

NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL
JOINT STAFF CONSULTATIVE COMMITTEE
MEETING HELD AS A VIRTUAL MEETING
ON WEDNESDAY, 10TH MARCH, 2021 AT 10.00 AM

MINUTES

Present: *Councillors: Kate Aspinwall (Vice-Chair), Keith Hoskins, Claire Strong, Martin Stears-Handscomb and Tony Hunter.*

In Attendance: *Ian Couper (Service Director - Resources), Jo Keshishian (Interim Human Resources Services Manager) and Anthony Roche (Managing Director), William Edwards (Committee, Member and Scrutiny Officer) and Matthew Hepburn (Committee, Member and Scrutiny Officer)*

Also Present: *Daniel Washington (UNISON) and Christina Corr (SCF).*

19 WELCOME AND REMOTE/PARTLY REMOTE MEETINGS PROTOCOL SUMMARY

Audio Recording – 5 seconds.

The Chair welcomed everyone to this virtual meeting of the Joint Staff Consultative Committee that was being conducted with Members and Officers at various locations, communicating via audio/video and online and advised that there was the opportunity for the public and press to listen and view proceedings.

The Committee, Member and Scrutiny Officer undertook a roll call and gave advice regarding the following:

- Attendance;
- Live Streaming;
- Noise interference;
- Rules of Debate;
- Voting.

The Vice Chair, Councillor Kate Aspinwall, started the meeting proper.

20 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Audio Recording – 2 minutes 10 seconds.

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Kay Tart and Terry Hone.

Having given due notice Councillor Martin Stears-Handscomb advised he would be substituting for Councillor Kay Tart.

Having given due notice Councillor Tony Hunter advised he would be substituting for Councillor Terry Hone.

Apologies for absence were also received from Lea Ellis, Allison Fox, Andrew Betts, Dee Levett and Debbie Ealand.

21 MINUTES - 16 DECEMBER 2020

Audio Recording – 2 minutes 43 seconds.

The Committee, Member and Scrutiny Officer advised of two amendments to be made to the minutes:

- Substituting 'Southern Rural Committee,' for 'Joint Staff Consultative Committee,' at Minute 9 – Welcome and Remote/Partly Remote Meetings Protocol
- Changing Jo Keshishian's job title to 'Interim HR Services Manager,' throughout

RESOLVED:

- (1) That the amendments above be noted;
- (2) That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Committee held on 16 December 2020 be approved as a true record of the proceedings;
- (3) That the Committee, Member and Scrutiny Officer be authorised to apply the Chair's digital signature to the approved minutes.

22 CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

Audio Recording – 4 minutes 22 seconds.

- (1) The Chair welcomed those present at the meeting;
- (2) The Chair advised that, in accordance with Council Policy, the meeting would be audio recorded;
- (3) 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.

23 STAFF CONSULTATION FORUM

Audio Recording – 5 minutes 5 seconds.

The Service Director – Resources presented the minutes of the Staff Consultation Forums held in December 2020, January 2021 and February 2021 and provided an overview of the matters discussed including:

- The relationship between SCF, JSCC and the Shaping Our Future group
- Home working expenses and tax allowances
- Monthly learning & development sessions
- NHS volunteering
- Remote social events and wellbeing strategies running in the organisation

The following Members and representatives contributed to the discussion:

- Councillor Kate Aspinwall
- Councillor Claire Strong
- Christina Corr – SCF

Points raised included:

- Staff were appreciative of the efforts being made to promote wellbeing while working from home;
- The number of social events produced by teams was encouraging;
- It was positive that staff did not feel guilty for taking time to socialise remotely;
- The People Recovery Plan should consider allowing staff the flexibility to continue working from home if they choose.

IT WAS AGREED: That the minutes of the Staff Consultation Forums held in December 2020 and January 2021 and February 2021 be noted.

REASON FOR DECISION: To enable the Joint Staff Consultative Committee to consider any issues addressed by the Staff Consultation Forum.

24 HUMAN RESOURCES INFORMATION NOTE

Audio Recording – 11 minutes 9 seconds.

The Service Director – Resources presented the Information Note entitled People Strategy Update along with Appendix A – People Recovery Plan 2020-22 and drew attention to points including:

- The draft recovery plan considered what lessons could be learnt from the pandemic and how the organisation will move forward as restrictions change;
- The plan had been received by the leadership team and discussed by SCF;
- The main area of feedback from SCF was in relation to home working set-up fees which became redundant as IT equipment was to be provided by the Council;
- The council was looking at how to go about providing other equipment (e.g desk chairs) for employees working from home in future;
- Paragraph 3.3.1 provided statistics on recruitment;
- The application ratio statistics may be skewed by the apprentice posts which generally attract more applications per position than any other role;
- General levels of unemployment were also a factor;
- The Shaping our Future group was in an information gathering stage and the Inclusion Group had its first meeting earlier in the week;
- Paragraph 3.10.2 provided an update on Learning & Development days which most but not all staff had been able to take part in;
- The most recent Learning & Development session was on Equality & Diversity Training in line with the motion passed by Council, and this training would be rolled out to Members soon;
- Staff Survey results showed members of staff were coping well with pandemic restrictions and working from home but there were indications that as time progressed people were feeling strained, particularly in service areas where COVID-19 response had increased workload;
- Employees with caring responsibilities including those home schooling also reported that they were finding it more difficult;
- The survey results might have been indicative of the time it was taken as COVID cases were spiking and as numbers decline and the vaccination programme continues results should improve;
- Future surveys would ask staff what they feel the return to office work should look like and what measures they expect to be in place.

The Managing Director advised that he was in discussion with chief executives of other councils to compare strategies on the return to office working and indicated that NHDC's recovery plan would be benchmarked against staff needs and expectations.

The following Members asked questions:

- Councillor Kate Aspinwall
- Councillor Tony Hunter
- Councillor Claire Strong

The Managing Director, Service Director – Resources, and Interim HR Services Manager gave responses to questions including:

- It was anticipated that staff would want a different balance of office and home working in future;
- Plans for the return to work envisioned using the offices differently compared to 12 months ago;
- Some employees missed the social side of office work and those with difficult working environments at home may find returning to office working a relief;
- The working assumption of the recovery plan was that the council would use one less floor in the office than it currently occupies;
- Comments attached to the staff survey indicate that there are groups in the workforce very keen to come back to office work and others that see value in working from home permanently;
- As people return to the office the way they work in the office would change including adopting hybrid meetings and hot desking;
- Not all services areas and teams had been able to work effectively from home during the pandemic and this would have to be considered by the leadership team;
- There were no plans as yet to enforce a particular home/office balance and it was felt that office space would be able to be managed naturally;
- If rotas or desk bookings did need to become a feature this would be implemented;
- Some degree of storage would still be provided in DCO offices;
- The next Learning & Development session was not themed so teams and individuals could determine the training they wanted to focus on;
- There were organisational benefits to allowing holiday balances to be carried over across two years.

IT WAS AGREED: That the Information Note entitled People Strategy Update be noted.

REASON FOR DECISION: To enable the Committee to consider the Information Note entitled People Strategy Update.

25 EQUALITIES UPDATE

Audio Recording – 34 minutes 48 seconds.

The Interim HR Services Manager presented the Information Note entitled Equalities Update and highlighted points including:

- The annual update on equalities data was based on a snapshot of figures on 31 December 2020 and was presented in percentage form rather than raw figures to preserve confidentiality;
- Not all employees provided NHDC with information relating to each protected characteristic;
- The overall workforce profile had remained stable in successive years;
- There had been a reduction in appointments of women which were now at their lowest in 3 years;
- More staff were declaring disability status;
- The increase in declarations of disability might be a result of ease of access on the iTrent reporting system;

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- There were no new appointments in 2020 of employees declaring a disability;
- Ethnic minority appointments and leavers in the organisation were up;
- There had been a decrease in appointments of members from LGBT+ groups, with only 2 recorded in 2020;
- Employees aged 45-54 were the largest group within the workforce, making up a third of staff;
- Changes in figures on marital status and religion were minimal;
- The number of full time employees dropped to 63% in 2020, the lowest it had been in five years;
- The proportion of the full time workforce that were women had fallen;
- The number of employees on long-term sick leave had remained stable and 91% of all cases were among women;
- The data relating to the gender pay gap was based on a snapshot taken in March which was published online ahead of the government deadline;
- There had been improvements in the average differences in both mean and median gender pay gaps and the figures were at their lowest since the council first started publishing this data in 2017;
- When using the mean figures there was still a gap of £7291 annually between men and women;
- There was a significant difference in the proportion of women employed in the upper quartile of salary grades.

The following Members asked questions and took part in the discussion:

- Councillor Kate Aspinwall
- Councillor Claire Strong
- Councillor Martin Stears-Handscorn

In response to questions the Interim HR Services Manager advised:

- There were 100 applicants for 3 Apprenticeship posts within the organisation which may have skewed the figures for applicants per age bracket;
- There was a high demand for roles overall and more technical positions had been filled faster this year than previously, though some service areas still see a low number of applicants e.g legal;
- The Inclusion Group had met on Monday with 14 participants in total and had a positive discussion on age, with a wide ranging and fruitful discussion which considered career progression, flatter council structure, lateral moves, secondments and mentoring, degrees, peer challenge feedback, the menopause, and pensions;
- Feedback from the Inclusion Group would be shared with the Shaping Our Future group and the leadership team;
- SCF had been asked to consider future discussion topics and share ideas between groups and committees;
- It was important that the Inclusion Group was a safe space for employees to discuss sensitive issues;
- The Community Engagement team was represented in the inclusion group and the Policy & Community Engagement Manager would link feedback from the Inclusion Group to wider corporate policy;
- The increase in number of workers, particularly women, on part-time working arrangements was noteworthy and required further investigation;
- Anything under 37 hours a week was considered part-time and numbers of casual contracts had increased overall;
- It was not yet known whether the increase in part-time work was primarily due to new appointments or full-time staff reducing their hours.

In response to questions the Managing Director advised:

- The narrowing gender pay gap was encouraging;
- 2020 had been an anomalous year in a number of ways including for recruitment and figures from this year would need to be compared with future years before they can be fully understood;
- It was not the intention to be prescriptive about how the Inclusion Group did its work and attendees were free to shape discussions as they felt fit;
- It could be put to the Inclusion Group to involve outside contributions but this would be up to them and could change the nature and profile of the group;
- Anecdotally some staff had reduced their working hours to handle COVID-related pressures including caring responsibilities and home schooling, and this may account for part of the increase, particularly among women who bear a disproportionate responsibility for care roles in wider society.

The Service Director – Resources advised that the Shaping Our Future group had both an internal and an external role and could incorporate the themes and topics considered by the Inclusion Group in to its work.

N.B The Managing Director left the meeting at 11:01 on Council business.

IT WAS AGREED: That the Equalities Update provided be noted.

REASON FOR DECISION: To enable the Committee to consider the content of the Equalities Update.

26 STRATEGIC DISCUSSION PAPER: SALARY SACRIFICE SCHEMES

Audio Recording – 1 hour 1 minute.

The Interim HR Services Manager presented the Strategic Discussion Paper on salary sacrifice schemes and drew attention to points including the following:

- Salary Sacrifice schemes were used to attract new employees and provide benefits to existing employees;
- They were based on the exchange of salary payments for a non-cash benefit, and had benefits for employees and the organisation in terms of tax and national insurance;
- Various schemes had been run over the years and the number was now reduced due to changes in government policy;
- The child care voucher scheme was closed to new applicants since the tax free childcare scheme was introduced;
- A cycle to work scheme had been running in various forms since 2013, most recently opened in December 2019 with a small group of employees taking it up before office closures made the scheme redundant;
- HolidayFlex was the newest scheme open which allowed employees to purchase additional annual leave up to an extra week, with 7 applicants during the trial period in August;
- A second application window was opened for the new year with 10 applicants, 6 of whom had applied before;
- It was hoped there would be more interest in HolidayFlex once travel restrictions had been lifted;
- The annual leave rollover policy had reduced the need for employees to purchase additional leave;
- Future options for salary sacrifice schemes included additional pension contributions and ultra-low emissions vehicles;
- Administrative work was necessary to set up and run salary sacrifice schemes like making changes to the payroll, performing payroll checks, and encouraging up-take;
- Levels of staff interest should be assessed before considering further schemes.

The following Members asked questions:

- Councillor Martin Stears-Handscomb
- Councillor Keith Hoskins

In response to questions the Interim HR Services Manager advised:

- All employees were eligible to apply for HolidayFlex during the application window but applications were subject to approval by team managers;
- A survey on ultra-low emissions vehicles would take place later this year.

IT WAS AGREED: That the Strategic Discussion Paper on the salary sacrifice schemes be noted.

REASON FOR DECISION: To enable the Committee to consider the discussion paper on salary sacrifice schemes.

27 FUTURE DISCUSSION TOPICS

Audio Recording – 1 hour 7 minutes.

Members considered which subjects should be discussed at future meetings and the following points were considered:

- Lockdown restrictions may not have been lifted by June and a paper on the challenges and rewards of home working presented then may be premature;
- Any paper presented for June would have to be researched and written in the months prior;
- The conversation regarding a return to office working would have progressed by June so that meeting could be an opportunity to provide feedback;
- The Employee Assistance Programme was worth considering;
- The challenges and rewards of home working item had been on the list for a long time and when originally proposed was not purely focussed on COVID;
- It had been a long time since the Committee had received an update on employment law.

IT WAS AGREED:

- (1) That the discussion topic for the next meeting be as follows:
 - (i) The Employee Assistance Programme
- (2) That the discussion topic of the challenges and rewards of home working and the return to office work be considered at the meeting after next;
- (3) That an Employment Law Update should be presented in the next civic year;
- (4) That regular updates on the work of the Inclusion Group be provided to the Committee.

REASON FOR DECISION: To enable the Committee to choose a discussion topic of interest.

The meeting closed at 11.14 am

Chair