

JOINT STAFF CONSULTATIVE COMMITTEE

22 September 2021

*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, 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 subsequent restrictions this year 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 was 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 throughout this period of change. In July we set out a plan for what our Future Ways of Working would look like and how we would transition to it. A lot of the plan focuses on moving back to some working time being in the office and the benefits that brings, alongside continuing to work at home and the benefits that provides. It also covers the technology and other arrangements needed to facilitate some people working in the office and others at home (e.g., hybrid meetings).

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 and share ideas on current employment issues relating to the changing circumstances as we move forward from the pandemic.

3.3 Recruitment

- 3.3.1 There continues to be a steady increase in recruitment and the number of vacancies has increased again this quarter.

Environmental Health have continued to experience work-load pressure relating to the pandemic and we have recently recruited an additional 3 Technical Support Officers

to assist with the workload. There have been good levels of interest in most of our job adverts and in addition to the Environmental Health posts, we have also recently appointed applicants in Planning, Housing, Communications and Emergency Planning. As restrictions ease across the country, Hitchin Town Hall have been able to start planning large scale events again. We have recruited an additional 5 events assistants and a duty manager on casual contracts for these events which will help generate income.

3.3.2 **The Kickstart Scheme**

This scheme provides funding to create new jobs for 16- to 24-year-olds who are at risk of long-term unemployment. We are supporting the scheme to help offer opportunities for young people in the district and recently offered our first Kickstart contract to a candidate who will be assisting IT with the laptop roll out.

The government funding covers 100% of the National Minimum Wage (or the National Living Wage depending on the age of the participant) for 25 hours per week for a total of 6 months, but we will be topping up this salary to grade 1.1 in line with our Apprentices. We are hoping to advertise further Kickstart vacancies in our Waste and Community Protection teams in the next few months. We will also continue to remind managers of the opportunity over the next two months (as applicants need to be in post by the end of December) as it may be easier to consider supporting the scheme as we move back to some office-based working.

3.3.3 **Temporary workers**

Following an approach by a Managed Service Provider to promote a tool to manage agency worker recruitment, a project team has been set up to consider the Council's use of temporary workers. This working group which involves HR, Procurement and the Commercial team is reviewing how these workers are recruited and managed within NHDC with a view to achieving savings through a reduction in agency costs and the introduction of improved processes.

3.4 **Apprenticeships**

3.4.1 We currently have five Apprentices studying a range of qualifications in Customer Service Specialist, Business Administration and HR Support. We have recently offered apprentice positions in Democratic Services, Procurement and Community Engagement, with two further positions currently being recruited for Customer Service and Hitchin Town Hall. Two existing members of staff are also 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.

We have recently signed up for a new suite of learning aimed at providing Kickstart employees and Apprentices with specific skills to develop their employability. This will enhance our current training offer for all the young people employed by the Council.

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 (SCP), 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.

Following a pay offer in May, which was rejected by the unions, the national employers group made final offer in July which included an increase of 2.75% for Grade 1 staff, 1.75% for Grades 2 -12 and 1.5% for Chief Officers and Chief Executives (grades 14-16). The higher rate for Grade 1 aims to keep ahead of the increases in National Living Wage which for NHDC is currently £8.91 per hour (the proposed increase providing a base hourly rate of £9.60).

This pay offer was rejected by the trade unions in August and therefore union members will be invited to vote on the offer at the end of September. When an agreement is finalised, the pay award will be backdated to April 2021.

3.6 **Employee Benefits**

3.6.1 **HolidayFlex scheme:** This scheme allows staff to purchase additional annual leave via salary exchange and became a permanent benefit in 2021 after a successful trial last year. During the August applications window we received three more applications to add to the ten received from the February window. In October 2020 when the HolidayFlex scheme was run for the first time there were seven applications.

3.6.2 **Workplace Bikes:** After taking a break during the lockdowns, the Council's salary exchange workplace bikes scheme was relaunched last month. This scheme encourages employees to cycle to work by giving tax and NI incentives on the hire of a bike and accessories whilst spreading the cost over 12 months via deductions from pay.

3.6.3 **Flu vouchers**
HR have secured flu vaccination e-vouchers from Boots again this year. As the NHS have extended the eligibility for free vaccinations to all aged 50+, only staff under this age have been invited to request an e-voucher, and the uptake has been good. The Council has also extended this invitation to all Councillors aged under 50.

3.7 **Mental Health and Wellbeing**

3.7.1 We have been trialling a monthly drop-in session with our Mental Health First Aiders (MHFA's) to allow staff to discover more about the support that MHFA's can offer and to discuss any concerns. So far these have been well received by the small number of staff that have attended, and our MHFA's have appreciated the opportunity to engage with staff. A further session is planned for September.

3.7.2 With 10th September marking World Suicide Prevention Day, we have taken the opportunity to raise awareness and have shared some helpful information from our Employee Assistance provider on how we can all play a part in spotting the signs and take action to help those suffering from suicidal thoughts.

3.7.3 The Hertfordshire HR Leaders project to support employee mental health and resilience is progressing with a number of options being investigated. We have now received our allocated funding from Public Health and will be finalising how this be used shortly.

3.8 Learning & Employee Engagement

3.8.1 With mental health remaining a focus for us all, the September half day development session has been focussed on Wellbeing. Managers have been provided with a wide range of resources to support team and personal development on this important topic.

3.8.2 Service Manager Development Programme

The first cohort of the Service Manager Development Programme have now completed their programme. This was positively received with Manager's appreciating the opportunity for peer-to-peer support. The programme aims to improve leadership skills, as well as covering topics such as motivation, performance, and effectiveness. The second cohort will begin in September 2021.

3.9 Shaping our Future

The new Council administration and a shift in the priorities towards 'Themes' has provided an opportunity to review the Shaping our Future programme and our target outcomes. A major part of this is to consider what is sometimes known as a 'target operating model' essentially a clear way of describing how we want to do things as an organisation in order to deliver against the themes. This refocussing will also mean that the way we communicate this and our values and behaviours can be looked at and considered by both the Leadership Team and the Shaping our Future Group. This review will take place throughout September and October.

In the meantime, staff and management development initiatives linked to Shaping our Future continue and are detailed in section 3.8

3.10 Equality and Diversity

At the June meeting of the Inclusion Group, the discussion topic was Disability. Many of those attending had either a personal connection to disability or experience of supporting friends, colleagues, or family members with disabilities. An open discussion followed on a range of topics including defining and recognising disabilities, how to support colleagues with disabilities, recruitment support, reasonable adjustment, those with caring for disabled dependents, and the impact of Covid-19 on those with disabilities.

The next meeting is due to take place in mid-September and the group will be discussing issues and experiences relating to Race.

3.11 Absence

3.11.1 We still have a small number of staff absent from work due to illness relating to COVID-19, and a summary of the number of cases and days lost by quarter is shown below, with July- Sept 2021 showing cases to date:

	COVID absences									
	April - June		July - Sept		Oct - Dec		Jan - March		Total	
	Cases	Days lost	Cases	Days lost	Cases	Days lost	Cases	Days lost	Cases	Days lost
2020/21	1	4	2	6	7	27.5	9	38.5	19	76
2021/22	3	14	3	21.5					6	35.5

- 3.11.2 There are a number of long-term absence cases which the HR team are actively supporting by making use of Occupational Health and Employee Assistance as well as providing guidance to managers. Individuals returning from long-term absence are also supported with a phased return programme and reduced workload for up to 4 weeks.
- 3.11.3 Short-term absence remains relatively low although higher than in previous months when lockdown restrictions were in place. The 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 July we were under this target.

Rolling 12 months	Absence days lost per employee		
	Long-term	Short-term	Total
Aug-20	0.27	0.20	0.47
Sep-20	0.27	0.20	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
Apr-21	0.33	0.18	0.50
May-21	0.36	0.25	0.60
Jun-21	0.22	0.23	0.45
Jul-21	0.49	0.30	0.80
Total	3.52	2.46	5.98

3.12 Leavers and Turnover

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

Year (1 April – 31 March)	
2015/16	15.1%
2016/17	9.7%
2017/18	13.0%
2018/19	12.8%
2019/20	10.7%
2020/21	8.1%

At the end of March our labour turnover for 2020/21 was at its lowest levels more than 10 years at 8.1%. As the economy has opened up with restrictions lifting, the employment market has become more buoyant again, and with it the number of resignations and retirements have increased. Looking at the labour turnover for the rolling year, September 2020 – August 2021, labour turnover has increased to 12.4%.

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.

5.0 **CONTACT OFFICERS**

Author

- 5.1 Jo Keshishian
Interim Human Resources Services Manager
Tel: 01462 474314
jo.keshishian@north-herts.gov.uk
- 5.2 Ian Couper
Service Director – Resources
01462 474243
ian.couper@north-herts.gov.uk