

People Recovery plan 2020-2022

Purpose

The pandemic has naturally had a very big impact on the plans to create a new People Strategy for 2020 – 2026. Covid-19 has changed all the normal forward planning, forecasting on the economy, labour, market, pay and pensions etc. The Council is also embarking on a more co-ordinated approach to organisational development and change management called 'Shaping our Future'. Its outcomes have significant HR implications and will link closely with the work of the HR team for the next two years and beyond. Given the current circumstances it was decided to adopt a 1 -2-year pandemic People Recovery plan as an alternative to a longer-term People Strategy.

1. NHDC Values and Behaviours
2. Shaping our Future
3. Employee Wellbeing
4. Recruitment & retention
5. Benefits
6. Learning & Employee Engagement
7. Communication
8. Working Arrangements

1. NHDC Values and Behaviours

The corporate Values and Behaviours define how we aim work as an organisation. The Values provide the overall framework and the Behaviours describe how we make that a reality. There has been a lot of work in developing and communicating the Values and Behaviours. Some of this was based around the physical office environment (e.g. visuals on the walls of meeting rooms, screen at the entrance to the DCO and branded coffee mugs). The current enforced working from home, as well as a likely ongoing increase in working at home, makes these visuals less relevant and effective. Therefore, the HR team will look at ways to continue to embed the Values and Behaviours.

2. Shaping our Future

The outcomes for 'Shaping our Future' have been agreed as creating a:

- A high quality, diverse, inclusive and resilient workforce, meeting the needs of our community;
- A healthy, creative and productive organisation;
- A vibrant culture that embodies our values and behaviours.

The Learning and Employee Engagement (L&EE) Manager is the lead specialist for the programme. The L&EE Business Partner will also be involved, alongside the rest of the HR team. The Shaping our Future steering group is still establishing the key areas of development, but is expected to include a focus on the following:

The introduction and integration of organisational Values and Behaviours

Leadership and Management Development

Staff development workshops

Work on equality, diversity and inclusion (including work to address the gender pay gap)

New approaches to engaging with staff

Developing commercial skills

Developing transformational thinking

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3. Employee Wellbeing

Mental Wellbeing

This is a big concern in a time of unprecedented circumstances and how individuals react will vary, however the pandemic and changes in restrictions will continue to impact significantly on people's lives. From an employment perspective, one of the greatest impacts on mental health and wellbeing has been, and will continue to be, the implications of our new ways of working with almost all the workforce working from home. Whilst there are benefits of home-working for many issues relating to a permanent home working environment can affect health in general i.e. the concept of living at work, feelings of isolation and the lack of face to face connection with the workplace and colleagues.

At the start of lock down the L&EE team spent time developing a 'lockdown toolkit' which contains helpful advice on wellbeing, stress management, personal organisation and resilience. In addition, we have provided support materials to managers helping them to lead in the challenging circumstances they continue to face. The team will continue to develop and promote this toolkit, including adjusting it as we hopefully emerge from mandatory working at home.

The team also initiated welfare calls from HR to all staff. This supplemented excellent work by managers in keeping in touch with and supporting their teams. Whilst this was a time-consuming activity at a busy time, it helped many people and created a positive impression of HR and their response to the crisis. We will ensure that managers (supported by HR and tools such as the Employee Assistance Programme) continue to be seen as a way of accessing support in times of need.

The intranet has plenty of advice on coping with permanent homeworking <https://intranet.north-herts.gov.uk/home/coronavirus/homeworking-tips-staff> The page on remote social contact attempts to go some way to bridge the gap on the unquestionable value of workplace daily, informal interactions whilst shared resources aim to boost social wellbeing with links to quizzes and other social sites to connect teams. We will adapt this moving forward to support staff who increase the amount that they work from home on an ongoing basis

The HR team maintains provision of a large range of support that staff can access such as an Employee Assistance Programme that includes a package for confidential counselling and links to all sorts of online help with Mental Health problems. Online: www.my-eap.com username: NORTHHERTSwell. This is known to have provided valuable support during Covid-19, as well as difficult personal or work-related situations. This service is highly rated by those who make use of it, in particular the free counselling sessions, and we will continue to promote this benefit to staff including via the use of anonymised real life examples and quotes. In addition, there are 16 in-house trained mental health first aiders and there are dedicated pages of help for staff <https://intranet.north-herts.gov.uk/home/coronavirus-covid-19/coronavirus-support-staff-and-managers>. We will continue to support the development of these first aiders, and look to train more if required.

Managers are crucial in supporting the mental wellbeing of staff. Our management and leadership development will focus on the skills and knowledge needed by managers to fulfil this part of their role with a largely remote workforce. It will also focus on the other management skills associated with increased homeworking. This will include the new on-line workshop being run called 'Managing Homeworking Performance' which aims to help address mental health and wellbeing issues whilst maintaining organisational performance.

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The HR team will continue to support staff and managers as restrictions ease and things seemingly move back towards normal. The economic impacts of Covid-19 will last beyond the end of the medical crisis. As the crisis subsides, this may be when burn-out happens. Support will include guidance for individuals on how to spot the signs of burn-out (both in themselves and in others) and practical ways to provide support. There will be a need to allow staff time, without the immediate pressure to pick up projects that may have been put to one side due to Covid-19. This will include allowing time for a break/ holiday, as well as reverting back towards normal.

Absence

To support staff to avoid the flu virus and to help reduce winter absence levels, we offer free flu vaccinations each year. We ran another very successful programme in the autumn of 2020 with over 140 vouchers taken up by staff and we intend to continue to provide this in future years. We will also support and encourage staff to make the time to get Covid-19 vaccinations (when available).

We also have access to a very good range of services that will help support our staff at this time and reduce absence, for example an Occupational Health Service, an online GP Service and of course a vital Employee Assistance Programme. The HR team will do regular reminders of the support available

Annual Leave

A significant number of staff have built up large annual leave balances due to work pressures and not wanting to take holidays. All staff will continue to be encouraged to take regular leave, where possible. As restrictions are lifted there will be an increased demand to take annual leave, and managers will be supported in being flexible, but also mindful of the need to maintain services. The using up of annual leave balances over two years (up to 31/3/2023) will be an option to ensure staff get the opportunity to take their leave over a phased period.

Some staff have continued to use leave (e.g. to support families and others) and where service needs allow, the Holiday Flex (purchase of annual leave) will continue to be available.

4. Recruitment & retention

Recruitment has slowed during the pandemic with a lower number of vacancies: in 2020 we appointed just 36 new staff compared to 81 appointments in the previous year.. We expect recruitment to return to more normal levels as we continue to adjust to the current working arrangements, although with unemployment on the rise there is likely to be less labour turnover which in turn will create less vacancies.

Since the start of lockdown in March 2020 we have adapted our recruitment and selection procedures. Interviews can now be conducted remotely using Zoom as our preferred video conference platform. Many job roles at NHDC include a test/presentation at the interview stage, which can also be carried out remotely, either via Zoom or through the use of email, with a time limit for response. The HR team have worked with recruiting managers to give tips and advice on navigating an interview via video conferencing. In future we will look at ways of reducing the time and travel commitment associated with in-person interviews and tests, this could mean that any tests and initial interviews may continue to be conducted online. This will need to be balanced against the advantages of candidates coming to council offices allowing them to get a better sense of the organisation.

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The council's apprenticeship scheme will continue to be important during a period where youth unemployment is expected to be high. During the recruitment campaign in August 2020 three apprentice posts were advertised, with a large volume of applications being received and all first-round interviews took place via Zoom with an independent service manager and HR representative. Successful candidates were offered a second interview with recruiting managers for final selection before job offers were made.

Retention

To support the remote onboarding of new staff, HR have introduced a New Starter Welcome call which provides an overview of HR matters with the opportunity to ask questions or discuss any concerns. Feedback suggests this is being appreciated by staff. Other induction material has also been adapted to reflect that most new staff will be working through their induction period whilst working from home. Videos to replace the content that would previously have been part of the induction training have also been developed. Following a return to office-working some further induction and familiarisation will be arranged for the cohort of new starters recruited during the pandemic.

Retention is also supported by our approach to career development and succession planning. This will be a continued area of focus and will need to be addressed whilst maintaining our goal of equality, diversity and inclusion.

A series of online workshops were introduced in November 2020 which help staff consider their future career, their confidence and what they can do to achieve their goals. We are also boosting the role of our coaches as career coaches.

Leavers

Some staff will have left the Council during the pandemic and will have not been able to say goodbye in the usual way. Where the leaver has retired and would have been eligible for a retirement buffet, then this will be honoured when restrictions on such gatherings are lifted. Teams have made use of online cards, collections and virtual gatherings to say goodbye to staff that have left.

5. Staff Benefits

As we move through the consequences of the pandemic and a "new normal" way of working becomes established for most employees, the impact of this on the Council's current benefits package needs to be considered. This will include a review of whether as an employer with a duty of care for the wellbeing of staff, the Council should consider if additional support is needed for employees. The negotiation of new contracts for traditional elements of the staff benefits package such as the OH and EAP services will provide the opportunity to review the services provided.

New and innovative ways of enhancing the remuneration package enjoyed by employees can also be explored. This will reflect that the economic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic is likely to mean that pay inflation will be lower than previously expected, and the Council needs to find other ways to attract and retain staff. The latest benefit to be approved has been the Holiday Flex salary sacrifice scheme following a successful trial which achieved a net saving of £2,000, with further annual savings expected.

6. Learning and Employee Engagement

With ongoing changes to restrictions, there is likely to be a continuation of full home working for the majority of staff for many months. The results of the staff survey on recovery will inform a new 'Recovery Toolkit' which will support our staff through this difficult time and the

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continued anxieties and challenges we will face as an organisation. We will also coach and develop managers to provide the ongoing welfare support needed.

The pandemic and the shift to homeworking has seen a necessary change towards more blended learning approaches in the form of online workshops and virtual conferences, and fewer face to face events. In some ways this move to online learning for both internal and external training provides an opportunity to make learning more accessible and flexible. L&EE have taken positive steps towards this approach to ensure that development can continue through the pandemic and have already arranged a number of learning events online ranging from a Pre-Retirement Seminar to Management Fundamentals.

The team are also exploring what new skills and capabilities will be required post pandemic and therefore the requirements for new Learning and Development. L&EE work very closely with their suppliers to ensure the right approach for our staff. The excellent coaching resources that the organisation has developed are also being mobilised to play a part in supporting people working through the COVID-19 challenges.

Learning and Development half-days have been implemented to allow individuals and teams time to focus on their personal and professional development needs. This reflects the Council's commitment to supporting staff development and wellbeing. The L&EE team will continue to provide useful resources and monthly themes will be decided in consultation with the Leadership Team and the Shaping our Future group.

7. Communication

We have many things in place to ensure people remain well informed particularly through extensive remote working. The Communications team are supporting remote working with an excellent range of regular items such as Insight, virtual all staff briefings and Senior Management Group meetings.

The Staff Consultation Forum every month is being held as a virtual meeting using Zoom. The agendas and minutes are shared with all staff, and the SCF representatives will raise questions and concerns at the meetings on behalf of staff. There is also a monitored e mail address SCF@north-herts.gov.uk where people can leave items to raise at the meeting. The Trade Union liaison meetings are also continuing regularly as virtual meetings.

8. Working Arrangements

At the start of the lockdown in March 2020, the IT team worked hard to create over 100 new home-working set-ups for those who had not previously worked from home. In addition, all staff on partial home-working contracts or with ad hoc home-working arrangements in place moved to full home-working, many using their own equipment. There will be further work to be done to ensure we have consistent terms and conditions for all staff who are home-working and this will be supported by the IT providing the majority of staff with a laptop to allow them to work both from home and in the office. These laptops will include cameras and microphones to allow staff to use them for virtual meetings, such as team meetings and staff briefings. Guidelines will be developed to determine what other IT equipment and furniture will continue to be provided, which will be linked to the amount of time spent working at home. As part of this new provision, the council will cease payment of the home-working set up fee for the purchase of IT equipment which was introduced in 2010. The eligibility for this payment has already substantially diminished.

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The return to office-working and using our buildings will be dependent on government guidelines, the safety of staff and service delivery needs. Initial occupation will also be limited by the equipment (e.g. IT and furniture) that has been taken home.

Many staff have indicated their preference for greater home-working (compared to pre-pandemic) in the future and service areas will review the requirements for office working to facilitate this where possible.