

1 March 2024

Our Ref Joint Staff Consultative Committee 13 March  
2024  
Contact. Committee Services  
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To: The Chair and Members of the Joint Staff Consultative Committee of North Hertfordshire District Council

District Councillors: Elizabeth Dennis (Chair) Raj Bhakar (Vice Chair) Terry Hone, Tom Plater and Claire Strong.

Substitutes Councillors: James Denselow, Keith Hoskins MBE, Nigel Mason, Michael Muir and Richard Thake.

UNISON Representatives: Debbie Ealand, Keith Fitzpatrick-Matthews and Dee Levett.

Staff Consultation Forum Representatives: Claire Bernard, Andrew Betts, Christina Corr, Louis Franklin and Tiranan Straughan.

**NOTICE IS HEREBY GIVEN OF A**

**MEETING OF THE JOINT STAFF CONSULTATIVE COMMITTEE**

to be held as a Virtual Meeting

**VIRTUAL VIA ZOOM**

On

**WEDNESDAY, 13TH MARCH, 2024 AT 10.00 AM**

Yours sincerely,

Jeanette Thompson  
Service Director – Legal and Community

**\*\*MEMBERS PLEASE ENSURE THAT YOU DOWNLOAD ALL AGENDAS AND REPORTS VIA THE MOD.GOV APPLICATION ON YOUR TABLET BEFORE ATTENDING THE MEETING\*\***

## **Agenda Part I**

<b>Item</b>	<b>Page</b>
<b>1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE</b> Members are required to notify any substitutions by midday on the day of the meeting.  Late substitutions will not be accepted and Members attending as a substitute without having given the due notice will not be able to take part in the meeting.	
<b>2. MINUTES - 6 DECEMBER 2023</b> To take as read and approve as a true record the minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on the 6 December 2023	(Pages 3 - 6)
<b>3. CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS</b> Members are reminded that any declarations of interest in respect of any business set out in the agenda, should be declared as either a Disclosable Pecuniary Interest or Declarable Interest and are required to notify the Chair of the nature of any interest declared at the commencement of the relevant item on the agenda. Members declaring a Disclosable Pecuniary Interest must withdraw from the meeting for the duration of the item. Members declaring a Declarable Interest, wishing to exercise a 'Councillor Speaking Right', must declare this at the same time as the interest, move to the public area before speaking to the item and then must leave the room before the debate and vote.	
<b>4. STAFF CONSULTATION FORUM MINUTES</b> To receive the Minutes of the Staff Consultation Forum meetings from December 2023 and January 2024.	(Pages 7 - 16)
<b>5. HR INFORMATION NOTE</b> To update the Joint Staff Consultative Committee on the progress made in the last quarter completing HR work and projects and supporting people issues.	(Pages 17 - 22)
<b>6. DISCUSSION PAPER - FACE TO FACE VS ONLINE LEARNING</b> To receive a discussion paper on Face to Face vs Online Learning	(Pages 23 - 24)
<b>7. DISCUSSION PAPER - LONG TERM ABSENCE MANAGEMENT</b> To receive a discussion paper on Long Term Absence Management	(Pages 25 - 26)
<b>8. FUTURE DISCUSSION TOPICS</b> To consider the subjects for debate at future meetings of the Committee.	

# Public Document Pack Agenda Item 2

## NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

### JOINT STAFF CONSULTATIVE COMMITTEE

MEETING HELD IN THE VIA ZOOM  
ON WEDNESDAY, 6TH DECEMBER, 2023 AT 10.00 AM

#### MINUTES

**Present:** *Councillors: Elizabeth Dennis (Chair), Raj Bhakar (Vice-Chair), Terry Hone and Tom Plater*

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

**UNISON:** *Keith Fitzpatrick-Matthews*

**Also Present:** *There were no members of the public present.*

#### 77 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

*Audio recording – 1 minute 40 seconds*

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Claire Strong.

#### 78 MINUTES - 18 OCTOBER 2023

*Audio Recording – 2 minutes 18 seconds*

Councillor Elizabeth Dennis proposed and Councillor Terry Hone seconded, and following a vote, it was

**RESOLVED:** That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Committee held on 18 October 2023 be approved as a true record of the proceedings and be signed by the Chair.

#### 79 CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

*Audio recording – 3 minutes 45 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.

#### 80 SCF MINUTES

*Audio Recording – 4 minutes 7 seconds*

The Service Director – Resources presented the item entitled 'SCF Minutes', alongside the Minutes from the meetings of October and December 2023 and highlighted the following:

- Work was ongoing to clear floor three for a potential lease.

- Staff had been requested to keep their working environment clear and tidy to enable a more pleasant working area.
- The consultation period for the pay and notice period for the Deputy Chief Officer had concluded and their pay would be linked to Green Book and they could choose if their notice period was aligned to the Chief Officer or the Green Book.
- Transitional changes had been put into place for Long service awards, and an additional special award had been made available for employment exceeding 30 years.
- Meeting free Friday had commenced and feedback was encouraged via the SCF.

**RESOLVED:** That the Committee noted the minutes of the Staff Consultation Forum for October and November 2023.

## 81 HR INFORMATION NOTE

*Audio Recording – 7 Minutes 10 seconds*

- It had been a busy period for recruitment, there were fewer vacancies than in previous years but the 3 apprenticeship roles had attracted 117 application.
- There had been a slight increase in staff turnover but nothing significant.
- Staff received the 2023/24 pay award in their November pay, it was expected negotiations for the 2024/25 pay award would commence in January.
- The contract for the Learning Management System was due to end in July 2024 and this was being reviewed.
- The Inclusion Group had received training on microaggressions and unconscious bias.
- An inclusion sub group had been formed to review the gender pay gap, which for 2023 was 14%, an improvement from 19.3% in 2022. An action plan to focus on attracting females into senior roles was continuing.
- There had been an increase in absences above what was expected for the time of year.
- Work was ongoing regarding more complex absences, especially as the majority of long term absences related to mental health.

The following Members asked questions:

- Councillor Elizabeth Dennis
- Councillor Terry Hone

In response to questions the HR Services Manager stated:

- The work force had more female employees, however the majority were employed below Grade 10, this area would be specifically targeted.
- A confident women workshop had previously taken place and was again being considered.
- Employees seconded from Hertfordshire County Council were not included in the Gender Pay Gap percentage calculations.

Councillor Elizabeth Dennis highlighted that staff were able to be reimbursed for the Flu Vaccine.

*N.B Councillor Tom Plater joined the Zoom meeting at 10:15.*

## 82 DISCUSSION PAPER - PROVIDING SUPPORT FOR STAFF WELLBEING

*Audio Recording – 15 Minutes 24 seconds*

The HR Services Manager presented the Information Note entitled 'Providing support for Staff Wellbeing' and advised that:

- Staff wellbeing was important and impacted on employee engagement, retainment and effectiveness.
- The report highlighted the Council values, in particular, that staff work together to support each other to deliver the best they can.
- There was a wide range of direct support and signposting to external sites available for staff.
- The internal support available to employees was highlighted on page 23 of the report.
- The external support available to employees was highlighted on page 24 of the report and included, Occupational Health, Employee Assistance Programme, North Herts Wellbeing, GP Helpline and Support for Staff who are Carers.
- Wellbeing articles were timed around calendar events, with an article about loneliness, bereavement and suicide prevention scheduled for December.
- HR continued to review resources available for staff wellbeing.
- There would be a staff survey in the Spring, which would include a section on the wellbeing resources available and their suitability.

The following Members asked questions:

- Councillor Elizabeth Dennis
- Councillor Terry Hone

In response to questions the HR Services Manager stated that:

- HR Business partners were available to work with managers to help and advise them on staff wellbeing, this was being reviewed and updated with the roll out of SharePoint.
- Wellbeing was highlighted at the SMG and through the Insight magazine and Intranet pages.
- The HR Team attended discussion groups with other local HR leads where wellbeing knowledge, experiences and ideas were discussed.

Councillor Elizabeth Dennis noted that:

- The bimonthly drop-in sessions for menopause were a great idea as this area was often overlooked.
- The football group running from Baldock Arena helped to improve mental health in men.
- Supporting staff with mental health issues was especially important throughout December and towards Blue Monday in January.
- There was a good measure of support for staff wellbeing.

**RESOLVED:** That the Committee commented on and noted the Discussion Paper on Providing Support for Staff Wellbeing.

## 83 SUGGESTED DISCUSSION TOPICS

*Audio Recording – 24 minutes 42 seconds*

Councillor Elizabeth Dennis suggested that Face to Face v Online Learning could be an idea for the next meeting.

Councillor Terry Hone stated that there were a lot of interesting topics, including Diversity Practices, Social Media for Recruitment and the Online learning.

Councillor Raj Bhakar commented that the Long-Term Absence Management would be good topic.

**Wednesday, 6th December, 2023**

Councillor Elizabeth Dennis stated that the Online learning item would be particular helpful for delivering the new Councillors training. She suggested that the long term absence discussion paper focused on how the Council supported employees throughout their absence and back into the workplace.

The Service Director – Resources requested that Micro Aggression and unconscious biases should be added to the suggested discussion topics.

The Chair confirmed the topics of 'Face to Face v Online Learning, Striking a Balance' and 'Long Term Absence Management' for the next meeting of the Committee and this was agreed with Members present.

The meeting closed at 10.33 am

Chair

## Staff Consultation Forum Meeting

06/12/2023

**Present:** Anthony Roche (**AR**), Ian Couper (**IC**), Rebecca Webb (**RW**), Drew Betts (**DB**), Claire Bernard (**CB**), Louis Franklin (**LF**), Christina Corr (**CC**), Vicky Kent (**VK**), Dee Levett (**DL**), Daniel Crowhurst (**DC**), Harrison McLeod – notes (**HM**)

**Circulation:** Global

**Chair for Meeting:** Louis Franklin (**LF**)

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### 1. Apologies

Apologies were received from Rachel Cooper and Caelan Ballard.

### 2. Restructure Notice

The restructure follows the transfer of the Cashier function from Customers to Resources. The proposed new structure includes the creation of an Income Team Leader role which would manage one Income Officer and one Accountancy Technician. The restructure also aims to reflect new responsibilities taken on by the Risk and Performance Officer which are not currently reflected in their Job Profile. The restructure will regrade this role to formalise the changes and make them permanent.

**Q:** Is the new Income Team Leader post replacing the vacant Chief Cashier post?

**A:** No, it is not a direct replacement. It picks up some elements of that role (such as management of the Income Officer post) but has a wider remit, including supporting the development of the income side of the new finance system that is being implemented.

### 3. Matters Arising from Previous Meeting

None

### 4. NHC Update

- Updates covered in staff briefing yesterday.

### HR and Employee Wellbeing Update

- The 2023 Pay Award has now been processed through payroll and issued in November pay.
- Pay claim from unions expected in January. RW will post an update on the Intranet.
- Personal Development Mornings this Friday the 8<sup>th</sup> of December. There is a learning session on the GP helpline and an IT bitesize session - everyone is encouraged to get involved.
- Gender pay gap figures for 2023 are to be published.



- HR are drafting an article about Loneliness & Bereavement and Mental Health, so keep an eye out for it.

**Q:** What is the Gender pay gap percentage comparison like, excluding the previous temporary Service Director post?

**A:** There has been an improvement in 2023 figures compared to 2022 figures. The mean gap has decreased from 19.5% to 15.5%. The median gap has also decreased from 19.3% to 14%.

## 5. Employee Queries

**Q:** When using the staff directory in Outlook, you cannot always find the person you are looking for. Sometimes it also takes you to the internet instead. Why is this happening, and is this the way the directory is supposed to function?

**A:** The staff details in the staff directory are all from a central source now, so all current staff profiles should be in the directory. There are minor issues with the directory, but it should be functional. Please raise a ticket on the [IT Helpdesk](#) if this continues to happen.

The launch of the Hub may also impact the staff directory, so IT will continue to check that it functions correctly and correct any bugs.

## 6. IT Update and Queries

- There is a new IT Helpdesk apprentice, Megan, in post now. This has been very helpful to the team and has eased the workload on the IT Helpdesk.
- There are an additional two new posts out for recruitment, and hopefully there will be some take up in this third round of recruitment.
- A request to managers to ensure the names on new starter forms are correct. We have a new starter process in place, but there have been incidents of managers putting the wrong names on the form. This requires a lot of work to be redone and devices to be rebuilt, which has knock on effect on the overall IT service. was going to mention in SMG next week.
- The IT bitesize sessions held so far have had received a lot of take up which is very positive. IT are looking for feedback and suggestions for these sessions, so if staff have a particular area of interest, let IT know and this can inform future sessions.
- Going through the process of installing new audio-visual equipment for the first-floor meeting rooms 2 and 3. Hopefully a demo unit will be provided before Christmas.

**Q:** Are the drop-in sessions just virtual, or will there be opportunities to attend in person?

**A:** Currently these sessions are just being hosted on Teams, but if there is sufficient demand for in-person sessions this can be explored further.



## 7. Building Services & Facilities Update

- Global email reminders were sent last week and covered a range of topics from signing in and out, vaping at work, and office tidiness.
- Good progress has been made in clearing out the third floor again thanks to the efforts of everyone.

**Q:** Is floor 3 now empty?

**A:** Not quite empty but better than before, will look at marketing the space once more when it is all clear.

If anyone has any issues, please email these to [propertyservices@north-herts.gov.uk](mailto:propertyservices@north-herts.gov.uk)

## 8. Green Update

- A large briefing has been provided by the policy team, which was shared with SCF members on the screen. The briefing can be read here: [December Environment Briefing 2023](#)

## 9. Ideas/Suggestions

- Many people will be on leave at the start of January. The January SCF meeting has been moved to the 31<sup>st</sup> of January 2024, and will cover both January and February.
- New ideas on promoting NHC's Values could include having the values printed on lanyards, or as a sticker/screensaver on laptops.

## 10. AOB

None

**Chair for next meeting – Christina Corr**

### Have something to say?

If you have an issue that you think should be brought to the attention of the SCF, please contact any SCF representative via phone, email or in person. They will raise your issue at the next meeting. You will not be identified unless you want to be.

Issues relating to property e.g., broken lift, non-flushing toilets, etc. must always be reported to Property Services in the first instance: [propertyservices@north-herts.gov.uk](mailto:propertyservices@north-herts.gov.uk)

Alternatively, you can send any issues to the SCF inbox - [SCF@north-herts.gov.uk](mailto:SCF@north-herts.gov.uk)

### **Representatives (and phone extension):**

**Christina Corr** #4325 - Senior Technical Officer Revenues and Benefits

**Claire Bernard** #4323 - MSU Admin Support Officer

**Andrew Betts** #4282 - Contracts Officer Waste Management based at Buntingford



**North  
Herts**  
Council

**Louis Franklin** #4262 – Admin Support Officer

**Vicky Kent** #4396 – Community Protection Apprentice

## Staff Consultation Forum Meeting

31/01/2024

**Present:** Anthony Roche (**AR**), Ian Couper (**IC**), Rebecca Webb (**RW**), Claire Bernard (**CB**), Louis Franklin (**LF**), Christina Corr (**CC**), Tiran Straughan (**TS**), Dee Levett (**DL**), Mark Robinson (**MR**), Natalie Barrett (**NB**), Bryony Weist (**BW**), Caelan Ballard – notes (**CB**)

**Circulation:** Global

**Chair for Meeting:** Christina Corr (**CC**)

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### 1. Apologies

Apologies were received from Drew Betts.

### 2. Restructure Notices

#### Legal Team Restructure

The restructure proposal follows a resignation from the Legal and Regulatory Team Manager. The new structure proposed one Legal Manager & Deputy Monitoring Officer role, and the conversion of the vacant Legal Regulatory Team Manager post to a fee earning post which would report to the Legal Manager & Deputy Monitoring Officer. The proposal went to the Leadership Team and has now commenced consultation with members of the Legal Team. The restructure aims to provide greater resilience within the team. At the end of March next year, two trainee posts will have reached the end of their training period and will revert to one qualified lawyer post. There has been no feedback from the team so far. The consultation closes on the 20<sup>th</sup> of February.

#### Licensing and Community Restructure

The Licensing and Community restructure proposal includes the introduction of a Licensing Team Leader in place of one of the Senior Licensing Officers and aims to streamline the flow of reporting. The structure has been trialled for the past six months and has worked well for the team, and as such, consultation for a formal restructure is underway. The restructure does not propose any new staff. Concerns have been raised regarding two posts being re-evaluated, and this feedback is being considered. There is budget to accommodate a change in grade for these roles if the re-evaluation goes ahead.

**Q:** Is the Licensing Team Leader role being changed from a Senior Licensing Officer going to be graded differently?

**A:** It has been regraded as a grade higher than the Senior Licensing Officer. It will have a slight budget impact, but staff costs can be recouped through license fees which will result in the regrading being cost-neutral to the organisation.



**Q:** Under the new structure, does the remaining Senior Licensing Officer deputise for the Licensing Team Leader when they are away?

**A:** Yes, they will deputise for the Licensing Team Leader, this has been added to the Job Profile of the Senior Licensing Officer role.

### **3. Matters Arising from Previous Meeting**

None

### **4. NHC Update**

- The budget for the next financial year is currently being reviewed and set. There are likely to be difficult decisions required for the 2025/26 budget, but nothing significant for the 2024/25 budget.
- The next round of elections is coming up in May. The Democratic and Electoral Services team will be looking for election staff, so any help will be appreciated.
- Other organisational updates were covered last week in the Staff Briefing.
- Customer Services are launching the new CRM system at the end of February, and there will be drop-in sessions on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday for the next two weeks. User guides will also be published.

### **HR and Employee Wellbeing Update**

- The scheme for Shared Cost Additional Voluntary Contributions (SCAVC's) has been launched, and you can find out more about the scheme on the [SharePoint page](#). Additionally, there are webinars taking place regarding the new scheme and you can find out more and [book a place on the sessions](#) on the AVC portal.
- The Health Cash Plan has also been launched and was discussed in the staff briefing last week. You can read more about this scheme on the [Health Cash Plan](#) page on The Hub.
- Pay negotiations are progressing, and a date has been set for the regional pay briefing. Further updates will come following this pay briefing.
- A staff survey is being planned and will be launched in the next couple of months. Dates will be confirmed as soon as possible, and we encourage everyone to take the opportunity to have their say.

**Q:** Is there a limit on the number of people that can attend each drop-in session for the new Customer Services system?

**A:** There is no limit on the number of people who can attend a drop-in session. The sessions will act as a walkthrough and a show-and-tell. If one-to-one walkthroughs are needed this can be arranged through their managers, but user guides will also be available.

### **5. Employee Queries**

**Q:** Is there an update available on the solar panels on the roof of the DCO? Any information on if this is reducing costs, or its efficiency would be helpful.



**A:** The solar panels are working well and are generating electricity to the DCO. Exact figures on how much energy is being generated will be provided by the next meeting.

**Q:** What is the progress on plans to install green energy systems such as solar panels into Royston Swimming Pool? Has this gone ahead?

**A:** The upgrades were due to go ahead, but the Council has now submitted a bid for £8 Million on the Decarbonisation Fund which will provide Solar PV for all our Leisure Centres, as well as an additional Solar Thermal power system for Royston Swimming Pool and heat pumps for all the Centres. The estimated total cost of these systems will be over £10 Million. The outcome of the bid is yet to be announced but is expected to provide savings that off-set the capital cost.

**Q:** The homeworking expense allowance is no longer covering the cost of broadband and additional expenses incurred from working at home. Are there any plans to review this allowance?

**A:** This was also covered in the Staff Briefing recently after a question was raised by the Conservative Councillors at the last full Council Meeting. The homeworking allowance is provided as a contribution to cover additional costs from working at home, rather than to cover broadband or other bills specifically. Currently there are no plans to review the amount as the budget will unfortunately not allow this.

## **6. IT Update and Queries**

- At the end of the week, Harry will sadly be leaving the IT team. After the recent rounds of recruitment, two applicants were offered roles in the department and one has accepted, so IT will welcome a new member of staff soon.
- Reports have been circulated regarding the recent power outage. The outage was caused by a problem during maintenance on an uninterruptable power supply which supplies power to the DCO, it's servers and online systems. The power supply was shorted out which unfortunately caused some damage to it. The company providing maintenance has apologised and put mitigation steps in place to avoid this happening again.
- The new versions of Teams and Outlook have been released by Microsoft. IT does not govern when the new test versions are given to users, as this is an external rollout, so users are reminded that some issues or bugs may occur in the new versions of these applications. If issues do occur when using the new versions of Teams and Outlook, users are advised to switch back to the old versions of the applications.
- Councillors will receive the first wave of the Windows 11 testing as a Councillor laptop replacement program is due to begin soon, and Windows 11 will be installed on their new laptops. A tablet replacement program has also recently begun and all Councillors with tablets have been contacted.
- IT will be in the DCO this weekend and next weekend in preparation for reworking of the Council chamber to facilitate new microphone units as well as the AV solution which is going into Room 2 on Floor 1 of the DCO. More updates will follow on both projects.



- There will be work happening on Saturday 10<sup>th</sup> of February regarding the recent power outage, and an email has been sent out regarding this. So far, no feedback has been received from Service Managers outside of coordination with Careline's work.
- EV charging point and other power installations will also be installed on the 10<sup>th</sup> to minimise disruption for staff during the week.
- As reported in global communications, an Information@Work update will be going ahead this weekend.

**Q:** Are the drop-in sessions just virtual, or will there be opportunities to attend in person?

**A:** Currently these sessions are just being hosted on Teams, but if there is sufficient demand for in-person sessions this can be explored further.

## **7. Building Services & Facilities Update**

**Q:** Despite previous discussion and several global emails reminding staff to be considerate about eating strong-smelling lunches in the open-plan office, this still seems to be an issue. Is there anything that can be done?

**A:** When this occurs, staff should feel confident to politely suggest a colleague eats their lunch in the canteen area. As the office is an open-plan working environment, staff should respect their colleagues.

If anyone has any issues, please email these to [propertyservices@north-herts.gov.uk](mailto:propertyservices@north-herts.gov.uk)

## **8. Ideas/Suggestions**

None.

## **9. AOB**

None

**Chair for next meeting – Louis Franklin**

## **Have something to say?**

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**Representatives (and phone extension):**



# North Herts

Council

**Christina Corr** #4325 - Senior Technical Officer Revenues and Benefits

**Claire Bernard** #4323 - MSU Admin Support Officer

**Andrew Betts** #4282 - Contracts Officer - Waste Management

**Louis Franklin** #4262 – Digital Services Officer

**Tiranan Straughan** #4842 – Housing Policy Officer

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**JOINT STAFF CONSULTATIVE COMMITTEE**  
13 March 2024

*PART 1 – PUBLIC DOCUMENT	AGENDA ITEM No.
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TITLE OF INFORMATION NOTE: HR UPDATE  
INFORMATION NOTE OF THE HUMAN RESOURCES SERVICES MANAGER

**1. SUMMARY**

1.1 To update the Joint Staff Consultative Committee on the progress made in the last quarter completing HR work and projects and supporting people issues.

**2. STEPS TO DATE**

2.1 The information note contains updates regarding the significant and strategic activities from the HR Service Work Plan.

**3. INFORMATION TO NOTE**

3.1 The terms of reference for the Joint Staff Consultative Committee are to be the corporate interface with employees on major Human Resources issues and to be the Strategic HR Forum for North Herts Council Members.

**3.2 Recruitment & Retention**

The table below shows a comparison of recruitment statistics from Nov 2023 – Jan 2024 to the same period in the previous two years.

Recruitment	VACANCIES	APPLICATIONS	SHORTLISTED	OFFER - EXTERNAL	OFFER - INTERNAL	NOT FILLED
Nov21-Jan22	15	82	56	10	4	1
Nov22-Jan23	17	94	51	7	6	4
Nov23 -Jan24	25	91	51	13	7	5

During this quarter we had a higher number of vacancies, including several internal secondments which have provided opportunities for staff to develop new skills and experience. We have filled a number of vacancies including the Principal Estates Surveyor, two Environmental Health Technical Officers which were readvertised having previously been unsuccessful, and one of two IT Application Development Officers.

The five vacancies which were not filled this quarter include one Application Development Officer (as described above) Contracts Lawyer, one of two Civil Enforcement Officer vacancies, one of two Careline Technicians, and the Safeguarding Team Leader.

**3.3 Leavers and Turnover**

Turnover figures exclude redundancies, retirement, apprenticeships, and fixed term contracts.

Rolling 12 months	Turnover	
	Leavers	Monthly
Mar-23	5	11.56%
Apr-23	4	12.39%
May-23	2	12.61%
Jun-23	6	13.44%
Jul-23	4	13.38%
Aug-23	2	13.35%
Sep-23	2	12.73%
Oct-23	3	11.84%
Nov-23	5	12.12%
Dec-23	2	12.11%
Jan-24	0	10.36%
Feb-24	1	10.33%
<b>Total</b>	<b>36</b>	

The table above shows the rolling labour turnover rate which has continued to slow slightly over the last 6 months. Labour turnover looks at unplanned leavers from the council and does not include figures related to planned leavers such as the end of fixed term contracts (eg apprentices, and maternity cover) as well as planned retirements.

In terms of feedback from leavers, there has been no significant change in the general responses which recommend the Council as an employer.

### 3.4 Staff Survey 2024

Work has begun on a staff survey which will take place during March. This will be the first full staff survey since 2018 and we are looking to find out about what our employees think is working well and what we could do better in a various areas including leadership and management, communications, inclusion, work life balance and wellbeing support.

### 3.5 National Pay bargaining 2024

Pay negotiations for 2024-25 have begun and the Unions are expected to table their pay claim in the coming weeks. Regional pay briefings have been arranged and the Council will take part in this process.

### 3.6 Apprentices

We currently have 8 Apprentices in post, and one of our most recent apprentices has been successful in securing a permanent role at the Council. There are 2 further apprentice vacancies that will be advertised in the coming months.

To mark National Apprenticeship Week (5-11 February) some of our Apprentices were featured on our social media platforms. The theme this year was Skills for Life and our

apprentices shared the skills that they have developed during their apprenticeships that they are able to take with them to future job roles.

In January, members of the HR Team attended a local careers fair to highlight the variety of different careers and Apprenticeships on offer at the Council. The aim is to highlight the variety of work, how we make a difference and encourage young people to consider the Council and local government as a future career path. We will attend a further apprenticeship fair targeted at school leavers in March.

### 3.7 Learning and Development

The current contract for the Learning Management System is due for renewal in July 2024, the procurement process is underway.

There have been a variety of workshops (both live online and face to face) as part of the personal development days, to support staff using new systems and to develop their IT skills.

### 3.8 Benefits

February saw the launch of our new Shared Cost AVC scheme, and an updated employee funded health cash plan.

### 3.9 Inclusion Group

The inclusion group met in January and discussed topics including age and over 55's in the workplace and how the Council can best support this group of employees. There were conversations about how to best use flexi time to ensure appropriate rest and recharge times and ideas about how to ensure general IT skills are kept up to date.

Work on general awareness raising about equalities and diversity, microaggressions and unconscious bias is ongoing.

### 3.10 Equalities Data 2023

We publish equalities data showing the Councils workforce profile on an annual basis. Our recent data has shown little change to the previous year in terms of our overall profile. This data will be reviewed in detail, and any areas for action will be identified.

### 3.11 Absence

The absence figures are shown below as absence days lost per employee.

Rolling 12 months	Absence days lost per employee		
	Long-term	Short-term	Total
Feb	0.19	0.37	0.55
March	0.39	0.34	0.73
April	0.30	0.22	0.52
May	0.26	0.26	0.52
June	0.15	0.28	0.43
July	0.28	0.32	0.60
August	0.45	0.21	0.66

Sept	0.23	0.38	0.61
Oct	0.30	0.60	0.90
Nov	0.27	0.58	0.85
Dec	0.31	0.29	0.60
Jan	0.59	0.50	1.09
<b>Total</b>	<b>3.72</b>	<b>4.35</b>	<b>8.06</b>

Summary of absence reasons:

Absence reason Nov 23 – Jan 24	Occasions of absence		
	Up to 1 week	1-3 weeks	3 weeks+
Ear, Nose and Throat (Inc Cold/Flu)	60	3	0
COVID 19 - suspected	12	1	0
Sickness / Vomiting	16	0	0
Other	26	4	1
Headaches (inc migraine)	9	0	0
Musculoskeletal	7	1	2
Mental health	9	10	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>139</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>7</b>

It's not unusual to see an increase of minor ailments causing increased sickness absence in autumn and winter months and can be seen in the short-term absences for cold/ flu and Covid-19, in the table above. Managers are reminded of the importance of communication during absence and carrying out return to work meetings to ensure returning employees are supported.

The HR team continue to work closely with managers to support the more complex absence cases including those related to mental health, which make up the majority of our current long term absence cases. The process and support for employees on long term sickness absence is detailed in the discussion paper.

#### 4.0 NEXT STEPS

- 4.1 Progress against the HR Service plan will be reported to quarterly JSCC Meetings.
- 4.2 This Committee receives this update, as well as getting to choose one or more discussion topics for each meeting. There is also the opportunity for the Committee to comment on what information is included in this report to help it act as the "strategic HR forum" (from Terms of Reference for the Committee).

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## **JSCC Discussion - Striking a balance with face-to-face vs live online learning**

North Herts Council has had online learning available to staff since the introduction of a Learning Management System in 2013, staff are able to access eLearning modules for essential learning at a time that works for them. Online workshops were available, but it wasn't until the Covid pandemic in March 2020 that all face-to-face learning was suspended, and a switch was made to fully online learning. All our apprentice training providers also switched to online learning, to ensure that the apprenticeships were able to continue, they have continued with this model post pandemic.

At this time, we adapted our Induction process, producing several videos that are available on demand, for staff to view within their first few days. We also introduced a virtual New Starter Get Together which is an informal session, allowing new starters to meet others who have recently joined the organisation, together with other key team members. This now alternates between a live online session and a face-to-face session to allow staff to choose the format that best suits their needs, it is too soon to say which is proving the most popular.

Many training providers have found that there are several benefits to continue delivering workshops online and the improvement in technology means that engagement and interaction during online learning is greatly improved with the use of the chat function, polls, word clouds and breakout rooms.

We have found that there are benefits to both live online learning and face to face learning:

### **Benefits of live online learning**

- Reduced expenses for external trainers.
- Reduced time away from the working day for employees.
- No extra travel time for those not based at the training location.
- Reduced vehicle use.
- Accessible for anyone who has access to a laptop.
- Closed Captions available for learning delivered via Microsoft Teams.
- Low cognitive load for those who struggle in a social situation (ability to introduce in the chat rather than face to face).
- If difficult subject matter, then easy to discreetly remove yourself.
- Ability to deliver content quickly.

### **Benefits of face-to-face learning**

- Better opportunity to meet people and build relationships.
- Practical skills can be demonstrated.
- Ability to ensure all participants are engaged.
- If difficult subject matter, then the trainer can more easily monitor attendees.

### **Finding the Balance**

We are continually reviewing the learning and development on offer and the ways in which it's delivered. We are constantly in dialogue with staff to understand what works well for them and the challenges that they face. There is no "one size fits all" as differing learning styles, working patterns and personal preferences mean that some staff prefer one option over the other.

We look to make a decision on the approach based on the learning objective of the session and if there needs to be a lot of interaction, relationship building or practical skills demonstrated then we would prefer that this is delivered face to face. If it lends itself more to information giving with a limited amount of interaction to a greater number of people then we will consider online. A blend of a session that is both live online and face to face provides additional challenges for the facilitator and participants, so we avoid this delivery method unless it is absolutely necessary. Of course, there are some circumstances where we are bound by the delivery methods of the training providers and by how prohibitive the costs may be.



## JSCC Discussion – Long Term Absence Management

Long Term absence is defined as an absence lasting more than 21 calendar days.

Our Long-Term Absence Management policy ensures that employees taking an extended period of sick absence from work for a serious illness or condition receive appropriate support from their manager and the HR team. Our sick pay scheme supports employees whilst they take time off to recover and ensures they receive fair pay and benefits.

Every effort is made to support employees in returning to work as quickly as possible. Where this is not possible, employees are fully supported through the options that may be available such as reasonable adjustments, redeployment, or ill-health retirement.

Disability is one of the protected characteristics covered by the Equalities Act which is often relevant to long-term sickness absence. It requires employers on occasions to treat disabled people more favourably than they would have treated them if they had not had a disability, such as considering any reasonable adjustments and any absences that are disability related should be clearly noted as such on the employee's absence record.

### **Eligibility for Occupational Sick Pay (OSP)**

During 1 <sup>st</sup> year of service	1 month's full pay and (after completing 4 months' service) 2 months' half pay.
During 2 <sup>nd</sup> year of service	2 months' full pay and 2 months' half pay
During 3 <sup>rd</sup> year of service	4 months' full pay and 4 months' half pay
During 4 <sup>th</sup> & 5 <sup>th</sup> year of service	5 months full pay and 5 months half pay
After 5 <sup>th</sup> years' service	6 months full pay and 6 months half pay

### **2023 Figures**

In 2023, there were 49 cases of long-term sickness absence, which resulted in a loss of over 1,000 working days. 40% of cases related to mental health issues such as depression, anxiety and stress, and a further 20% related to musco-skeletal issues, with the remaining 40% a wide variety of issues.

### **How we support and manage employees on Long Term Sickness Absence**

#### **Long-Term absence Letter**

- Sent at 21 days from HR to the employee informing them of the policy and expectations whilst they remain absent, including the requirement to provide Fit notes and the importance of maintaining contact with line manager.
- The recommendation of an Occupational Health referral is included.
- Our Employee Assistance Programme is also signposted in the letter.

#### **Occupational Health (OH) Referral**

- HR recommend that a referral is made to OH within 28 days of the start of the absence, consent is requested.

- OH appointments are scheduled by our OH provider, and involves a consultation which takes place over the phone, at a time convenient for the employee
- The confidential OH report includes a summary, providing guidance from a trained medical professional.
- Advice is provided about the employee's health in relation to their job and any adjustments that are needed to support the employee return to work, including phased return, modified duties and reasonable adjustments.

The HR team provide guidance and support to the line manager throughout the process and are available to provide guidance and signpost external support to employees.

### **Returning to the workplace**

- Occupational Health advice is used to support a phased return to work and arrangements are made ahead of employees returning to the workplace to ensure adjustments are in place and can be supported.
- Reasonable adjustments are changes an employer makes to remove or reduce a disadvantage related to someone's disability, the Council extends this beyond those absences relating to a disability and reasonable adjustments are put in place, where appropriate, for each long term absence case.
- Examples of reasonable adjustments include reduced hours, alternative working arrangements and/or modified duties. These are put in place for a maximum of 4 weeks.
- Regular reviews on the phased return to work are followed up by HR with the line manager. Ensuring that progress towards a full, sustained return to work is on track. Any concerns are highlighted and addressed.
- Where cases require more than 4 weeks then a reduction in contracted hours on a temporary or permanent basis is considered, with advice from HR.

### **Unable to return to the workplace (for employees in the Local Govt Pension Scheme)**

For employees who are incapacitated and unable to work in the foreseeable medium to long term future, the possibility of Ill Health Retirement provision can be explored and advice sought from a qualified independent Occupational Health Physician. HR will advise on all options in line with the relevant regulations which apply to the pension scheme.

### **Looking forward**

- Considering introducing Wellness Action Plans alongside stress risk assessments as a proactive approach in managing long-term absence which relate to mental health absences.