee to determine suitable topics for discussion at future meetings.

The meeting closed at 10.31 am

Chair