

NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL
JOINT STAFF CONSULTATIVE COMMITTEE
MEETING HELD IN THE VIRTUAL VIA ZOOM
ON WEDNESDAY, 18TH JUNE, 2025 AT 10.00 AM

MINUTES

Present: *Councillors: Ian Albert (Chair), Daniel Allen, Keith Hoskins, Bryony May and Claire Strong.*

In attendance: *Faith Churchill (Democratic Services Apprentice), Ian Couper (Director - Resources), Robert Filby (Trainee Committee, Member and Scrutiny Officer), James Lovegrove (Committee, Member and Scrutiny Manager) and Rebecca Webb (HR Services Manager).*

Staff Consultation Forum: *Louis Franklin*

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

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Audio recording – 0 minutes 7 seconds

Councillor Keith Hoskins proposed and Councillor Claire Strong seconded and, it was:

RESOLVED: That Councillor Ian Albert be elected as Chair for this meeting of the Joint Staff Consultative Committee.

There were no apologies for absence from Members.

2 MINUTES - 19 MARCH 2025

Audio Recording – 2 minutes 30 seconds

Councillor Ian Albert, as Chair, proposed and Councillor Claire Strong seconded and, it was:

RESOLVED: That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Committee held on 19 March 2025 be approved as a true record of the proceedings and be signed by the Chair.

3 CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

Audio recording – 3 minutes 36 seconds

N.B. The SCF staff representative joined the Zoom call at 10.04.

- (1) The Chair advised that, in accordance with Council Policy, the meeting would be 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.

4 SCF MINUTES

Audio recording – 3 minutes 59 seconds

The Director – Resources presented the item entitled ‘SCF Minutes’, alongside the Minutes from the meetings of March, April and May 2025 and highlighted the following:

- IT updates covering a variety of topics had been received.
- The new directorate structure which came into effect on 1 April was discussed.
- Quarterly updates on property services would now be given by the Facilities Team Leader rather than the Director – Resources as it was no longer under the remit of the Resources Directorate.
- Discussion about virtual parking permits replacing physical permits had taken place.

The following Members asked questions:

- Councillor Claire Strong
- Councillor Daniel Allen
- Councillor Ian Albert

In response to questions, the Committee, Member and Scrutiny Manager advised that all Members would be informed of the passing of one of the former Chief Executives at the next Full Council meeting.

In response to questions, the Director – Resources advised that most property issues had been resolved and staff were generally content.

In response to questions, the SCF staff representative advised that they had not heard any complaints from staff regarding the changes from physical to virtual parking permits and agreed with the comments from the Director – Resources about recent SCF meetings being quiet, which was usually a good indication of staff morale.

RESOLVED: That the Committee noted the Minutes of the Staff Consultation Forum for March, April and May 2025.

5 HR INFORMATION NOTE

Audio recording – 8 minutes 16 seconds

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

- Paragraph 3.2 of the Information Note provided an update on recruitment. The table within this highlighted the Key Performance Indicator (KPI) for Q4 and the recruitment data showed that this had been met. A comparison of data with the same quarter in the previous year was also shown within the table.
- 79% of vacancies were filled at the first attempt and most were filled at the second attempt, however, there were fewer vacancies in Q1 this year compared to the same quarter in the previous year.
- Paragraph 3.3 highlighted staff turnover which continued to be approximately 9%. This was higher than the previous year but the Local Government Association (LGA) benchmarking tool, Infinistats, illustrated that the percentage was broadly in line with other councils in the East of England.
- National Employers had offered a 3.2% increase across all NJC pay points, however, UNISON were still demanding an increase of £3,000 across all spinal column points and were advising their Members to reject the offer.

- Two apprentices had attended the LGA Apprentice of the Year event that took place in May. This was an online event which brought together apprentices across the country to encourage collaboration and the development of skills required to tackle challenges in local government.
- Graduates were in their second rotation of service areas and interviews for the second cohort had been completed. It was expected that the next graduate placement would start in Autumn 2025, subject to suitable candidates and their acceptance of the role.
- HR had developed short and focused bite sized training sessions for managers which were designed to develop their knowledge and skills in key areas. They would continue to develop these sessions based on feedback to fulfil the action on this detailed in the Staff Survey Action Plan.
- Employee Wellbeing was detailed at paragraph 3.8 and the Council had participated in Mental Health Awareness Week in May by signposting staff to internal and external resources and providing them with videos about maintaining positive mental health.
- The activities of the Inclusion Group (IG) were set out in paragraph 3.9 of the Information Note. Their meeting in June included a guest speaker from a charity called ProAge who worked to create inclusive workplaces.
- The IG had discussed the Supreme Court ruling on the meaning of sex within the Equalities Act and they would await the guidance that was due to be released on this later in the month.
- Additional guest speakers would be invited to attend future IG meetings to shift the focus of the group to other areas and to diversify their knowledge on equality, diversity and inclusion.
- 8.54 days were lost to sickness per full-time employee in the last 12 months which was lower than the previous figure reported at the last Committee meeting.
- This was due to a reduction in cold and flu absences as expected, with gastro and mental health related absences remaining similar to the previous quarter.
- Bite sized sessions were currently focused on upskilling managers to deal with short-term absences within their teams by equipping them with the skills to facilitate conversations with team members and be able to offer them appropriate support.
- HR continued to give support across the Council for long-term absences and involved occupational health where needed to support return-to-works and provide adjustments where necessary. Throughout that process, additional support was signposted to employees, particularly to the Employee Assistance Programme when appropriate.

The following Members asked questions:

- Councillor Daniel Allen
- Councillor Ian Albert
- Councillor Claire Strong
- Councillor Bryony May

In response to questions, the Human Resources Services Manager advised that:

- Office days differed between departments as they were managed by individual service managers and because of this, the general data they held on absence due to sickness could not be linked to working from home or the office specifically.
- The Council had encouraged home working for several years, therefore no recent change in absence from sickness could be linked to this.
- The LGA benchmarking system revealed that their figures on absence due to sickness were close to other authorities in the East of England. More information could be provided on that comparison to Members via email after the meeting.
- Two graduates were recruited last autumn on a two-year placement and their plan going forward was to recruit one graduate annually on a two-year placement to create overlap and allow the graduates to support each other.

- The central budget of the Council only allowed for approximately eight apprentices to be employed at any one time.
- Personal development mornings took place each month on a Friday and staff were provided with resources such as online courses and webinars. It was flexible when personal development was undertaken as they were aware that some staff did not work on a Friday and they were encouraged to pick it up on another day in their week.
- Managers were encouraged to carry out team activities for personal development mornings as long as all team members were present.

Councillor Ian Albert thanked the Human Resources Services Manager for presenting the Information Note to the Committee.

6 DISCUSSION PAPER - SUCCESSION PLANNING AND FUTURE PROOFING

Audio recording – 21 minutes 30 seconds

The HR Services Manager presented the Discussion Paper entitled 'Succession Planning and Future Proofing' and advised that:

- Succession Planning focused on identifying and growing talent to fill leadership and business-critical positions.
- The Council was committed to the development and progression of current employees through various initiatives, and this commitment was crucial, especially with LGR approaching as teams would need to be prepared for evolving demands.
- Staff were encouraged to develop through both formal and informal training but were also supported to complete formal qualifications and take on opportunities in the form of secondments or 'acting up'.
- Discussions with line managers at Regular Performance Reviews (RPRs) and 1-1s were vital to this process along with HR support and advice.
- Succession planning and development could support retention but it was recognised that there would not always be a position for employees to progress into due to the flat organisation structure of the Council which meant that some individuals sought promotion opportunities elsewhere.
- However, the Council had benefited from former employees returning to the organisation when appropriate positions became available for them after gaining skills and experience at another authority.
- Where there had been staff turnover in senior positions over recent years, these had filled by several internal candidates and there were examples of employees at all levels of the organisation achieving promotions within.
- In addition to developing staff for future roles, staff were also being prepared to adapt to change within the world of work.
- The apprenticeship levy had been incorporated as one of the tools for development and several staff were improving their digital skills by undertaking courses in AI for business value, data insights for business decisions and advanced software engineering to support the Council workforce of the future.
- However, any form of learning and development came with challenges, the primary one being a constraint on time and workload both inside and outside of working hours as the apprenticeship levy required 20% off-the-job learning. HR were supporting employees with this and encouraging them to find the best methods of learning to suit their needs.
- The future would bring new structures, roles, processes and technologies and it was vital that staff were not only prepared for these changes but could use them as an opportunity.

The following Members asked questions:

- Councillor Claire Strong

- Councillor Bryony May
- Councillor Ian Albert
- Councillor Keith Hoskins

Councillor Claire Strong highlighted that the Council had been successful with succession planning as there were recent examples of internal candidates filling positions in the Senior Leadership Team, however, it was recognised that they would not be able to satisfy all Members of staff with career opportunities.

In response to questions, the Human Resources Services Manager advised that:

- There was no formal process for recognising talent within the Council, however, RPRs and 1-1s could be used by managers to spot progression and HR provided guidance on appropriate training if a suitable career path had been identified.
- RPRs and 1-1s were continuous and an annual log of these was kept to aid planning for future conversations.
- A coaching and mentoring scheme was available for those who wanted to progress but lacked the confidence to do so.
- A confidence workshop, specifically targeted at women, to help address the gender pay gap would be provided by the Council.
- It was ensured that opportunities were equally available to all employees regardless of their working patterns.
- Job adverts specified that the Council were open to discussing work patterns with the right candidate.
- Staff were able to request flexible working due to the Flexible Working Policy and there were examples of employees utilising this, even in the Senior Leadership team.
- Recruitment was an ongoing issue for the local government sector although there had been some recent improvements on this.
- Recruitment could become more difficult for the Council if the instabilities of LGR impacted their ability to attract candidates. This situation would be monitored by tracking staff turnover.
- The Council would take advantage of the national recruitment campaign for local government and continue to market the Council as a great employer in order to combat the potential future recruitment difficulties arising from LGR.

RESOLVED: That the Committee commented on and noted the Discussion Paper on Succession Planning and Future Proofing.

7 DISCUSSION PAPER - MICROAGGRESSIONS AND UNCONSCIOUS BIAS IN THE WORKPLACE

Audio recording – 35 minutes 32 seconds

The Human Resources Services Manager presented the Discussion Paper entitled 'Microaggressions and Unconscious Bias in the Workplace' and advised that:

- Microaggressions were defined as negative comments or actions that targeted a marginalised group and were often linked to stereotypes.
- They could be intentional or unintentional and while their delivery could be subtle, their impact could be significant both on mental health and emotional wellbeing.
- Hostile work environments could result from the accumulation of unchallenged microaggressions over time and lead to a reduction in employee morale.
- How people thought could depend on their life experiences and sometimes they held beliefs and views about others that might not be right or reasonable.
- Unconscious bias led to automatic judgements based on stereotypes or preconceived notions and could result in the unfair treatment of individuals.

- Both microaggressions and unconscious bias could hinder diversity and inclusion efforts, affecting team dynamics and overall organisational performance.
- It was key to address these issues to foster a respectful and productive workplace.
- The Council were committed to creating an environment where all employees felt valued and respected which was supported through its 'Inclusive' value in the Council Values as well as the ongoing work of the Inclusion Group (IG).
- Failing to address these issues could have severe consequences such as increased staff turnover, decreased employee engagement, legal ramifications and a loss of reputation as an employer which could hinder recruitment and retention of good employees.
- By tackling the issues proactively, a supportive and inclusive work environment could be created, resulting in enhanced organisational performance and employee wellbeing.
- Several initiatives had been employed to combat the issues such as recruitment training which covered unconscious bias and e-learning modules which included equality, diversity and inclusion.
- Posters on microaggressions in the workplace were developed by the IG to promote awareness of this issue among employees.
- Personal development mornings had focused on unconscious bias and microaggressions.
- Members of the HR team, Senior Leadership team and IG had attended training on these microaggressions.
- Next steps to combat these issues included additional training for all staff to further develop their understanding on these topics and encourage them to consider their own behaviours, as well as promote inclusion, equality and diversity.
- They were planning to relaunch the Council values to further embed the 'Inclusive' value.
- Members were encouraged to share their perceptions of microaggressions and unconscious bias as it would help the Council to further understand these issues.

The following Members asked questions:

- Councillor Ian Albert
- Councillor Keith Hoskins
- Councillor Daniel Allen
- Councillor Bryony May
- Councillor Claire Strong

In response to questions, the Human Resources Services Manager advised that:

- Microaggressions could constitute comments or actions that did not specifically target a marginalised group, but they were more commonly aimed towards marginalised groups as detailed in their definition.
- Microaggressions could occur both face-to-face and online, including via social media.
- The HR team and IG were developing the skills of staff to be able to challenge microaggressions in the moment by recognising them, processing interactions and then responding correctly. Although, there would be difficulties in challenging them in the moment.
- It was important for staff to see that unconscious bias was present in everyone to make it easier for them to recognise it within themselves and challenge it when they saw it through their behaviour.
- Digital copies of the microaggression posters would be sent to all Members following the meeting.
- Work on microaggressions and unconscious bias would never be complete as the conversation on these issues was ongoing.
- HR and IG would drip feed messages on both topics to all staff to keep them present in their minds to encourage discussion and reflection.

- Sessions on microaggressions and unconscious bias would continue to be held at staff briefings, the Senior Management Group, and in the monthly staff Insight Magazine.
- There were inclusion-based questions in the Staff Survey last year and they would investigate the rollout of pulse surveys with a focus on inclusion.
- Actions on inclusion were detailed in the Staff Survey Action Plan. One of these was to continue to keep the discussion on microaggressions and unconscious bias ever present at the Council.
- Conducting a presentation on microaggressions and unconscious bias in the workplace prior to or during a Full Council meeting would be investigated.

Councillor Keith Hoskins highlighted that it was good to see the increasing awareness of these problems and showed how much progression had been made on attitudes in the workplace in recent decades.

Councillor Claire Strong highlighted that having regular conversations with employees about the topics was key as being on the receiving end of unconscious bias was not pleasant.

In response to questions, the Director – Resources advised that:

- Assumptions should not be made about anyone.
- It was natural for people to make mistakes but in order to tackle them it was better to ensure that people learned from them rather than being punished for them.
- The Staff Survey Action Plan included an action to ensure that managers were supported to facilitate meaningful conversations with staff during 1-1s and RPRs about their health and wellbeing.

In response to questions, the SCF staff representative advised that:

- Discussion on microaggressions had taken place at the IG on more than one occasion and this was a good starting point because it encouraged further conversations about the topic.
- Challenging microaggressions was more about positively influencing individuals to change their behaviours rather than punishing them for acting in a certain way.

In response to questions, the Chair advised that:

- There was value in spreading awareness on microaggressions and unconscious bias in the workplace by building the topics into inductions, training programmes and development as they were important issues.
- A presentation on microaggressions and unconscious bias in the workplace could be incorporated into a Full Council meeting where there were fewer items on the agenda.

RESOLVED: That the Committee commented on and noted the Discussion Paper on Microaggressions and Unconscious Bias in the Workplace.

8 SUGGESTED DISCUSSION TOPICS

Audio recording – 58 minutes 30 seconds

The Chair led a discussion on future topics for the Committee to consider. The following Members took part in the discussion:

- Councillor Bryony May
- Councillor Claire Strong
- Councillor Ian Albert
- Councillor Daniel Allen

The following points were made as part of the discussion:

- It would be worth having a conversation on the Supreme Court ruling on the Equalities Act and how the Council would respond to this once the guidance was released.
- The Employer Value Proposition would be an interesting topic for discussion as talent retention was important for the Council.
- Discussion around Change Management would be valuable, particularly with LGR drawing closer, however, discussion on the topic should be delayed until more was known about the potential structuring of the unitary authorities.
- Change Management was identified as a large topic and it was suggested to have a sole discussion paper on this at a future meeting.

In response to points raised in the discussion, Councillor Daniel Allen suggested that they should invite the Executive Member for Local Government Reorganisation/Devolution to attend the Committee meeting at which Change Management would be discussed and this was agreed by the Chair.

Members agreed two topics on 'Implications of the UK Supreme Court Judgement on Single Sex Spaces on the Workplace' and 'The Employer Value Proposition' for the next meeting of the Committee and one topic on 'Change Management' for the Committee meeting taking place on 28 January 2026.

The Chair thanked the Human Resources Services Manager for presenting the discussion papers to the Committee.

The meeting closed at 11.09 am

Chair