

NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL
JOINT STAFF CONSULTATIVE COMMITTEE
MEETING HELD IN THE VIA ZOOM
ON WEDNESDAY, 12TH JUNE, 2024 AT 10.00 AM

MINUTES

Present: *Councillors: Daniel Allen (Chair), Ruth Brown (Vice-Chair), Val Bryant, Rhona Cameron and Claire Strong.*

In attendance: *Ian Couper (Service Director - Resources), Rebecca Webb (HR Services Manager) and Sjanet Wickenden (Committee, Member and Scrutiny Officer).*

UNISON: *Keith Fitzpatrick-Matthews*

Staff Consultation Forum: *Louis Franklin*

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Audio recording – 1 minute 44 seconds

There were no apologies for absence from Members.

2 MINUTES - 13 MARCH 2024

Audio recording – 2 minutes

Councillor Claire Strong noted that the minutes of the 13 March 2024 referred to her as 'Clare' and requested that this be amended to the correct spelling of her name 'Claire'.

Councillor Daniel Allen proposed and Councillor Claire Strong seconded and, following a vote, it was:

RESOLVED: That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Committee held on 13 March 2024 be approved, as amended, as a true record of the proceedings and be signed by the Chair.

3 CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

Audio recording – 3 minutes 13 seconds

- (1) The Chair advised that, in accordance with Council Policy, the meeting would be recorded.
- (2) 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.

4 STAFF CONSULTATION FORUM MINUTES

Audio recording 3 minutes 32 seconds

The Service Director – Resources presented the item entitled 'SCF Minutes', alongside the Minutes from the meetings of March, April and May 2024 and highlighted the following:

- That the Staff Consultation Forum held monthly meetings where they discussed key issues. The Forum consisted of a Human Resources (HR) representative, the Service Director –Resources, the Managing Director and nominated members of staff. Any staff member can join the forum.
- There had been two restructures mentioned in the March agenda, in the Catering team and the Green Spaces team. The consultation period had now finished, and the restructures had been processed.
- The roof top solar panels had generated 10 megawatts of power per year for the years 2022 and 2023 and this was the expected level going forward.
- The SCF minutes included updates on green issues and promoted the IT drop-in sessions.

In response to a question from Councillor Claire Strong, the Service Director – Resources confirmed that during the Green Spaces restructure, one employee had reduced their working hours releasing a cost saving, however this saving had been appropriated to another employee, resulting in a neutral cost savings.

RESOLVED: That the Committee noted the minutes of the Staff Consultation Forum for March, April and May 2024.

5 HR INFORMATION NOTE

Audio recording – 7 minutes 19 seconds

The Human Resources Services Manager presented the Information Note entitled 'HR Update' and highlighted the following:

- That the number of advertised vacancies had decreased over the last 3 years, however the number of applicants for these posts had increased as detailed at paragraph 3.2 of the report. The vacancies for the Revenues Officer and the Planning Compliance Officer were particularly popular.
- The Careline technician position had now been filled. However there remained two hard to fill vacancies, the Estates Surveyor and the Senior Environmental Health Officer.
- The staff turnover rate was now below 9%, further details regarding this data was discussed in the next agenda item.
- There had been 228 responses to the staff survey, and work was ongoing to analyse the data. The survey did show that 90% of employees would recommend North Herts as an employer.
- The Unions submitted a pay claim in February for pay award that was for at least £3,000 or a 10% pay rise. The National Employers made a full and final offer of £1,290 in May for all pay points and an offer of 2.5% for those above the pay points. The Unions were recommending that employees reject this offer.
- There were 7 apprentices currently in employment with vacancies advertised on the website.
- HR attended an apprenticeship fair in March and highlighted the careers and apprenticeships available at North Herts. Historically there had been a high number of applicants for apprenticeship vacancies.
- The Inclusion group met quarterly and in April discussed neurodiversity in the workplace and made recommendations on how to support neurodivergent employees.
- The days lost as absences per employee, and the absence reasons were outlined at 3.9 of the report. Short term absences had fallen with the change in seasons with long term absences remaining the same. Support was being provided to Managers and staff who were absent for mental health reasons.

The following Members asked questions:

- Councillor Rhona Cameron
- Councillor Ruth Brown
- Councillor Daniel Allen
- Councillor Claire Strong

In response to questions, the Human Resources Manager stated that:

- There was a set budget for apprenticeships which was fully utilised.
- The apprenticeships had been successful in all service areas, with some apprentices being offered permanent positions.
- Work was ongoing with schools to promote the apprenticeship scheme and encourage work experience placements.
- The Council had joined the National Graduate Scheme and were currently interviewing for a graduate employee.
- The percentage of apprenticeships in permanent positions would be provided outside of this meeting.
- The new GrowZone system would be launched in July, with the system being more straight forward and easier to navigate.
- A discussion paper on Mental Health had been presented to the Committee in January 2024 and this would be forwarded to new Members.
- Regular articles were published to the Hub and the insight magazine to raise awareness of Mental Health support.
- HR provided support for Managers and employees with long term absences.
- The Estates Surveyor position had been covered temporarily by agency staff.
- The questions in the staff survey gave the opportunity for open text answers and these had generated large volumes of data. This data was taking longer than expected to analyse.
- It was anticipated that a summary of the staff survey would be presented at the next meeting of the Committee along with action plans.
- Work was ongoing to split the staff survey data into directorates, these would then be discussed with the relevant Service Directors. This information would then form part of the feedback and any action plans.

In response to questions, the Service Director – Resources advised that:

- The Estates Surveyor position was still being covered by agency staff however, a Senior Estates Surveyor had been employed for the last two months.
- Feedback from the staff survey would be provided at Staff Briefings and where required mini surveys would occur to provide further details.

Councillor Daniel Allen stated that there had been 228 responses to the staff survey, and this represented 70% of all staff.

The SCF Representative stated that the most recent Learning and Development morning had covered sustainability, and that highlights of the staff survey had been mentioned at the recent Staff Briefing.

6 DISCUSSION PAPER - RECRUITMENT UPDATE

Audio Recording – 28 Minutes 10 seconds

The HR Services Manager presented the Information Note entitled 'Recruitment Update' and advised that:

- The employment market was challenging in several services areas, including previously easy to recruit roles.
- The HR Team were working on improving how North Herts attracted and retained candidates.
- There was a national downward trend in vacancies, which generated a competitive market for good candidates.
- There had been changes to the social media adverts, including a new format, colours, and an increased use of images.
- The recruitment webpages had been updated to be more modern, informative and easier to navigate and, where possible they contained video contents and images of current employees and the district.
- The webpages highlighted that North Herts was a good employer and included a section with employee comments.
- There was an area on the website to focus on particular teams and it was anticipated that this would be used for hard to fill vacancies.
- There was improved content regarding how to apply for positions.
- For hard to fill vacancies and where there was a national skill shortage, candidates would be considered for career graded roles and they would be supported to develop with the role at the Council. These vacancies would be highlighted as Learning and Development opportunities on the webpage.
- Work was ongoing to modernise the recruitment documents and processes for both candidates and recruiting managers.
- Work was ongoing to create a candidate pack with more comprehensive details of the working terms and conditions and these would then be included in an online pack to candidates at the interview invite stage.
- A trial was being undertaken regarding transparent interviews, these provided candidates with their interview questions, 24 or 48 hours prior to the interview date. The results to date had been positive.
- A recruitment campaign aimed at encouraging people to work in Local Government had been trialled in north east England. There was a Local Government Association meeting in November, following which more details were expecting, including around potential funding.

The following Members asked questions:

- Councillor Rhona Cameron
- Councillor Ruth Brown
- Councillor Claire Strong

In response to questions, the HR Services Manager stated that:

- There was a policy to develop talent within the Council, and this was particularly relevant in the areas with hard to fill vacancies.
- Employees were supported and offered opportunities to study and progress.
- There was a work from home policy on the website, and it was important to understand the differences between flexibility and hybrid working especially in different service areas.
- Managers were encouraged to discuss flexible working with candidates, and to highlight the other benefits of working at North Herts. The flexible working details and all other benefits were included in the candidate pack.
- It was noted that some candidates were highly skilled in answering interview styled questions, however this did not always enable them to perform the required role.
- Questions for the transparent interviews were given to candidates 24 to 48 hours before the interview. Managers would be required to test and probe the answers and to establish further details at the interview.
- Some interviews required candidates to take part in tests or to provide a presentation.

- There was a policy linked to professional qualifications and this included an expected period of post qualification employment to ensure that there was an achieved benefit.
- It was expected that the staff survey would generate further information that could be utilised to increase candidates interests in working for North Herts.

In response to questions, the Service Director – Resources stated that:

- As a result of the previous staff survey, work commenced on making North Herts a more attractive place to work.
- There was work ongoing regarding genuine flexible working and ensuring that this was promoted to candidates and staff. This was especially relevant for hard to fill posts and to ensure a healthy work life balance.
- North Herts were a fully flexible employer and this needed to be emphasized throughout the recruitment stages.

Councillor Daniel Allen stated that the idea of a transparent interview was really enabling for a neurodiverse person.

The Unison Representative stated that they had taken part in transparent interviews in the past and that they found interviewees were more prepared and performed better, however they expressed some concerns over the use of AI for answers.

The SCF Representative stated that the Inclusion Group had recently discussed the pros and cons of transparent interviews and recommended that the Committee reviewed the minutes of the meeting. They also stated that the interview techniques of managers within North Herts had improved throughout their employment.

RESOLVED: That the Committee commented on and noted the Discussion Paper on Recruitment Update.

7 FUTURE DISCUSSION TOPICS

Audio recording – 45 minutes 43 seconds

The Chair led a discussion on future topics for the Committee to consider. The following Members took part in the discussion:

- Councillor Daniel Allen
- Councillor Claire Strong
- Councillor Ruth Brown
- Councillor Val Bryant

The following points were made as part of the discussion:

- Coaching and Mentoring would be a good topic for the next meeting.
- The Staff Survey and Coaching and Mentoring would be good topics for the next meeting.
- The Succession Planning and Development topic was important, and this had been highlighted by the recent vacancies in the Estates Department and was also critical for any Service Director roles.
- The Succession Planning and Development topic would be more relevant after the peer review.
- Key critical employees should have longer notice periods and this should aid in the succession planning.
- Employees often displayed a lack of motivation during their notice period.
- Confidentiality conflicts could require an employee to leave our employment sooner than expected.

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- That holiday leave can often shorten the notice period.

The Chair confirmed the topics of 'Coaching and Mentoring' and 'Staff Survey Results' for the next meeting of the Committee and this was agreed by all the Members present.

The meeting closed at 10.52 am

Chair