

JOINT STAFF CONSULTATIVE COMMITTEE

9 March 2022

*PART 1 – PUBLIC DOCUMENT

AGENDA ITEM No.

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.

2. STEPS TO DATE

- 2.1 The HR Update Information Note contains updates regarding 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.

Late 2021 saw the reintroduction of Plan B, which meant a significant number of employees were once again working from home. Since then, restrictions have been lifted and, in February, all employees were allowed to return to office working again. This is expected to be a gradual return for most employees and will be facilitated by the online desk booking system, laptops and video conferencing facilities in meeting rooms. 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.

There are specific risk assessments (with measures to help protect employees) in place for non-desk-based work.

3.3 Recruitment

We have seen an increase in vacancies in the last few months which reflects our higher labour turnover. The level of interest from applicants has been good for most positions, although we have had to readvertise a couple of vacancies (one in Revenues and

another in Customer Service) which have both had an improved response rate for the second advert. Professional roles such as Legal and Planning are still proving difficult to fill. We have successfully filled several key roles including Communications Manager, two Environmental Health Officers, Planning Officer and Housing Officer as well as an internal secondment to cover a management role at Hitchin Town Hall. The team have also been working with Careline to improve the effectiveness of the recruitment of Careline operators.

3.4 Temporary workers

The project group on temporary workers, supported by Commercial, continues to explore how the Council's temporary resource needs can be met effectively.

A Fast-Track Temp process has been introduced to allow directly recruited temps to start more quickly. The Use of Temporary Workers Policy has been updated to incorporate this change and to reflect current practice. Accompanying documentation has been reviewed with input from Legal, IT and Property Services and revised versions are now available on the intranet.

3.5 Apprenticeships

We have nine Apprentices in post studying a range of qualifications including Customer Service Specialist, Business Administration, HR Support and Digital Marketing. A further three will be recruited shortly and will be completing the following Apprenticeships: Community Health and Wellbeing, Information Communication Technician and Cultural Learning and Participation Officer.

As the Apprenticeship Levy Scheme becomes more established, new Apprenticeships are available which allow us to provide more specialist learning to suit our varied teams. This will be a great benefit to the Council as we continue to develop the workforce of the future. We are also continuing to utilise the Apprentice Levy Fund for further job-related training for existing staff when the opportunity arises.

Our training providers are still offering remote learning with face-to-face observations, which appear to be the delivery model of many training providers as we move slowly into a new way of working.

3.6 Pay

National Pay bargaining: The pay negotiations for the 2021 general pay award have not yet reached a settlement. From December 2021 to February 2022 unions carried out ballots to seek support for industrial action. The outcome of these ballots so far have not supported strike action.

This is separate from the pay awards for Chief Executives and Chief Officers, which the relevant Unions have agreed at 1.5%. This is lower than the employer offer of at least 1.75% made for other workers.

National Pay bargaining 2022: The National Employers are not expecting the Unions to table their pay claim for 2022 until April. North Herts Council will continue to take part in the National Pay Briefings.

3.7 Employee Benefits

In January the team announced the launch of a new benefit for Council employees, Headspace. Headspace is an award-winning mindfulness and sleep application that supports people to feel less stressed, more focused and sleep soundly. The app has been positively received by employees across the Council.

In December, the Council announced that we would support employees achieve a healthy work life balance by opening flexible working requests to all employees from day one of employment. The benefits of flexible working for both employers and employees are clear and varied, from improved wellbeing and work life balance to greater productivity.

3.8 Mental Health and Wellbeing

As the second Monday of January has become known as Blue Monday, the HR Team emailed all staff during this week, to make personal contact and to take the opportunity to remind them of all the support that is available to them. We also used this as the initial platform to announce the launch of the Headspace App.

We also ensured that our Mental Health First Aiders (MHFA) were available at 3 drop-in sessions on Monday 17th January.

To support staff and encourage them to catch up with colleagues, and following positive feedback that we received during the MHFA drop-in session in January, we held another Virtual Kitchen on 3rd February to coincide with Time to Talk Day. As with the previous Virtual Kitchens, this was very well received by those that attended.

The Hertfordshire HR Leaders project to support employee mental health and resilience is progressing. The allocated funding from Public Health will be invested in tools and training to help staff to develop their resilience. So far this has funded the Headspace application.

3.9 Learning & Employee Engagement

To support the January 2022 Personal Development Session, we ran a Productivity Workshop, which was attended by 90 staff– this workshop provided tips and tricks to help staff who were struggling with constant distractions and information overload, to help them balance productivity and wellbeing. Feedback from attendees has been very positive and a further session is booked for later in the year.

A new suite of Customer Services eLearning is being launched to staff to support in putting our customers at the heart of everything we do.

3.10 Shaping our Future

The Organisational Values have been further developed to be more concise and have been shared with staff through a variety of means, the concise values are as follows; Together, Listening, Learning, Adaptable and Inclusive.

We have now developed an action plan for the future based on the outcomes of the Shaping our Future meetings, these actions align the Council Plan priorities. The action

plan also considers the alignment of training for Officers and Members. This action plan was shared with the Shaping our Future steering group at the end of February. The action plan will form part of our Operational Work Plan.

3.11 Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

The Inclusion group met in December 2021 to discuss Sex, Sexual Orientation and Gender Reassignment. The attendees were provided with the workforce profile in this area and an open discussion followed. The overall feel from the group was that the Council is an inclusive place to work and that it could be more vocal about how it's inclusive and celebrate success.

The group felt it was important to publicise the Council's values, including inclusivity to prospective or new employees and in external messaging.

Although many experiences discussed were positive, the group noted the importance of awareness raising through messaging and training.

It was noted that there are now more female service directors at the Council and the group would be interested in hearing from women in senior positions about their experience in navigating their way to those positions.

The next meeting is due to take place in March and the group will be discussing issues and experiences relating to Religion.

3.12 Absence

Rates of employee absence relating to COVID-19 have been at their highest level to date, reflecting the prevalence of Omicron circulating in the community. In particular, there were 35 cases of absence in the 8 weeks 29th November – 21st January which was almost double the total number of cases in the first two waves. A summary of the number of cases and days lost by quarter is shown below, with January – March 2022 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	34.5	32	184	22	90	62	322.5

There are a small number of employees on long-term absence at present, and the HR team are actively supporting with assistance from Occupational Health, as well as providing advice to line managers.

Short-term absence has been increasing since October, with the increase in cases of the Omicron variant being a significant factor. 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 for the first time in several years we have exceeded this target.

Rolling 12 months	Absence days lost per employee		
	Long-term	Short-term	Total
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
Nov-21	0.22	0.53	0.75
Dec-21	0.24	0.54	0.78
Jan-22	0.24	0.42	0.66
Total	3.48	3.67	7.15

3.13 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%

Whilst at the start of this year, our labour turnover was at its lowest levels for more than 10 years at 8.1%, the number of employees leaving has increased in line with national trends since April. However, the increase now appears to have slowed with a smaller number of resignations during the last three months (December – February) with 6 resignations compared to 12 during September – November. The labour turnover for the rolling year appears to have peaked in December at 14.3% and has now reduced to 12.1%.

4.0 NEXT STEPS

4.1 Progress against the HR Service plan, 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

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