NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

JOINT STAFF CONSULTATIVE COMMITTEE

MEETING HELD VIA ZOOM
ON WEDNESDAY, 21ST OCTOBER, 2026 AT 10.00 AM

MINUTES

Present: *Councillors: Val Bryant (Chair), Claire Strong (Vice-Chair), Ian Albert, Keith Hoskins and Bryony May*

In attendance: *Ian Couper (Director - Resources), Robert Filby (Committee, Member and Scrutiny Officer), Jamie Graham (Electoral Services Assistant) and Jo Keshishian (HR Operations Manager)*

UNISON: *Keith Fitzpatrick-Matthews*

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

9 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Audio recording – 0 minutes 20 seconds

There were no apologies for absence received.

10 MINUTES - 24 JUNE 2026

Audio Recording – 01 minutes 55 seconds

Councillor Val Bryant, as Chair, proposed and Councillor Claire Strong seconded and, it was:

RESOLVED: That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Committee held on 24 June 2026 be approved as a true record of the proceedings and be signed by the Chair.

11 CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

Audio recording – 02 minutes 26 seconds

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.

12 STAFF CONSULTATION FORUM MINUTES

Audio recording – 03 minutes 11 seconds

The Chair presented the Staff Consultation Forum Minutes for consideration and invited Members to ask questions.

The following Members asked questions:

- Councillor Ketih Hoskins
- Councillor Claire Strong

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

- It was felt necessary to continue face-to-face safeguarding training as this only took place every 3 years, but it was recognised that there were potential triggers from the training, and they were looking into this.
- The staff probation period had been reduced to four months to align with changes in the Employment Rights Act, but there would still be the option to extend the probation period to up to six months.

Councillor Val Bryant proposed and Councillor Claire Strong seconded and, it was:

RESOLVED: That the Committee noted the Minutes of the Staff Consultation Forums for July and August 2026.

13 HR INFORMATION NOTE

Audio recording – 06 minutes 10 seconds

The Director – Resources presented the Information Note entitled 'HR Update' and advised that:

- Recruitment was higher than the same quarter in previous years, and above target levels.
- Turnover was low and trending at the same level as recent figures.
- Absence figures were above target levels, but it was noted that these were ambitious targets, and support to staff continued to be provided to staff through various measures.
- A staff pay award had been agreed and paid to all staff in September.
- New apprentices and graduates continued to be recruited, and rotations between departments for graduates had also continued.
- All-staff events had been postponed due to the pause on Local Government Reorganisation as this would have been the focus of the events. These would be rescheduled in due course.

The following Members asked questions:

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

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

- Increased absences had been driven by a higher percentage of long-term absences, which had increased from 3.47% to 5.19%, but while there was concern about this, there was no general pattern and support continued to be provided where needed.
- Existing staff were encouraged to undertake apprenticeship qualifications, which the Council could claim for under the apprenticeship levy.
- Apprenticeship post opportunities were regularly discussed by the Leadership Team and it was believed the Council had the right number to satisfy demand.
- A discussion paper on the implications of the motion relating to paternity leave passed at Full Council would be presented to the Committee at the next meeting.
- Implementing the recommendations from the paternity leave motion would require a decision by the Chief Executive or relevant Executive Member, which would be subject to discussion by the Committee and consultation of staff and UNISON. Therefore, the outcomes could not be implemented until the new year.

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

- Entry-level apprenticeships were mostly filled by external candidates who were younger, and they aimed to advertise roles in line with summer exam results to attract school and college leavers.
- Apprenticeships undertaken by existing staff were generally more specialist.
- Parental bereavement leave allowed 4 weeks paid leave, and it had been agreed by the Leadership Team to extend this benefit to the loss of a spouse/partner.
- There was provision for 5 days paid leave for other forms of bereavement.
- Bereavement might also create stress or mental health related absences, which would be paid through sick pay rather than bereavement.
- Bereavement and leave offered by the Council could be benchmarked against other authorities and be included in an information note or discussion paper at a future meeting.
- Bereavement leave was managed on a case-by-case basis, and while the Council did not have a specific policy for staff with spouses/partners coming to the end of their lives, they aimed to support staff appropriately in all circumstances.

Councillor Ian Albert requested that benchmarking bereavement and other leave offered by the Council against other authorities should be looked at further at a future Committee meeting and this was agreed by Members and the UNISON Representative.

14 UPDATE PAPER - EMPLOYMENT RIGHTS ACT

Audio recording – 22 minutes 01 seconds

The Director – Resources presented the Update Paper on the Employment Rights Act and advised that the table in the discussion paper detailed both the provisions that had changed and the upcoming changes as part of the act, when they had been or would be implemented, and the impact on the Council.

Councillor Bryony May thanked officers for producing the update paper as it provided a useful reference point for the changes.

The Chair confirmed that there were no objections from Members and, it was:

RESOLVED: That the Committee noted the Update Paper on the Employment Rights Act.

15 DISCUSSION PAPER - PEOPLE STRATEGY

Audio recording – 24 minutes 10 seconds

The Director – Resources presented the Discussion Paper on the People Strategy and advised that:

- The People Strategy had been due for a refresh in 2020, but this became a COVID-19 People Recovery Strategy to reflect the conditions of the pandemic at the time, and this People Strategy had been impacted by Local Government Reorganisation (LGR).
- The strategy accounted for LGR and the end of the strategy once the unitary authorities were formed, but they would use their strategy to try to influence any future strategy adopted by a unitary authority, while being mindful that LGR would mean a heavy workload for HR and that anything implemented now could be reversed under a unitary authority.
- There were three key themes in the strategy to retain and attract, which was to keep existing staff first and recruit after if needed, develop and engage, which aimed to continue good practices and support staff through change, and inclusion and wellbeing more broadly.

- The People Strategy was attached at Appendix A to the discussion paper, with themes and actions attached at Appendix B, which included timelines to achieve these.
- There were questions in the discussion paper for the Committee to consider.

In response to questions from Councillor Claire Strong, the Director – Resources advised that:

- The Staff Consultation Forum had been engaged on the People Strategy at various meetings, but its content had also been driven by the Staff Survey.
- The Staff Consultation Forum would be consulted on the completed People Strategy in its entirety at its next meeting.

The following Members took part in the discussion:

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

The following points were raised during the discussion:

- The good culture in the Council should be highlighted in the People Strategy by including quotes from staff.
- It would be important to carry forward good practices to a future unitary authority, and avoid those being diluted.
- Policy changes arising from the Full Council motion related to paternity leave were welcomed, but the burden on the HR Team, particularly during LGR, was recognised.
- Reference to '2024' where the Staff Survey had been mentioned in the People Strategy should be removed and replaced with 'last'.
- The People Strategy should be discussed between different staff groups across the county during LGR.
- LGR was on pause but services at the Council would resume as normal during this, and they should look to continue improving services while that was happening.
- Service managers throughout the Council should continue to offer support to staff as managing change could be stressful.

In response to points raised during the discussion, the Chair advised that:

- The Corporate Peer Challenge had highlighted how happy staff were to work for the Council.
- Chief Executives of authorities across Hertfordshire and the Herts Leaders Group would be investigating LGR related work that could continue during the pause, such as finding a baseline for the work already undertaken by the authorities.

In response to points raised during the discussion, the UNISON Representative advised that the Council had been regionally recognised as having some of the best people focused policies in Hertfordshire, and they would be pushing for any policies adopted by a future unitary authority to follow theirs.

In response to points raised during the discussion, the Director – Resources advised that:

- Information on recruitment pages where existing staff described what it was like to work at the Council could also be put into the People Strategy.
- Many people had detailed that they would recommend working at the Council in the Staff Survey.
- LGR Change Ambassadors continued to meet, but it was acknowledged that these were voluntary roles with a specific focus and they did not want to overwork them.

- The HR workstream on LGR would look at policies between authorities and how they compared.

The Chair confirmed that there were no objections from Members and, it was:

RESOLVED: That the Committee noted the discussion paper on the People Strategy.

16 SUGGESTED DISCUSSION TOPICS

Audio recording – 41 minutes 36 seconds

The Director – Resources advised that parental and bereavement leave were already due to be discussed at the next meeting, and they could incorporate a wider discussion on Council policies and associated leave and compare these with other authorities.

Members agreed that the topic of discussion at the next meeting should be focused on parental, bereavement and other associated leave.

The meeting closed at 10.46 am

Chair