

NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL
JOINT STAFF CONSULTATIVE COMMITTEE
MEETING HELD IN THE VIRTUAL VIA ZOOM
ON WEDNESDAY, 18TH OCTOBER, 2023 AT 10.00 AM

MINUTES

Present: *Councillors: Councillor Elizabeth Dennis (Chair), Claire Strong and Tom Plater*

In Attendance:

Sjanel Wickenden (Committee, Member and Scrutiny Officer), Dee Levett (Unison Branch Administrator), Anthony Roche (Managing Director), Rebecca Webb (HR Services Manager), Susan Le Dain (Committee, Member and Scrutiny Officer) and Louis Franklin (Admin Support Officer).

Also Present:

There were no members of the public present for the duration of the meeting.

70 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Audio recording – 3 minutes 28 seconds

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Terry Hone.

Councillor Raj Bhakar was absent.

71 MINUTES - 5 JULY 2023

Audio Recording – 3 minutes 45 seconds

Councillor Claire Strong proposed and Councillor Tom Plater seconded, and following a vote, it was:

RESOLVED: That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Committee held on 5 July 2023 be approved as a true record of the proceedings and be signed by the Chair.

72 CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

Audio recording – 4 minutes 29 seconds

- (1) The Chair advised that, in accordance with Council Policy, the meeting would be audio recorded;
- (2) The Chair drew attention to the item on the agenda front pages regarding Declarations of Interest and reminded Members that, in line with the Code of Conduct, any Declarations of Interest needed to be declared immediately prior to the item in question.

73 SCF MINUTES

Audio Recording – 4 minutes 54 seconds

The HR Services Manager presented the item entitled 'SCF Minutes', alongside the Minutes from the meetings of July and September 2023 and highlighted the following:

- There was no meeting of the SCF held in August 2023.
- In the July meeting there was an update on the Gender Pay Gap, the Pay Gap 2023 was currently being analysed and an update would be provided at the next JSCC meeting.
- There was a soft launch of meeting free Fridays which was discussed in the July meeting. This had now been fully launched with feedback being encouraged for officers via the SCF.
- Comments made by Councillor Claire Strong at the last meeting of the JSCC regarding social media job adverts were highlighted to the SCF at the July meeting.

The following Members asked questions:

- Councillor Claire Strong
- Councillor Tom Plater

In response to a question the HR Services Manager advised that telephone calls made to Customer Services were recorded for staff working in the office or from home.

In response to a question the UNISON Representative stated that all calls into and out of Customer Services were recorded, however if the call was then internally transferred the recording stopped once the call was transferred.

In response to a question the SCF Representative stated that calls to Benefits and Council Tax departments were also recorded, even when transferred from Customer Services and that the SCF had discussed implementing the recording of all internal communication between Customer Services and other departments.

In response to a question the Managing Director advised that:

- Floor two of the Council Building had been leased out for some time and generated an income of £50K per annum.
- Floor three was now empty and not in use and Estates were in negotiations with a prospective tenant.
- It was unlikely that there would be a clause in the contract of the tenants to reclaim the office space in the event of an emergency, but this could be confirmed in writing at a later date.

Councillor Elizabeth Dennis noted that it was disappointing to see the comments from the Facilities Department regarding sanitary items in the toilets in the SCF Minutes from the July meeting. She noted that as most people no longer carried cash, it was not always easy to leave a contribution, but no-one should be made to endure period embarrassment.

RESOLVED: That the Committee noted the minutes of the Staff Consultation Forum for July and September 2023.

74 HR INFORMATION NOTE

Audio Recording – 14 Minutes 57 seconds

The HR Services Manager presented the Information Note entitled 'HR Update', including that:

- Recruitment continued to be busy and there had been an increase in applications compared to previous years as shown in 3.2 of the report, with more posts successfully filled although there were some unfilled posts that had not yet been readvertised.

- There had been a social media refresh with a new style advert, which highlighted key elements of the role and the benefits of working for the Council and current staff were encouraged to promote these on all social media.
- There had been an increase of views of the job vacancies webpage and social media engagement, with an upcoming relaunch of the vacancies page.
- Most leavers would recommend the Council as an employer.
- The National Pay bargaining was still outstanding and there should be an update at the end of the October.
- Flu Vaccines for those not eligible on the NHS can be claimed through expenses.
- A successful pairing in the reverse mentoring scheme as highlighted in Insight, had led to another pairing.
- The Inclusion group discussed Halo Collective, race discrimination and microaggressions. An action plan was developed and proposed to the Leadership Team covering a range of initiatives.
- In August there was a peak in long term absences, many relating to stress, depression, and or anxiety.

In response to a question from Councillor Claire Strong, the HR Services Manager stated that:

- There were various updates and articles on the intranet, and signposts for staff along with external support on the EAP site for stress, depression and anxiety.
- Some of the absences through stress, depression and anxiety were not work related.
- Staff are encouraged to return to work, which in many cases was a good environment for them to be in where there was support available.
- A staff survey would commence shortly.
- Mental Health First Aiders were now in place and should be available on site.
- It was important for managers to recognise and respond to employee absences in a timely manner and to keep HR informed.
- There was training for both employees and their managers around mental health that was provided by MIND and available on GrowZone.

In response to a question from Councillor Claire Strong, the Managing Director stated that:

- The absences were a concern but were being monitored by the HR Team.
- Work had commenced on a staff survey, with a section on wellbeing and how people were feeling.
- It would be better to target and intervene at a point just before long-term sickness occurred and this had been highlighted as an area to identify and understand.

Councillor Elizabeth Dennis stated that:

- There was an organisation called Centre for Mental Health that provided support for Council networks and Local Government employees.
- Mental Health First Aiders were available on site to assist employees, but it may be worth seeing what other support and help was available, as work can often follow you home and employees should be given all the help and support needed to deal with challenges

75 DISCUSSION PAPER - EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT IN A HYBRID WORKING ENVIRONMENT

Audio Recording – 24 minutes 24 seconds

The HR Service Manager presented the Discussion Paper entitled 'Employee Engagement in a Hybrid Working environment' and advised that:

- Employee Engagement was the emotional and professional connection employees feel towards their organisation, colleagues and work.
- High engagement leads to increased; job satisfaction, performance and retention and reflected the overall positive employee experience.
- Hybrid working can make informal, coincidental engagement less likely, managers need to work with their teams to engage by other means, and to conduct wellbeing check ins.
- SCF meetings, Inclusion Groups meetings and staff briefings now took place as hybrid meetings, ensuring that everybody can take part.
- Employees can take part in social events outside of work, the chats functions on teams, and reverse mentoring which can be online or in person.
- The key elements of engagement were, leadership, management integrity, employee voice and visible leadership that communicated a vision for the future.
- These occurred through, staff briefings, SCF, personal development days, having one to one and team meetings so that employees had the opportunity to be heard and listened to.
- This occurred by ensuring the support and development of effective Managers who understood and maintained the values of the Council.
- This can be achieved by using the regular performance review (RPR) framework for discussions on values and by recognising employee values through the staff recognition awards, and the provision of opportunities such as 'ask Anthony' and the staff survey.
- Now that technology supported hybrid working as part of flexible working there was a need to support engagement in the hybrid environment.
- The Comms Department were working on developing SharePoint and a staff survey was planned to balance face to face and virtual contact, depending on the employee and circumstances.

The following Members asked questions:

- Councillor Elizabeth Dennis
- Councillor Claire Strong
- Councillor Tom Plater

In response to questions, the HR Service Manager advised that:

- Engagement can be measured in output rather than presentism whether at home or in the office, and Managers reviewed this through the RPRs.
- Managers are encouraged to have regular check ins, team meetings and have consideration for people who may live alone.
- An engagement survey would be used to measure employee responses, and more detailed information would be available through SharePoint.
- HR can review how many employees have read Insight and attended the staff briefings, which would help to develop a bigger picture of the engagement of employees.
- The Teams chats facility worked well for quick question and answer sessions and working together helped with coincidental chats.
- Some teams had weekly catch-up session and spent time together virtually as well as face to face.
- Employees can join Teams groups that, allowed groups of people to work and communicate together either online or via messages.
- IT had been running drop-in sessions on the better use of technology to increase communication and engagement.
- There was a difference between hybrid working and virtual working, and employees often arranged to work in the office with their peers.
- Team members and Managers of new staff are encouraged to be more available and to have face to face communication.
- Not every employee enjoyed or wished to take part in social functions, but these can happen on Teams or were advertised on the work intranet.

The SCF Representative stated that:

- They attended the office once a week on different days to interact with more colleagues.
- They were part of several Teams groups with a lot of different departments and felt that there was still active engagement.
- They had been a buddy for 3 new employees, meeting with them once a week, introducing them to other people and assisting their needs.

In response to questions, the Managing Director advised that:

- There were lots of digital platforms and it was sometimes challenging to decide which one to use or check, from Teams, WhatsApp to text messenger.
- SharePoint would be launching soon and would incorporate 'Yammer' an internal social media page promoting activities.
- Direction had been sought from employees as to which platform should be used and when, as different employees preferred different media types to respond to queries and were often unsure of which to use.

Councillor Elizabeth Dennis advised that Members communicated using the Portal, and by emails, it would be a good idea to encourage Members to use Teams for quick communications with Officers.

Councillor Tom Plater stated that he had used Teams with Committee Services and that if Officers were happy to receive communication in this way, then it should be promoted to Members.

Councillor Elizabeth Dennis suggested that relevant Officers were contacted regarding Members using Teams, after which an update for Members should be sent by email and published in MIS encouraging everyone to communicate effectively and appropriately.

RESOLVED: That the Committee commented on and noted the Discussion Paper on Employee Engagement in a Hybrid Working Environment.

76 SUGGESTED DISCUSSION TOPICS

Audio Recording – 41 minutes 21 seconds

The Managing Director suggested following on from the discussions at this meeting that 'Providing Support for Staff Wellbeing' would be a most appropriate for the next meeting.

Councillor Elizabeth Dennis agreed with the suggestion and further suggested linking the wellbeing item to finances ahead of the festive period and Blue Monday in January.

Councillor Claire Strong agreed with the wellbeing discussion and also suggested that in the March meeting the discussion should be on the 'Guidance for use on Social Media'.

Councillor Tom Plater clarified the wellbeing item for the next meeting and social media discussion in March.

The Chair confirmed the topic of 'Providing Support for Staff Wellbeing' focusing on mental health and finances for the next meeting of the Committee and this was agreed with Members present.

In response to a question from Councillor Tom Plater, the HR Service Manager stated that no formal advice or support had been offered to Officers and Members regarding the recent Terrorist attacks, but this could be reviewed.

Wednesday, 18th October, 2023

The meeting closed at 10.47 am

Chair