

Staff Consultation Forum Meeting

07/09/2022

Present: Rebecca Webb (**RW**), Ian Couper (**IC**), Louis Franklin (**LF**), Brenda Downie (**BD**) Dee Levett (**DL**) Alice Ashbrook (**AA – notes**), (Caelan Ballard (**CB – notes**))

Circulation: Global

Chair for Meeting: Louis Franklin (**LF**)

1. Apologies

Mark Robinson, Anthony Roche, Andrew Betts, Emma Jellis, and Christina Corr

2. Matters Arising From Previous Meeting

None

3. NHC update

Pay Award

Pay negotiations are ongoing and an update has been added to the message board to confirm that the unions are consulting with their members. Three consultations are taking place with the final consultation period ending on 21st October. We expect to hear the outcome towards the end of October or beginning of November. As soon as the pay award is agreed we will process with payroll, but payment date will depend on the pay-run timetable. If the pay award is not agreed following this consultation, it will return to negotiations.

Employee Benefits

HR are working through the feedback gathered on Employee Benefits and there may be a couple of short surveys on specific benefits, otherwise these findings will be presented to the leadership team and then any changes to the Employee Benefits will be raised at a future staff briefing.

Unison Branch Pay Briefing

The Union held a briefing regarding the 2022 pay negotiations on Tuesday 6th September. The meeting aimed to update attendees on Unison's consultation process and discuss the overall pay offer.

General NHC Update

August was the holiday period, as well as a break from Committee Meetings, but they are now back in full swing.

The community consultation strategy is going to Cabinet this month, as are the results from a district wide survey.



Also going to Cabinet will be the Medium-Term Financial Strategy. The cost-of-living crisis and general inflation are key issues, for example the waste contract costs are increasing by almost 10%.

The plan is to focus on service efficiencies and income generation, rather than service cuts, but the Council must also be realistic in their spending. There is no immediate reaction as there are reserves which can be used until there is more certainty on future funding.

Consultation is about to start regarding a change to the Council Tax Reduction Scheme which involves moving to a banded system. The change would mean that rather than having a set amount of Council Tax reduction which changes every time there is a change in income, the claimant would instead sit within a pay band, meaning there are less changes. NHC hopes overall this will help more people if it is approved. This will be a consultation between with the public, County council and the Police Crime Commissioner.

There are several other reports too, one of them being on the building of a soft play provision at North Herts Leisure Centre. This has been put to a consultation and is awaiting a response from cabinet.

Q: What optional services do we provide that would potentially be cut if needed?

A: We have mostly statutory services, such as planning and environmental health, enforcement etc. We have support services for these which could be considered optional but if we did not have these then we would struggle to run the other services. There are services around the edges that are discretionary or is an add-on to the statutory level of service.

4. Employee Queries

Q: Will we all be getting new ID badges with the new name and logo? Some of our photos are very old and the logo is outdated on most Staff ID cards.

A: Staff are not encouraged to get a new ID card due to just having the old logo, but if your picture is very outdated or your card isn't functioning then you should contact Property Services to get a new Staff ID card.

Q: South Cambridgeshire District Council are currently trialling a 30-hour work week, as opposed to a standard 37-hour work week. Is there any intention for NHC to consider implementing this?

A: There is currently no plan for us to adopt a shorter working week, but it is an interesting concept, and we will see how it goes at South Cambs.

Q: NHC allows staff a home-working allowance of £16, but HMRC allow up to £26 to be paid to staff working from home. If staff have been receiving the allowance from the council of £16 (rather than getting the tax relief from HMRC), can they also claim the £10 difference? Could you shed some light on these rules?

A: Let us preface this advice by saying we are not giving tax advice.

The HMRC guidance on home-working expenses paid by employers is that employers can choose to pay employees up to £26 per month, without deducting any tax or requiring evidence of expenses. The rules are that the employee must regularly work from home, and this must be an agreed arrangement. Employers can choose to pay less than £26, or even nothing. We currently allow claims for £16 per month (it is your decision to claim this, if you are eligible), and as it is less than £26, it is tax-free.

There are now different criteria for seeking tax relief in relation to working from home. They were broadly aligned during Covid-19. Now the criteria for claiming tax relief are much more strict and probably unlikely to apply (see [Claim tax relief for your job expenses: Working from home - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/claim-tax-relief-for-your-job-expenses-working-from-home)). If you determined that you were eligible to claim tax relief then you could either:

- Claim that tax relief on the difference between what you claim from the Council and the limit set by HMRC, or
- Not claim from the Council and claim the full relief from HMRC

Note that claiming tax relief is much less generous as it is an adjustment to your tax code. The amount you get is generally equivalent to 20% or 40% of the amount, depending on the rate you pay tax at.

The decision on whether an you seek to claim tax allowances is your personal choice and the Council does not provide tax advice.

The rules during Covid-19 for tax relief were less strict, and you may still be able to claim for a prior year. You will need to make sure that you fully understand the guidance for that year, and then see if you can apply. This link may help: ([Working from home? Customers may be eligible to claim tax relief in 2021 to 2022 - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/working-from-home-customers-may-be-eligible-to-claim-tax-relief-in-2021-to-2022)).

5. IT Update

No questions or queries raised for IT.

6. Green Update

HCCSP Solar Bulk Purchase Scheme

The Solar Together scheme has now been launched and will be open for expressions of interest until 27th September. We have produced a webpage with information for residents and put out comms on various channels: [Solar Together | North Herts Council \(north-herts.gov.uk\)](https://www.north-herts.gov.uk/solar-together)

Review of Climate Change Strategy

The Policy team are in the process of reviewing the Council's Climate Change Strategy. The revised strategy will be taken to Cabinet in December 2022.

Climate Change Officers Group

The next Climate Change Officers Group will take place on Monday 12th September. This will include a presentation on renewable energy generation by West Suffolk Council, as well as a discussion on adaptation.

Letchworth Green Festival - Saturday 10th September

Letchworth Green Festival is taking place on Saturday 10th September between 10am – 5pm located in The Wynd and The Arcade in Letchworth. The Council will have a stall in The Arcade, to share with the public what actions we are taking as part of our climate change strategy and to encourage residents to take action too. The stall will have representation from the Waste Team and North Herts Councillors on the day.

The Council also will be represented at the Royston Sustain-Ability Fair, which is taking place on Sunday 2nd October.

Q: Will the events be promoting the bulk solar scheme?

A: Some of the events may not have had enough notice to promote the bulk solar scheme, however, we will contact the those involved in the event on the 10th of September in Letchworth to ask if they are going to promote it.

7. Building Services Update

No concerns have been raised.

If anyone has any issues, please email these to propertyservices@north-herts.gov.uk

8. Ideas/Suggestions

None

9. AOB

None

Chair for next meeting – Alice Ashbrook

Have something to say?

If you have an issue that you think should be brought to the attention of the SCF, please contact any SCF representative via phone, email or in person. They will raise your issue at the next meeting. You will not be identified unless you want to be.

Issues relating to property e.g., broken lift, non-flushing toilets, etc. must always be reported to Property Services in the first instance: propertyservices@north-herts.gov.uk

Alternatively, you can send any issues to the SCF inbox - SCF@north-herts.gov.uk



**North
Herts**

Council

Representatives (and extension):

Emma Jellis #4312 - MSU team

Christina Corr #4325 - Senior Technical Officer Revenues and Benefits

Andrew Betts #4282 - Contracts Officer Waste Management based at Buntingford

Alice Ashbrook#4235 - Assistant Licensing Officer

Louis Franklin#4262 – Admin Support Officer