

NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL
JOINT STAFF CONSULTATIVE COMMITTEE
MEETING HELD IN THE VIRTUAL VIA ZOOM
ON WEDNESDAY, 13TH MARCH, 2024 AT 10.00 AM

MINUTES

Present: *Councillors: Tom Plater (Chair), Terry Hone, Tom Plater and Claire Strong*

In attendance: *Ian Couper (Service Director - Resources), Caroline Jenkins (Committee, Member and Scrutiny Officer), Rebecca Webb (HR Services Manager) and Sjanet Wickenden (Committee, Member and Scrutiny Officer),*

UNISON: *Keith Fitzpatrick-Matthews (Unison representative)*

Staff Consultation Forum : *Louis Franklin*

Also Present: *At the commencement of the meeting approximately 0 members of the public, including registered speakers.*

84 ELECTION OF A CHAIR

Audio recording – 26 Seconds

Councillor Clare Strong proposed and Councillor Terry Hone seconded and, following a vote, it was:

RESOLVED: That Councillor Tom Plater was elected Chair for this meeting of the Joint Staff Consultative Committee.

85 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Audio recording – 2 minutes 30 seconds

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Elizabeth Dennis.

N.B Councillor Raj Bhakar provided apologies ahead of the meeting, however this was not announced during the meeting itself.

86 MINUTES - 6 DECEMBER 2023

Audio Recording – 3 minutes

Councillor Tom Plater, as Chair, proposed and Councillor Terry Hone seconded and, following a vote, it was

RESOLVED: That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Committee held on 6 December 2023 be approved as a true record of the proceedings and be signed by the Chair.

87 CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

Audio recording – 3 minutes 44 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.

88 STAFF CONSULTATION FORUM MINUTES

Audio recording – 4 minutes 7 seconds

The Service Director – Resources presented the item entitled ‘SCF Minutes’, alongside the Minutes from the meetings of December 2023 and January 2024 and highlighted the following:

- Three restructures had been reported. These have now progressed and been taken forward.
- A new CRM system had been installed and training was being undertaken by staff.
- Reported a temporary power outage at DCO.

RESOLVED: That the Committee noted the minutes of the Staff Consultation Forum for 6 December 2023 and 31 January 2024.

89 HR INFORMATION NOTE

Audio Recording – 5 minutes 37 seconds

The Human Resources Services Manager presented the Information Note entitled ‘HR update’ and advised Members that:-

- Internal secondments had enabled current employees to develop their skills.
- Unfilled vacancies continued, especially in hard to fill roles such as Legal and IT. Other roles had been advertised, skills developed internally or trainees had been recruited to develop into roles.
- The staff survey had been launched, there had already been a good response from staff. The results would be reviewed when the survey closed in April 2024.
- Since the publication of the agenda, a green book pay claim had been received from the unions which was for £3000 or 10%, whichever is greater, on all spinal column points. Negotiations would begin and regional pay briefings would be arranged.
- There were currently 8 apprentices in post, with 1 apprentice securing a permanent role with the Council. National Apprenticeship Week was also marked with articles on social media about the current apprentices.
- The Inclusion Group had discussed over 55s in the workplace and how the Council can ensure continued support. Staff discussed using flexi time to support their own wellbeing and suggestions on keeping general IT skills up to date. The IT team would look at providing IT champions to provide support.
- Work continued on raising awareness of micro aggressions and unconscious bias.
- It was noted that an increase in staff absences was expected in Autumn and Winter months due to minor ailments.
- Figures from January 2024 had not yet reached the levels of October and November 2023, but levels were higher than this time last year.
- It was noted there was also a national increase in sick absence, with a reported increase of 5.8 days to 7.8 days per employee, per year. Monitoring would continue and advice and support would be available to manage absence.

The following Members asked questions:

- Councillor Clare Strong
- Councillor Tom Plater

In response to questions, the HR Services Manager stated:

- The staff survey would close at the end of April and 130 responses had been received to date from 380 total staff. HR were expecting more and would continue to chase on this.
- It was questioned as to how long the 5 outstanding unfilled staff vacancies had been available. The information on how long the 5 unfilled staff vacancies had been outstanding was not available at the meeting but would be gathered and circulated to members.
- It was confirmed that musculoskeletal refers to broken bones or back problems, which can be work related.
- HR confirmed they contact managers to look at reason behind absences and provide support and guidance to individuals and their circumstances.

90 DISCUSSION PAPER - FACE TO FACE vs ONLINE LEARNING

Audio Recording – 15 minutes 7 seconds

The HR Services Manager presented the Information Note entitled 'Face to Face vs Online Learning' and advised that:

- Since the pandemic, learning had changed which also includes apprenticeship training. During 2020, training sessions and meetings were held virtually. However, now the Council was using a mixture of online and 'in person' workshops and courses to provide training.
- The virtual new starter sessions started in 2020 to introduce the new staff and these are now held between alternate online and face to face sessions, to allow staff flexibility for their own personal situation.
- Training providers were benefitting from the use of online polls, breakout rooms and word clouds at online sessions.
- There were huge benefits to both methods allowing more flexibility regarding work patterns and preferences which helped to make training inclusive and accessible to all employees.

The following Members asked questions:

- Councillor Clare Strong
- Councillor Terry Hone
- Councillor Tom Plater

In response to questions, the HR Services Manager stated that:

- Feedback forms were reviewed after each training course. Feedback received from online training provided during 2020 suggested that most staff did not want all training to remain online.
- If a certain training session worked better online as opposed to face to face, or vice versa, the comments from the feedback forms would highlight this.
- There was not a 100% answer to whether training result were better online or in person. Different trainings and meetings had different needs and scenarios. It was thought a balance between the two options was the most effective way to carry out training, dependant on the needs of the employee.
- Questions were asked about the more difficult training sessions, such as Safeguarding. Although some people preferred to have this training face to face, others were more

comfortable carrying this training out online, to be able to switch off their camera and take a break if needed. Trainers would also allow staff to exit the room if needed, so there was not one clear format that would work for everyone.

- It was felt that hybrid meetings did work well within the Council. Hybrid training sessions with some people in the room and some people online had not worked as well. This could be implemented if the need was there from staff members.

RESOLVED: That the Committee commented on and noted the Discussion Paper on Face to Face vs Online Learning.

91 DISCUSSION PAPER - LONG TERM ABSENCE MANAGEMENT

Audio Recording – 24 minutes, 0 seconds

The HR Services Manager presented the Information Note entitled 'Long Term Absence Management' and advised that:

- Long term absence was classed as more than 21 days sick. A policy was in place to provide appropriate support from line managers and Human Resources in these circumstances.
- The sick pay scheme supports employees whilst recovering.
- Support was offered to staff to return to work such as adjustments, redeployment and, on occasion, ill health retirement.
- In 2023 there were 49 cases of long-term sickness absence, resulting in 1000 lost working days. 40% of these cases related to depression, anxiety and stress. At 21 days sickness, a letter will be sent to the employee, reminding them of fit note requirements, the employee assistance programme, and to keep in touch with your line manager.
- A referral would be made to Occupational Health for a medical professional to see if any adjustments can be made for the return to work, including a possible phased return.
- Support is given to both line managers and employees.
- On return-to-work, Occupational Health would advise on possible modified duties and undertake regular reviews to address any concerns.
- On the occasions that the employee is unable to return, options of ill health retirement would be discussed with Occupational Health and the employee.
- Long term sickness can relate to mental health problems and the Council were looking into Wellness Action Plans that assist the employee to notice triggers for their mental health, addresses mental health problems and provides a better understanding for line managers to understand the needs of employees. These were being tested by some management and staff and feedback would be collated on how these work in practice.

The following Members asked questions:

- Councillor Terry Hone
- Councillor Clare Strong
- Councillor Tom Plater

In response to questions, the HR Services Manager stated that:

- North Herts Council has signed up to the Green Book entitlement on sick pay, which is a standard. However, some other authorities have moved away from this entitlement.
- From the 2023 figures, it seemed that 49 cases of long-term absence were deemed high. However, it was noted that there was an aging workforce which came with specific health issues.

- No comparison had been carried out with neighbouring authorities, but this has been the standard for North Herts Council. The biggest difference had been the increase in mental health cases in the last few years.
- It was confirmed that sick pay starts on day 1 of the sickness absence.
- The Occupational Health service provided for the Council is outsourced to an external provider and employees would be referred to an Occupational Health advisor.
- In more detailed cases relating to ill health retirement, employees would be referred to a physician or GP who would provide a report of suggested support.
- There was currently no framework in place regarding Wellness Action Plans to support management and staff to have the conversation. This was not something everyone would be interested to use and would not be mandatory across the organisation. It was thought it could be a good tool to enable people to be more proactive about their own mental health.

RESOLVED: That the Committee commented on and noted the Discussion Paper on Long Term Absence Management.

92 FUTURE DISCUSSION TOPICS

Audio recording – 33 minutes, 16 seconds

The Chair led a discussion with Members regarding future topics to be discussed.

The Chair confirmed the topic of 'Recruitment and Retention of Staff', together with the result of the Staff Survey, would be discussed at the next meeting of the Committee and this was agreed with Members present.

Chair