

<b>JOINT STAFF CONSULTATIVE COMMITTEE</b>
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9 June 2021
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*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 2021/22 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 Recovery Plan**

The pandemic and ongoing restrictions have had a big impact on all the normal forward planning carried out by services including HR, as well creating difficulties for forecasting on the economy, labour, market, pay and pensions etc. The People Recovery Plan has been developed as an alternative to the People Strategy for 2020-2026 and describes how HR processes have been adapted as a result of the pandemic, and how we are supporting our staff through this period of change.

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 Since the start of the pandemic our labour turnover has declined and as a result there has been a reduction in the number of vacancies. However, since the start of 2021 we have noticed a steady increase compared with the start of the pandemic as managers get more confident with recruiting on virtual platforms and labour turnover slowly begins to increase. For the year to date we have advertised 20 completed vacancies, with 18 of these having been successfully recruited to. By comparison, the same period in 2020 there were only 12 advertised vacancies.

The impact of the pandemic on working practices within Environmental Health has recently resulted in 4 x fixed term vacancies for Covid Marshalls. We have continued to see good levels of interest in most of our job adverts and in addition to the

Environmental Health posts, we have recently appointed applicants in Planning, Legal and Parking, as well as two new Apprentices in Legal & Community and Communications & Commercial.

The closing of Hitchin Town Hall and Museum during the pandemic caused a number of our casual staff to resign. We have recently been successful in recruiting a new Visitor Services Assistant and several casual posts in preparation for the re-opening of the Museum. This vacancy was extremely popular and saw in excess of 100 applicants.

### 3.4 Apprenticeships

3.4.1 **Apprentice update:** We currently have 6 Apprentices completing a range of qualifications including Customer Service Specialist, Business Administration and HR Support. We are in the process of recruiting 2 further Apprentices. We also have an existing member of staff utilising the Apprentice Levy Fund for further job-related training. Our training providers continue to be able to offer remote learning which has ensured that there has been no interruption to our Apprentices. In addition, two of our most recent Apprentices have now been successfully recruited to other positions within the Council.

3.4.2 **Local Government Apprentice of the Year Awards:** In April some of our apprentices participated in a one-day virtual event, attended by over 100 Apprentices, which was organised by the East of England Local Government Association. This was a great opportunity for apprentices to learn, network and showcase their skills, expertise, and initiative whilst working in virtual teams to learn more about the opportunities, risks, and challenges involved in delivering successful local government services.

During the day, Gillian Keegan MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Apprenticeships and Skills, spoke to the attendees. She is the first former apprentice to hold this position and talked to the group about her personal experiences, the benefits of apprenticeships and the skills that you can gain for life.

Emily Gray (Democratic Services Apprentice), who joined NHDC in December, said she really enjoyed the opportunity to meet other Apprentices from across the country.

Oliver Hill (MSU Apprentice) was an individual runner-up and was also part of the winning team. He said “the event was challenging, engaging and fun. It allowed me to collaborate with other apprentices and develop my communication and time management skills.”

An article about the Apprenticeship scheme and our participation in the national event is appearing in the next edition of Outlook Magazine.

### 3.5 Pay

3.5.3 **National Pay bargaining:** In mid-February the National Joint Council unions lodged their pay, and terms and conditions, claim for local government staff for 2021 which included a substantial increase of at least 10% on all spinal column points, along with a number of proposed T&C changes. and an agreement on a best practice programme of mental health support for all local authorities

During March, consultation via virtual regional pay briefings took place and feedback was considered by the National Employers group. The Interim HR Services Manager attended the East of England pay briefing along with the JSCC Vice-Chair.

On 14<sup>th</sup> May, a pay offer of 1.5% was made to the unions representing the local government workforce. There was also agreement to complete a term-time only review, and to start discussions on home-working policies, mental health support and a review of provisions for maternity, paternity and shared parental / adoption leave.

Three other claims were rejected:

- the introduction of a homeworking allowance,
- reduction of the working week to 35 hours with no loss of pay
- a minimum of 25 days annual leave for all starting employees

This pay offer was rejected by the trade unions on 21<sup>st</sup> May and it is expected that talks between the National Employers and the unions will be scheduled shortly.

### 3.5.3 Collection of Exit Payment data

Following the revocation of the £95K Exit pay cap regulations in February, we have been asked to collate exit payment data to submit to MHCLG. This data is intended to allow Government to assess the number and financial value of exit payments. The Government objective is still to find ways to end the perceived excessively high payments in the public sector.

## 3.6 Employee Benefits

3.6.1 **HolidayFlex scheme:** This scheme allows staff to purchase additional annual leave via salary exchange and which became a permanent benefit after a successful trial last year. During the February applications window we received applications from 10 employees – 6 whom had applied previously (Oct 2020 there were 7 applications in total). The majority of applicants were full-time staff with less than 5 years' service.

3.6.2 **Support for carers:** To mark Carers Week 2021 (6 – 13 June), this month's issue of Insight gives details of how staff, managers and Councillors can access the support available as a result of NHDC's membership of Employers for Carers (EfC) and also gives details of the local services provided by [Carers in Hertfordshire](#).

3.6.3 **Employee Wellbeing classes:** We continue to promote a range of online wellbeing classes to employees which can be accessed free of charge through our Employee Advice Service provider. The classes are available until July and cover a variety of topics which support employees in proactively managing their physical and mental wellbeing such as nutrition, managing stress, how to improve sleep and a number of exercise classes.

3.6.4 **GP Helpline:** The contract for the GP consultation service for all NHDC employees has been renewed. The availability of the confidential health related advice and guidance provided by this benefit proved valuable during the period of lockdown when physical access to medical support was severely limited. Staff can arrange a GP telephone consultation, or a GP online consultation (webcam) and details of how to do this are available on the intranet. The service also includes a private prescription service and a medical information service, giving access to health, disease, lifestyle and travel information.

### **3.7 Mental Health and Wellbeing**

- 3.7.1 The HR team continue to provide support as required to those across the organisation., there have been a number of service teams who have been extremely busy due to a mix of a high volume and the nature of additional work, and some resourcing issues. We continue to update our resources that are available to staff and recently promoted additional support during Mental Health Awareness Week.
- 3.7.2 We recently held another Virtual Kitchen, which is an informal opportunity to allow staff to meet up with colleagues they may not necessarily catch up with in their working day. The session was attended by a number of staff from across the organisation.
- 3.7.3 The benefits of Workplace Wellness, the council's confidential employee advice service continues to be promoted to staff through support emails to staff and managers, as well as in regular articles in the monthly Insight e-newsletter and Intranet message board posts. Feedback from Workplace Wellness is limited to high level usage figures, but the most recent report shows a consistent number of calls to the service.
- 3.7.4 The Hertfordshire HR Leaders forum have recently secured some Covid grant funding from Public Health and are working together on a project to support employee mental health and wellbeing with the aim of reducing absenteeism related to COVID burn out, and increasing resilience of service delivery at the front line. There are a number of options being considered which include personal resilience training, additional support for Mental Health First Aiders and / or a subscription to a suitable Wellbeing app. Funding will be shared across all the Hertfordshire councils to benefit all staff.

### **3.8 Equality and Diversity**

At the March meeting of the Inclusion Group, the discussion topic was Age with a wide range of areas covered: recruitment, secondment opportunities, retirement planning, career development and succession planning, confidence levels (in particular of younger staff), and the impact of the menopause. The next meeting is due to take place in mid-June and the group will be discussing experiences relating to disability and including those who are carers for family members with disabilities.

We are currently working with Gap-square, our equalities analytics software provider, to determine our 2021 Gender Pay Gap and to carry out an Equal Pay review using the data extracted from the iTrent payroll system. Results of these analyses will be reported to future JSCC meetings.

### **3.9 Shaping our Future**

The Shaping our Future programme is progressing with regular meetings of the steering group which involve both staff and Members. The most recent meeting focussed on commercialisation with a presentation from Chloe Gray, Commercial Manager, and a discussion on how this can help to move the Council forward. The Shaping our Future steering group has so far focused on gathering information. At the next meeting it will consider how to translate this into a vision, which can then feed into an action plan. Part of this will include re-examining the Values and Behaviours in order that we are communicating them in the most effective way.

Staff and management development initiatives linked to Shaping our Future are detailed in section 3.10.

### **3.10 Learning & Employee Engagement**

3.10.1 Monthly half day sessions dedicated to personal and professional development for all staff started in January. The Learning & Employee Engagement team provide guidance when necessary, to support managers and signpost staff to various resources that are available. Some months have corporately arranged activities or focussed topics, and in other months the allocated time allows managers to work with their teams or individuals can work on their own personal development. The topics covered so far have included employee wellbeing, the corporate Values and Behaviours, equality and diversity and commercialisation. The L&EE Team have recently attended a number of management team meetings to discuss how these sessions are being utilised and to answer questions from managers. The feedback has been very positive, indicating that these sessions are well received and appreciated.

#### **3.10.2 Service Manager Development Programme**

At the end of May, we launched the first cohort of a new programme of virtual workshops to develop our service managers. The programme aims to improve leadership skills, as well as covering topics such as motivation, performance and effectiveness. It is also intended to link management style with our corporate Values and Behaviours to help further embed them and bring them to life. The second cohort is will run in September/October of this year.

### **3.11 Staff Survey and Homeworking**

3.11.1 We have recently undertaken a further staff survey to understand the views of staff around returning to the office, this will be used to plan for the future. At the time of writing this report, the survey had just closed so the results had not yet been analysed. The survey asked specific questions about when staff would like to come back into the office and what they would like to see when they come back. It also asked about attitudes to continuing levels of home-working. Our current intention in relation to home-working is that we will do what we can to make this as effective as possible (e.g. laptop roll-out, setting up meeting rooms to allow hybrid meetings). We also see the benefits of office-based working in terms of interacting with others. As well as the indirect impact of supporting the local economy (particularly in Letchworth).

3.11.2 There were separate questions/ surveys for those staff that are not office based (e.g. Hitchin Town Hall/ Museum staff and Civil Enforcement Officers).

3.11.3 Previous surveys indicated that although staff are still generally coping well with working from home, there are still some challenges around isolation and work/life balance. We are working hard to provide opportunities for staff to get together informally and continue to signpost staff to the support that is available. We will also remind staff about the possibility of outdoor meetings, when the weather conditions allow.

### **3.12 Absence**

3.12.1 Since the last report the number of staff reported as absent from work due to COVID-19 has started to reduce in line with the national picture. There were 3 reported cases in March 1 in April and none in May.

- 3.12.2 We are currently supporting a number of long-term absence cases, with four of the eight cases being related to mental health issues. The HR team are actively to supporting the individuals and the line managers, and we make use of our Occupational Health services and Employee Assistance providers as appropriate.
- 3.12.3 Short-term absence continues to be lower than in previous years, as the majority of staff continue to work from home. Being able to work from home can help to reduce the level of minor absences as staff who are not feeling 100% may feel more inclined to continue to work without the need 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.
- 3.12.4 Absence figures for the rolling 12-month period are shown below as absence days lost per employee. The short-term absence target is 3.5 days per year, and at the end of March 2021 we were under target with 2.13 days for the year 2020/21.

Rolling 12 months	Absence days lost per employee		
	Long-term	Short-term	Total
Apr-20	0.14	0.09	0.23
May-20	0.13	0.15	0.28
Jun-20	0.26	0.16	0.42
Jul-20	0.39	0.22	0.61
Aug-20	0.27	0.2	0.47
Sep-20	0.27	0.2	0.47
Oct-20	0.35	0.13	0.48
Nov-20	0.27	0.22	0.49
Dec-20	0.16	0.13	0.29
Jan-21	0.17	0.24	0.41
Feb-21	0.24	0.07	0.31
Mar-21	0.39	0.32	0.71
Total	3.04	2.13	5.17

### 3.13 Leavers and Turnover

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

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%
2020/21	8.1%

In the last 12 months we have seen a drop in the number of staff leavers reflecting the current economic downturn and more limited employment opportunities available. The labour turnover for 2020/21 was lower than the last couple of years and the lowest we have seen for more than 10 years.

#### 4.0 **NEXT STEPS**

- 4.1 Progress against the HR Service plan 2021/2022, and work on the People Recovery plan as well as work on Shaping our Future will be reported to all quarterly JSCC Meetings.

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