

JOINT STAFF CONSULTATIVE COMMITTEE

15 December 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 NHC 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 this was shared with staff via the Staff Consultation Forum and the monthly Staff Briefing and circulated to all. Since October staff have been encouraged to return to the office one day per week, and this has been supported by the introduction of an online desk booking system. In addition, the larger meeting rooms have been fitted with video conferencing camera to allow hybrid meetings to take place. Most staff have now been issued with new lap-tops and can therefore work at home or at hot-desks in the office. Several measures are still in place to help minimise the risk of infections these include desk cleaning materials, facemasks whilst moving around the building, and social distancing, as well as encouraging staff to use lateral flow tests regularly.

Councils across Hertfordshire and the East of England region meet regularly in virtual meetings to share knowledge and experience of employment matters, and to discuss and share ideas on current employment issues relating to the changing circumstances as we move forward from the pandemic.

3.3.1 Recruitment

- 3.3.1 Recruitment continues to be steady and while there has been a slight decrease in the number of vacancies this quarter compared to last, we have continued to see good levels of interest. We have been successful in filling management vacancies within Electoral Services and Housing, which have previously proved difficult to recruit to, as well as a successful recruitment process for the Service Director for Place role.

Environmental Health have continued to experience work-load pressure relating to the pandemic and we have recently advertised for an additional Track and Trace Officer and Covid Marshall Team leader to assist with the workload.

As well as Environmental Health and the management vacancies detailed above, we have also successfully appointed candidates within Hitchin Town Hall, Communications, Housing, Estates and Democratic Services.

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. 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 currently have two Kickstart assistants; one in IT helping with the laptop roll out, and another who is working with the Healthy Hub. Kickstarters are also eligible to apply for any internal vacancies and we offer employability support throughout the duration of their contract. One Kickstarter recently applied and was successful in securing permanent employment with us in the role of IT Helpdesk and Technical Support Officer.

Managers have been reminded about the opportunity, which will be closing to new vacancies from 17th Dec 2021, with successful candidates needing to be in post before 31st March 2022.

3.3.3 Temporary workers

Following meetings between Procurement, Commercial and HR on temporary workers at the Council, it was identified that further information was needed on how agency temps were currently used, who by and in what roles. A questionnaire was therefore developed and distributed to NHC managers who had used agency temporary workers in recent years. Information on spend was also sought from Finance.

The results of the survey showed the Council's volume of usage and current level of spend did not warrant the costs involved with engaging a managed service provider. It was however felt that there were savings to be made, e.g. by using fewer agencies and negotiating better rates on a bigger spend with each one and it was suggested that a broader working group be set up with representatives from all relevant areas; user line managers, Commercial, HR, IT, Finance and Procurement, to consider the next steps. The actions proposed following the first meeting of this group included the investigation of a possible NHC framework agreement, benchmarking with other local authorities, further investigation into why multiple agencies were being used for the same roles within the Council, how current health and safety and safeguarding

requirements were being met in relation to agency workers and what IT equipment was being used by them.

In the meantime, HR have been working on redesigning the Temps Register into a Fast-Track recruitment option and looking at amendments to the on-line recruitment system to enable a quick turnaround on the recruitment of directly employed temps by the Council. The current Use of Temporary Workers Policy and supporting documentation is also under review.

3.4 Apprenticeships

- 3.4.1 We currently have nine Apprentices in post studying a range of qualifications including Customer Service Specialist, Business Administration, HR Support and Digital Marketing. We are continuing to utilise the Apprentice Levy Fund for further job-related training for existing staff when the opportunity arises. Our training providers continue to be able to offer remote learning with some face-to-face observations now able to take place.

We recently attended a Generation Hitchin Apprentice event arranged by Bim Afolami MP, in collaboration with Amazing Apprenticeships. This was an opportunity for us to promote NHC as a potential employer and highlight what we can do to support the careers of young people within district. The event was supported by 3 of our current Apprentices, who had the opportunity to listen to the newly appointed Minister for Skills, Alex Burghart MP.

3.5 Pay

- 3.5.3 **National Pay bargaining:** The pay negotiations for the 2021 pay award have not yet reached a settlement. At a meeting on 19th October between the National Employers and the National Joint Council, the employers group reaffirmed the pay offer made in July as a full and final offer and declined to reopen the negotiations.

The pay offer provides 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). This offer has been rejected by the unions and in December they are due to ballot their members to seek support for industrial action. There will need to be at least 50% turnout at the ballot to meet the threshold for industrial action as well as a majority voting to support of action.

3.6 Employee Benefits

- 3.6.1 **Employee Wellbeing Classes:** Following the introduction of a series of free wellbeing classes for employees provided by our employee advice service earlier this year, employees can now access new classes which will be available until the end of 2022. These classes, which are delivered digitally, focus on creating an environment that empowers employees to proactively manage their physical and mental wellbeing.

Topics covered include working well at home, improving sleep, managing stress and anxiety and diet and nutrition.

3.7 Mental Health and Wellbeing

- 3.7.1 The Mental Health First Aiders continue to support staff, we are holding further drop in sessions for staff on Monday 17th January, commonly known as “Blue Monday” we are also ensuring that we support the wellbeing of our Mental Health First Aiders and they have regular catch up sessions arranged to allow them to share any concerns
- 3.7.2 25th November marked White Ribbon Day – a day when thousands of people take action and raise awareness to prevent violence before it starts. White Ribbon UK is the leading charity engaging with men and boys to end violence against women and whilst we recognise the amazing efforts of this charity, we at NHC recognise that men are not the only perpetrators of domestic violence but can sometimes be the victim. We took the opportunity to highlight to all staff, the support we have available to both men and women who may be victims of domestic abuse.
- 3.7.3 The Hertfordshire HR Leaders project to support employee mental health and resilience is progressing with the allocated funding from Public Health received. This will be invested in tools and training to help staff to develop their resilience.

3.8 Learning & Employee Engagement

- 3.8.1 The Personal Development sessions are continuing, and dates have been confirmed for 2022, with the focus for the start of 2022 being to develop good habits.
- 3.8.2 **Service Manager Development Programme**
Both cohorts 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. Feedback has been received from the participants and will be passed to the Leadership Team.

3.9 Shaping our Future

The new Council Plan and the inclusion of priorities and 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 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, Diversity and Inclusion

At the September meeting of the Inclusion Group, the discussion topic was Race and Ethnicity. The meeting started with the definitions of race and ethnicity in legal terms, and a comparison of the ethnicity of employees at NHC compared to the North Hertfordshire census data. Discussion followed on a variety of points including how our recruitment process avoids bias at short-listing by removing personal details such as applicants name and ethnicity, known as blind recruitment; the importance of

individuals feeling comfortable being able to raise concerns relating to their race or ethnicity and how any barriers can be overcome. The group have agreed to act as Inclusion Champions, with their details provided on the intranet, so they can be contacted by members of staff who want to approach someone in confidence. It was noted that taking a concern to their manager or to HR may not always be the preferred option in the first instance and that having Inclusion Champions will provide an alternative and less formal option.

The next meeting is due to take place in mid-December and the group will be discussing issues and experiences relating to Sex, Sexual Orientation and Gender Reassignment.

3.11 Absence

3.11.1 Employee cases of illness relating to COVID-19 have increased more recently in line with the national trend, and a summary of the number of cases and days lost by quarter is shown below, with October – December 2021 showing cases to date at the time of reporting.

	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	5	30.5	10	46			18	90.5

3.11.2 The number of employees on long-term absence has now reduced to just two at present which the HR team are continuing to actively support. Overall, in 2021 we have supported and advised on 20 cases of long-term absence, of these 7 were related to stress or mental health issues, 5 musculo-skeletal, 2 related to cancer and 6 other reasons.

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 October we were under this target.

Rolling 12 months	Absence days lost per employee		
	Long-term	Short-term	Total
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

Aug-21	0.19	0.23	0.42
Sep-21	0.31	0.25	0.56
Oct-21	0.26	0.35	0.61
Total	3.39	2.78	6.15

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%

Our labour turnover for 2020/21 was at its lowest levels more than 10 years at 8.1%. Since April we have seen the number of leavers increase to pre-pandemic levels, with resignations during the period April – October 2021 being just over double (30) compared to the same period in 2020 (14). This has increased our labour turnover for the rolling year, November 2020 – October 2021, to 13%.

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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