NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

JOINT STAFF CONSULTATIVE COMMITTEE

MEETING HELD IN THE VIA ZOOM
ON WEDNESDAY, 8TH JANUARY, 2025 AT 10.00 AM

MINUTES

Present:	*Councillors: (Chair), Ruth Brown (Vice-Chair), Val Bryant, Rhona Cameron and Claire Strong*
In attendance:	*Faith Churchill (Democratic Services Apprentice), Ian Couper (Service Director - Resources), James Lovegrove (Committee, Member and Scrutiny Manager) and Rebecca Webb (HR Services Manager)*
UNISON:	*Keith Fitzpatrick-Matthews*
Staff Consultation Forum :	*Reina Gendle*
Also Present:	*There were no Members of the public present.*

15 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Audio recording – 2 minutes

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Daniel Allen.

16 MINUTES - 9 OCTOBER 2024

Audio Recording – 2 minutes 39 seconds

Councillor Ruth Brown, as Chair, proposed and Councillor Rhona Cameron seconded and it was:

RESOLVED: That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Committee held on 9 October 2024 be approved as a true record of the proceedings and be signed by the Chair.

17 CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

Audio recording – 3 minutes 24 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.

18 SCF MINUTES

Audio recording: 3 minutes 48 seconds

The Service Director – Resources presented the item entitled ‘SCF Minutes’, alongside the Minutes from the meetings of October, November and December 2024 and highlighted the following:

- There had been increased attendance at meetings with more representatives volunteering.
- During October, thanks were given to all volunteers who had helped during the recent flooding in Hitchin and a request had been made for more volunteers to help with any incidents in the future.
- There had been thanks received in November for the Corporate Peer Challenge Review and the Officers who supported the process.
- A revised Conflict of Interest Policy was launched in December.
- In response to questions from Councillor Claire Strong, the Service Director – Resourses stated that the disinfectant spray was safe for staff use.

Councillor Ruth Brown expressed positive feedback to the IT team for their work to keep the Council safe from cyber attacks.

RESOLVED: That the Committee noted the minutes of the Staff Consultation Forum for October, November and December 2024.

19 HR INFORMATION NOTE

Audio recording: 7 minutes 28 seconds

The Human Resources Services Manager presented the Information Note entitled 'HR Update'.

- Recruitment key performance indicator shows number of vacancies filled first time and the comparison shows quarter two for year 2024/2025 vs quarter two for previous year.
- During the second quarter this year, there had been 6 more vacancies compared to the same period last year and two more vacancies were not yet filled.
- Various roles had been recruited to this quarter including some posts in hard to fill areas such as Environmental Health and IT.
- There were still some unfilled posts within this period.
- Work was continuing with recruiting managers where a post had yet to be filled, to look at the role and to suggest amendments or changes within the job description or the advertising process to achieve more success with future recruitment.
- A national recruitment campaign for local government was launched in November 2024. Councils were asked to support the campaign by using materials as a part of their recruitment adverts and an advert had been published in the December Outlook magazine. There were plans to continue to use the materials provided to enhance branding of the Council on social media and customer facing locations.
- Turnover had remained below 9% since April.
- National Pay Bargaining Outcome – pay award was agreed in October 2024. This had been backdated to April and paid to employees in November. The 2025 National Pay Bargaining had now started. There was a Regional Employees Briefing arranged for next month.
- There were 12 apprentices now in posts who were completing various apprenticeships. Areas included business admin, ICT technician, digital marketing and a digital support technician. The levy provided varied apprenticeships that fitted within the varied service areas of the Council.
- Graduates from the National Graduate Scheme started in October and have settled in well. Each graduate completed four rotations lasting six months each covering a variety of services and projects.
- A new learning management system launched in July. Since then, mandatory training on that platform was being phased in.
- Following the launch of the digital and data academy by the digital team, two additional employees had participated which brought the total to 22. Apologies for the error on the paper which stated 20.

- The Inclusion group met in November, where discussions were focused on the Peer Review, Gender Pay Gap and the White Ribbon Action Plan.
- Equalities, Diversity and Inclusion E-learning which was launched in October 2024 currently had an 80% completion rate. There were plans to work alongside the inclusion group and managers to increase this figure.
- A neurodiversity network launched in December 2024 with the first meeting being well attended.
- Update on Gender Pay Gap Data – the mean pay gap for 2024 was 14.6%. Overall, there had been a steady improvement in gender pay gap at the Council. The updated action plan included support for flexible working, the mentoring scheme for women and encouraging female applicants to apply for senior roles.
- Absence update – there had been slightly over nine days lost to sickness absence per full time employee. There was an increase in absences of up to one week for all types of absences except for COVID. HR provided support for all employees on long-term absence.

The following Members and Officer representatives asked questions:

- Councillor Rhona Cameron
- Councillor Claire Strong
- Councillor Ruth Brown
- Councillor Val Bryant
- Reina Gendle

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

- The annual salary budget for apprentices, managed by the leadership team, was maximised each year.
- The was a limitation on apprenticeship vacancies due to staff capacity to support them, some departments lack the capacity to manage apprentices.
- The gender pay gap was improving slowly. Changes being made were focused on the long-term goal, unless there were significant changes in terms of work force profile, there would be no quick change to the pay gap. Action plan was to make small incremental progress that were ongoing.
- Currently no target had been set. The ideal target for the gender pay gap would be 0% but it was more likely to be hovering around lower numbers. The Council was above average in terms of the pay gap compared to other Councils.
- ‘Confidence for women’ workshops had previously been run and had been well attended and received by staff. External adverts explicitly encouraged female applicants to apply for senior roles.
- The Council was taking steps towards transparent interviews and this was being trialled on various roles, but not on all of them. There was information on the website about how to request questions before an interview if an applicant required that adjustment. HR was encouraging recruiting managers to consider sharing interview questions beforehand. A trial was ongoing and feedback from candidates and managers was being reviewed.
- Job adverts were seen by all internal staff with particular encouragement for female applicants. Action plan included development focused on confidence for women and the mentoring scheme ensuring women had the confidence to apply. Flexibility was crucial for supporting women in senior positions.
- The current benchmarking tool did not cover what was required to make a comparison on turnover rate, HR was waiting for data to be on the benchmarking tool to be able to compare the turnover rate. It had been noted that a comparison was needed in turnover rate as well as in staff absence.
- More workshops for women were on the list for action but this was not currently a main focus.

- The Estate Surveyor vacancy had been temporarily filled. The HR team were in contact with recruiting manager to fill this vacancy on a permanent basis.

20 DISCUSSION PAPER - MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT

Audio recording: 40 minutes 41 seconds

Councillor Ruth Brown suggested going straight into the discussion on the Mental Health Support Paper.

The following Members asked questions:

- Councillor Ruth Brown
- Councillor Claire Strong

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

- There was no figure available for the uptake of the Employee Assistance Programme. Feedback received around counselling sessions had been positive.
- Plans for Mental Health Support Day – Highlighting of bite size E-learning and sign posting for external support. Looking at increased communications and potentially focused E-learning for staff. There was a suggestion for an open coffee morning to encourage staff interaction around mental health and wellbeing. There had been a suggestion to look into 'I'm Fine' campaign and 'Ask Twice' campaign.
- HR advised that they could consider an event to support World Mental Health Day on 10 October 2025, and Members offered to provide support at this event.

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

- In response to the staff survey the Council was looking into how managers could support staff during 1-1's in terms of mental health by asking 'Are You Okay?' in a meaningful way. Also how to support and equip managers to ask these questions.

RESOLVED: That the Committee commented on and noted the Discussion Paper on Mental Health Support.

21 SUGGESTED DISCUSSION TOPICS

Audio recording: 51 minutes 16 seconds

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

- Councillor Ruth Brown
- Councillor Claire Strong

The following points were made as part of the discussion:

- Priority for discussion topic for the meeting in June to be focused on unconscious bias in the workplace and micro aggressions.
- The relevant results of the Corporate Peer Challenge Action Plan.

In response to points raised in discussion, the Service Director – Resources advised that the staff survey results would be ready to be presented in March.

The Chair suggested two topics ‘Staff Survey Action Plan’ and ‘Neurodiversity in the Workplace’ for the next meeting of the Committee and this was agreed with Members present.

The meeting closed at 10.58 am

Chair