

JOINT STAFF CONSULTATIVE COMMITTEE

16 December 2020

*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 as well as our work supporting the people issues during the Coronavirus pandemic, lockdown and ongoing restrictions.

2. STEPS TO DATE

- 2.1 The HR Update Information Note contains the 2020/21 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 NHDC Members. HR projects often require support from other support services such as IT, Finance, Legal Services and others.

3.2 People Strategy

The coronavirus situation continues to have a big impact on the work of HR and has changed all the normal forward planning and forecasting on the economy, labour, market, pay and pensions etc. In the current circumstances we have postponed the plan for a new People Strategy for 2020 – 2026 and as an alternative a People Recovery plan is being developed. This will focus on how HR processes will adapt and improve as a result of, and learning from, the Covid-19 pandemic.

Councils across Hertfordshire and the East of England region meet regularly in virtual meetings to share knowledge and experience of employment matters, and in particular to discuss issues and share ideas on current developments relating to the ongoing restrictions and employment aspects of the pandemic.

3.3 Recruitment

- 3.3.1 With the economic downturn, we have seen a drop in staff leaving the council and as a result there has been a reduction in the number of vacancies. January – November 2020 there were only 33 vacancies advertised (compared to 93 in 2019 and 68 in the same period in 2018). These include posts advertised from restructures and some internal job moves as well as external recruitment.

HR have ensured that all communication relating to advertising, interviews, offers of employment and new starter information has been updated to reflect the changes to a remote recruitment process. We have also used to opportunity to make amendments

to our recruitment tool to recognise the diverse make up of society and allow us to gain more of an insight into where candidates are first viewing our adverts.

HR have supported managers with recruitment throughout this year to ensure the new ways of working have not hindered the usual procedures. Short-listing has been done remotely and all interviews and assessments have been carried out using Zoom. The number of applications received for recent adverts has been good and we have recently appointed applicants in Electoral Services, Waste, Revenues & Benefits as well as three new apprentices. We have also recently appointed applicants into two legal posts which in the past have been difficult to recruit to.

3.3.2 Resourcing for Vaccination Pods

Hertfordshire County Council have set up a weekly meeting for HR Managers following a call to support the NHS in resourcing the Vaccination Pods being set up around the county. NHDC along with other councils will be seeking staff volunteers to work extra hours in local vaccination pods (non-clinical support roles) covering opening hours – 12 hours per day, 7 days per week.

3.4 Apprentices

There is a separate Apprentices Information Note which provides an update on our apprenticeship scheme.

3.5 Pay

3.5.1 The Pay Policy Statement for 2020/2021 went to full Council in February and has since been updated following the recent senior managers changes and pay increases announced in August. The in-year update has been uploaded to the council website.

3.5.2 The Shared Internal Audit Services are carrying out the annual payroll audit, with particular focus on the new payroll contract to ensure the appropriate controls and measures are in place. The outcome and final report are expected in December.

3.5.3 £95K Exit Payment cap

These regulations which were first proposed in 2016 (and were subsequently delayed on several occasions) have now been approved with legislation coming into effect on 4th November 2020. The timing and impact on local councils has been unfortunate as the new legislation currently conflicts with existing regulations within the Local Government Pension Scheme (LGPS). The cap limits the amount that employers can spend on pension strained costs for long serving employees who are made redundant aged over 55 whereas the pension regulations require employers to offer an immediate, unreduced pension by full payment of the strained costs. Amended pension regulations are expected from LGPS in the new year leaving uncertainty for those councils who are currently in discussions with staff at risk of redundancy. We are currently trying to avoid restructures that include Officers that may be affected by Exit Payment Cap, as neither the Council or the individual would be able to fully understand the implications. The legislation is also subject to legal challenge.

3.6 Employee Benefits

- 3.6.1 **HolidayFlex scheme:** This scheme which allows staff to purchase additional annual leave via salary sacrifice was successfully trialled in August and following a recent review, approval has been given to offer this as a permanent staff benefit. The initial uptake of the scheme has been low, with only 7 employees applying to purchase additional annual leave, however this was to be expected given the lockdown and travel restrictions we have all experienced this year. The level of applications received in the pilot therefore give a poor indication of the true level of demand for an additional annual leave purchase scheme amongst staff and it is hoped there will be more interest in the scheme next year. Despite receiving only 7 applications, salary savings of £3,904 have been made with an overall saving to the council from the August pilot (after set-up costs) of £2,814.

In summary, 7 employees (4 male and 3 female) applied for the scheme and all applications were approved by their line managers. The applications came from 6 full time members of staff and 1 part time member of staff. All applied for the maximum amount of leave available under the scheme, 1 week's working hours. 4 of the applications came from the Customer Services Centre, 1 from Electoral Services and 2 from Resources. The applicants came from grades 3, 4, 5 and 14.

- 3.6.2 **Bikes for Work Scheme:** This scheme was re-introduced to the Council after a gap of some years and has seen a good level of interest with a total of 6 employees joining over the last 12 months. With the vast majority of NHDC staff working remotely since March 2020 however we have closed the window to new applications and will review the situation early next year, when we might be better able to predict what the year holds for us. We remain committed to allowing staff access to this staff benefit and see it as a valuable addition to our green credentials, and therefore it is anticipated that the scheme will be part of our benefits offering again from April 2021.
- 3.6.3 **Flu Vaccinations:** The seasonal flu vaccination programme went ahead in a slightly different format this year. Due to Covid-19 lockdown no office-based clinics were held. Online Boots vouchers were issued to staff via our Occupational Health provider Optima Health. Staff received their vouchers via email and then booked their own appointments at a local Boots pharmacy. This year the government announced that they would extend free vaccinations for the first time to the 54 – 64 age group, with the aim to reduce pressure on the NHS from flu admissions. However, an NHS source advised us that this age group are unlikely to be offered the vaccination until December due to high numbers, it was agreed to cover this group as in previous years. A total of 142 staff requested vouchers with an increased take-up of nearly 50% on previous years.

3.7 Mental Health and Wellbeing

- 3.7.1 In a follow-up to the staff welfare calls which took place in April and May, the HR Team have been in contact with all employees individually by email. The intention was to ensure that all individuals felt supported but in particular to reach out to those who needed it most and encourage them to make direct contact with HR or to make use of other support channels including managers and colleagues. In the email an update was provided on the support and resources available to staff including links to relevant websites. A separate email tailored for managers was also sent with tips on how managers can actively support their teams whilst working remotely, as well as encouraging regular contact and highlighting the need for us all to look out for one another.

The “check-in” emails have been welcomed by staff and feedback has been very positive indicating that staff appreciate the contact with HR and the support available. One of the feedback emails has been published in Insight (in the Compliments section).

- 3.7.2 HR were approached to provide some specific support to individuals in one service team who have been extremely busy due to a mix of a high volume of additional work and some resourcing issues. Each member of staff has had a personal welfare call from one of the HR team, and the Service Director has been provided with an update and further offer of support.
- 3.7.3 The benefits of Workplace Wellness, the council’s confidential employee advice service has been promoted through the check-in emails to staff and managers, as well as in a recent article in the monthly Insight e-newsletter. Feedback from Workplace Wellness is limited to high level usage figures, but the most recent report shows an increase in the volume of calls to the helpline as well as numbers accessing their online resources.
- 3.7.4 Wednesday 25th November was White Ribbon Day in the UK which is a campaign that aims to prevent violence towards women. This campaign has been highlighted to staff via the intranet with links to relevant external support and also to our own dedicated intranet page for staff who may be experiencing domestic abuse.

3.8 **Equality and Diversity**

Work is due to commence shortly on the Equal Pay Review, and a report from this review will be discussed at the March JSCC along with our annual analysis of equalities data which will be published at the end of January 2021.

At the last meeting of the gender pay gap group it was decided that the group would be expanded to widen the focus on all aspects of diversity and inclusion. The terms of reference of the new Inclusion Group have been drafted and the first meeting will take place in December. The primary purpose of the group will be to drive the equality and diversity agenda forward and its recommendations and actions are expected to feed into the Shaping our Future programme.

3.9 **Shaping Our Future**

The Council’s Shaping Our Future organisational development programme is now underway with two meetings of the steering group having taken place involving staff and Members. Some of these staff have specific roles relevant to the programme and others are intended to add diversity to the discussions.

A total of eight virtual sessions to explain and discuss Shaping our Future have been held with staff and managers which have proved to be popular with positive and useful feedback received.

A series of staff development workshops focusing on personal skills such as time management, career planning, confidence and personal awareness have been arranged for December. These are fully booked already with further sessions planned in the new year.

3.10 Learning & Employee Engagement

- 3.10.1 **Staff communication:** The team have been working hard to keep staff informed on a variety of topics which help to support wellbeing including: building resilience, personal organisation, remaining in control, relaxation, managing positivity, getting and staying healthy as well as links to dedicated Covid-19 support eLearning module (the lockdown toolkit)
- 3.10.2 The Leadership Team are introducing a monthly half day dedicated to personal and professional development for all staff starting in January. The first session will be focussed on wellbeing. The Learning & Employee Engagement team will signpost staff to various resources that are available, provide guidance for Managers to run team activities and will also be delivering short workshops.
- 3.10.3 **Managing a Remote Workforce:** In November a new on-line workshop was held called Managing Homeworking which focussed on achieving the balance between performance and wellbeing. The workshop allowed managers to consider their approach and style, communication, performance levels and how to support the wellbeing of staff.

In addition to the check-in emails sent to managers in October, support materials have been provided to managers as part of the lock down 'toolkit' as well as some individual coaching and guidance.

All management training activity run recently or planned will have content added to reflect the challenges and opportunities of managing a remote workforce.

- 3.10.4 A staff survey was undertaken at the end of the summer to help us understand views of homeworking during the lockdown and considerations for the future. Feedback was also sought on the support provided to staff during the pandemic. The results and general themes from the survey were discussed at a staff briefing in early November, where we encouraged further ideas to be shared. Results of the initial survey along with feedback from Service Directors has allowed us to identify service areas that may require further support and also to amend our current workshops to align with the new way of working. We intend to repeat the survey very soon to ensure we continue to understand the needs of staff.

3.11 Absence

- 3.11.1 Absence figures for the rolling 12-month period are shown in Table 1 as absence days lost per employee. The short-term absence target is 3.5 days per year, and we are currently under target with 2.95 days.

Table 1

Rolling 12 months	Absence days lost per employee		
	Total	Long-term	Short-term
Nov-19	0.42	0.14	0.28
Dec-19	0.33	0.06	0.27
Jan-20	0.40	0.05	0.35
Feb-20	0.46	0.09	0.37
Mar-20	0.37	0.12	0.25

Apr-20	0.19	0.10	0.09
May-20	0.26	0.10	0.16
Jun-20	0.44	0.14	0.30
Jul-20	0.67	0.42	0.25
Aug-20	0.50	0.25	0.25
Sep-20	0.54	0.31	0.23
Oct-20	0.49	0.35	0.14
Total	5.08	2.13	2.95

311.2 Short-term absence has reduced since lockdown started with April – October 2020 over 0.5 days lower than the same period in 2019. This will in part be due to almost all staff working from home. We know that home-working reduces some minor absences as staff who are not feeling 100% may feel more inclined to continue to work in their home without having to commute to the office. In addition, the high level of homeworking and lower levels of social contact has probably helped by reducing the number of bugs and infections being passed between colleagues.

3.11.3 Long-term absence has increased this year and the team are actively working with managers on the current cases and involving support from Occupational Health where appropriate. 6 out of a total of 15 cases since April involve stress or mental health issues.

3.11.4 Since March we have had 10 staff absent from work due to either suspected or diagnosed COVID-19 which has accounted for a total of 37 days lost. Again, the ability to work from home has enabled some staff to continue to work with mild symptoms so the true number may be slightly higher. It is interesting to note that we only had 3 cases reported up to August, and 7 cases since September including 4 in November reflecting the rise in cases both locally and nationally.

3.12 Leavers and Turnover

Year (1 April – 31 March)	
2013/14	10.1%
2014/15	12.6%
2015/16	15.1%
2016/17	9.7%
2017/18	13.0%
2018/19	12.8%
2019/20	10.7%

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

Since the start of the April 2020 we have seen a drop in the number of staff leavers reflecting the current economic downturn and more limited employment opportunities available. There have been 19 leavers in the period April – November 2020 compared to 32 leavers in the same period in 2019.

4.0 NEXT STEPS

- 4.1 Progress against the HR Service plan, and work on the Covid 19 recovery as well as work on Shaping our Future will be reported to all quarterly JSCC Meetings.

5.0 CONTACT OFFICERS

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