

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE  
HUMAN RESOURCES COMMITTEE HELD AS  
AN ONLINE MEETING ON  
WEDNESDAY 5 AUGUST 2020, AT 7.00 PM

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PRESENT: Councillor Rosemary Bolton (Chairman)  
Councillors P Ruffles, A Alder, S Bull,  
J Dumont, M McMullen and S Newton

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE:

Jackie Bruce	- Senior Development Officer
Vicki David	- Human Resources Officer
Peter Dickinson	- Health and Safety Officer
Helen Farrell	- Human Resources Officer
Peter Mannings	- Democratic Services Officer
Simon O'Hear	- Head of Human Resources and Organisational Development
William Troop	- Democratic Services Officer

119 APOLOGIES

No apologies for absence were received.

120 MINUTES - 12 FEBRUARY 2020

It was moved by Councillor Alder and seconded by Councillor Ruffles, that the Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 12 February 2020 be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman. After being put to the meeting and a vote taken, this motion was declared CARRIED.

**RESOLVED** – that the Minutes of the Committee meeting held on 12 February 2020 be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

121 CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chairman thanked everyone in attendance. She said she had been impressed at the manner in which Officers had continued working under difficult circumstances. Human Resources (HR) had seen an increased workload but had still given all the necessary support to staff and Members. The Wellbeing Survey results highlighted this fact and this was very impressive. The Chairman conveyed her thanks to HR and all the Council's staff.

122 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor Ruffles said that whilst it was not a pecuniary interest, he would like it noted that he was a Member of Hertford Town Council, which had been a recipient of some HR support as referred to in Item 17.

123 LOCAL JOINT PANEL - MINUTES: 5 FEBRUARY AND 1 JULY 2020

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Councillor Alder asked a question about staff working from home and the East Herts Together initiative.

The Head of HR and Organisational Development (OD) said that this matter would be addressed in a report later in the Agenda.

The Democratic Services Officer reminded the Chairman and Members that there was no provision to discuss matters arising from previous Minutes, but that questions could be asked during later items or following the conclusion of the Committee.

**RESOLVED** – that the Minutes of the meetings of the Local Joint Panel held on 5 February 2020 and 1 July 2020 be received.

124 SAFETY COMMITTEE MINUTES - 13 JANUARY 2020

Councillor Ruffles asked about the possibility of removing trees and allowing more disabled car parking spaces at Wallfields as referred to in the Minutes.

The Head of HR and OD said that there had been no tree removals. As the Minutes were from January 2020, they were somewhat outdated.

The Democratic Services Officer reminded the Chairman and Members that there was no provision to discuss matters arising from previous Minutes, but that questions could be asked during later items or at

the conclusion of Committee.

**RESOLVED** – that the Minutes from Safety Committee held on 13 January 2020 be received.

125 HUMAN RESOURCES MANAGEMENT STATISTICS - QUARTER 4 (JANUARY - MARCH 2020)

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The Head of HR and OD presented a report to the Committee on HR management statistics, covering the period January – March 2020. He said that this report was for Members' information only, and the annual report later in the agenda would give a better overview, although he would be happy to take any questions.

Councillor Dumont asked how the targets for diversity were determined.

The Head of HR and OD said he had previously made this enquiry himself, as the targets pre-dated his tenure at the Council. He understood that they were drawn from data from the 2011 Census and the targets would be updated once new data was available.

Councillor Alder said she was impressed with the courses HR offered to Members. She asked whether these were also offered to Parish and Town Councillors. This would also be an area in which Members could be proactive in promoting the Council's training programmes.

The Head of HR and OD said the HR Officer had been proactive in sending out offers of training to Parish and

Town Councils. However, engagement had been “patchy” and sometimes it was difficult to contact the councils due to changes in their contact details. However, expanding the reach and uptake of training was an area which HR had been working on.

The Head of HR and OD agreed it would be useful for Members to promote the training, especially given the value for money and knowledge of local authority matters the Council provided, compared to private providers of training.

**RESOLVED** – that the report be noted.

126 HEALTH AND SAFETY QUARTERLY REVIEW - QUARTER 4 REPORT (JANUARY - MARCH 2020)

The Health and Safety Officer presented a report to the Committee on Health and Safety covering the period January – March 2020. He said that the annual report later in the agenda would give a better overview of this matter.

**RESOLVED** – that the report be noted.

127 HEALTH AND SAFETY - ANNUAL REPORT 2019/20

The Health and Safety Officer presented the Health and Safety Annual Report 2019/20 to the Committee.

Councillor Newton said it was evident a significant amount of work had gone into this report. She said that this was impressive and thanked Officers.

The Head of HR and OD said that this was the first occasion this report had been created and that it was slightly regrettable that no benchmark to review the Council's performance against other local authority data could be established. More data would be sought to establish this going forward. He thanked the Health and Safety Officer for his work and said that all action points from the Health and Safety audit had now been addressed.

The Chairman said it was disappointing that only seven local authorities had responded to the request for benchmark data.

**RESOLVED** – that the report be noted.

128 HEALTH AND SAFETY QUARTERLY REVIEW - QUARTER 1  
(APRIL - JUNE 2020)

The Health and Safety Officer presented a report to the Committee on Health and Safety covering the period April - June 2020.

Councillor Dumont asked when Members could expect to see staff returning to Wallfields following the change in Government guidance on working from home. He hoped that staff with underlying health conditions, or that had previously been shielding, would receive appropriate levels of support when returning to the office.

The Health and Safety Officer said some staff had been working at Wallfields. The Council had put policies in place to ensure this was safe, for example by limiting

the number of staff allowed into the office at one time, and assigned seating in order to adhere to social distancing guidelines. These policies were being continually monitored, and with regard to first aider provision and fire safety. The results of the Wellbeing Survey had been factored in, and staff who indicated they were having significant problems working from home would be given priority in returning to the office, should they wish to. Any members of staff who had concerns about returning could seek support through the Wellbeing Hub.

The Head of HR and OD said that he wished to clarify that reference to the re-opening of Wallfields was in relation to the general public's access; Wallfields had remained open to a limited number of staff throughout lockdown. UNISON had been involved in checking the agreed safety policies in the office were being followed. He thanked the UNISON Branch Secretary, for her collaboration. In relation to staff that had been shielding, none would be forced to work from home or attend the office. HR was aware that the issue of staff returning to the office involved complexities and considerations, so this process would not be rushed.

Councillor Bull said he was surprised to hear that the small fire at Buntingford Service Centre was caused by a household battery, which he would not have expected to have 'slipped through the net'.

The Health and Safety Officer said that it was thought the battery had been damaged by a waste disposal vehicle. There had been a larger volume of general

waste being dealt with by the Council as residents were unable to visit recycling centres; this made detection of erroneous items more difficult. However, this incident had been recorded and consideration had been given to new fire safety measures.

**RESOLVED** – that the report be noted.

129 LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT REVIEW 2019/20

Helen Farrell, HR Officer, presented the Learning and Development Review 2019/20 to the Committee. She added that, whilst these figures were not available at the time the report was produced, it had been established that the Council delivered election training to 158 people, such as Poll Clerks.

Councillor Newton said that from a monetary viewpoint, the HR training budget appeared to be slightly overspent.

The HR Officer confirmed there had been a slight overspend in the training budget managed by Services, but the HR-managed budgets had stayed well within budget. However, there had been a positive outcome from this in that additional funds had been granted for that purpose. There were savings in other areas, such as use of the Apprentice Levy to contribute to funding training of a staff member who was studying for their qualifications at University.

The Head of HR and OD said that the key message was that the budgets had been managed very well, many budgets having an underspend.

Councillor Dumont asked how the Apprenticeship Programme had been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The HR Officer said that all nine of the Council's apprentices had continued employment with the Council. All of the Apprentices' college-based learning had moved online. The Council was duty-bound to delivering 20% on-job training to the Apprentices, but HR had been creative in achieving this in alternative ways, such as asking Apprentices to shadow online meetings.

The Head of HR and OD said there had been some difficulties, particularly regarding Planning Apprentices. Site visits had not been possible during lockdown. Further, the 'pipeline' of Planning Apprentices had been disrupted due to the framework for their development reaching the date by which it needed review and replacement. The new framework had not yet been established, meaning that the Council was not able to take on as many Planning Apprentices as planned – there was budget provision for six apprentices across Services, but only two were taken on. This was being reviewed to ensure sufficient levels of apprenticeships were re-established as this was a key element of creating suitably experienced Officers.

The Chairman thanked Officers for the provision of e-learning modules for Members and asked what the uptake had been.

The Head of HR and OD said the uptake had been

poor, only around 30% of Members having engaged with the e-learning. A meeting had been arranged with the Executive Member for Communities, the Executive Member for Resources, HR and with Democratic Services to review how the level of uptake could be increased.

**RESOLVED** – that the report be noted.

130 ANNUAL TURNOVER REPORT 2019/20

Vicki David, HR Officer, presented the Annual Turnover Report 2019/20 to the Committee.

Councillor Ruffles said that it seemed from the main trends, an annual employee turnover rate of 10.1% and an even spread of reasons for staff departure, that tackling levels of turnover was a success for the Council. He asked whether this was the correct conclusion and whether there were any areas Members should be concerned about. Further, he said that although 65% of staff who took the exit survey were happy with the training they received, this meant 35% were not, and he asked why this was.

The Head of HR and OD said Officers intended to review and reduce the selection of 'other' as a reason for departure as this did not provide useful insight. Further, whilst it could be seen there were a number of staff leaving for more senior positions and promotions elsewhere, this could be seen as a positive, as staff were clearly developing well professionally at the Council. It was also inevitable to some extent, given the size of the Council, that not all staff would be able

to progress to the extent they would like.

The HR Officer said the current format of the exit questionnaire did not allow HR to understand why departing staff were unhappy with training they had received.

Councillor Newton said that the importance of the exit questionnaire had previously been impressed on the Committee, so it was disappointing to hear it did not give the insight needed. She asked that this be amended accordingly.

The Head of HR and OD said he would add provision to the questionnaire for departing staff to express why they were unhappy with training. However, some staff inevitably left as they were not a good fit for the role and therefore might leave negative feedback even if it was not warranted. He said that allowing departing staff the opportunity to give more feedback did not mean they would.

Councillor Ruffles said that in Planning, vacancies were still being held, due to the notion of the upcoming restructure of the Planning department. However, this meant the Council was not currently seeking out the staff it needed. He said he would like to see some progress in this regard.

The Head of HR and OD said the restructure had been somewhat delayed by the COVID-19 pandemic. It should also be borne in mind that The Head of Planning and Building Control had only been in post for approximately a year and needed to restructure

the department as she thought appropriate. HR could not push a department into a restructure, only support the process when it was in progress. There had been some progress already, but Members' comments would be passed on.

**RESOLVED** – that the report be noted.

131 EMPLOYEE HEALTH AND WELLBEING REPORT 2019/20

Vicki David, HR Officer, presented the Employee Health and Wellbeing Report 2019/20 to the Committee.

Councillor Dumont asked whether there had been a drop off in short-term casual sickness during lockdown, given the majority of staff were working from home. Furthermore, he asked whether working from home and flexible working were being considered as longer-term policies.

The HR Officer said there had been a reduction in short-term casual sickness. She said staff who were “not feeling 100%” might be more likely to work from home given they did not face a commute and other factors. Flexible hours might have also contributed to this reduction, in that staff could still make up their hours even if starting slightly later, for example. HR were considering how lessons could be carried forward. For example, some jobs which had previously been considered incompatible with working from home could clearly be done from home. There were also other benefits, such as decreased levels of stress amongst staff.

The Chairman said that stress and mental health problems would be more difficult to detect in staff who were working from home. She asked how it would be picked up if a member of staff was struggling.

The HR Officer said it was important that managers kept up regular one-to-one meetings with their team members to keep track of their wellbeing. There were also other measures in place to promote the maintenance of good mental health amongst staff, such as the recent Mental Health Awareness Week campaign and provision of mental health first aiders.

The Head of HR and OD said the Wellbeing Survey had been valuable as follow up contact was being made with staff that were identified to be struggling. Whilst stress or mental health issues were more difficult to detect in staff working remotely, use of Zoom and other video call software at least meant that managers could see staff when talking to them, which was helpful. There were several other channels of support, such as UNISON and informal socialising amongst teams.

Councillor Newton asked whether there was an option for staff to attend the office for one-to-ones or other meetings if they wanted to.

The Head of HR and OD said this was an option available at the discretion of managers and staff. The outdoor space at Wallfields had been used extensively by staff for meetings during lockdown.

Councillor Alder congratulated the HR team for having

been shortlisted for a Reward and Employee Benefits Association (REBA) Wellbeing award, and asked what the outcome had been. The Head of HR and OD said unfortunately East Herts District Council had not won the award but were pleased to have been shortlisted as a finalist.

**RESOLVED** – that the report be noted.

132 HR MANAGEMENT STATISTICS - QUARTER 1 (APRIL - JUNE 2020)

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Vicki David, HR Officer, presented a report on HR management statistics for the period April 2020 – June 2020 to the Committee.

The Head of HR and OD said the decreased level of staff departure was likely due to the fact staff were less likely to change jobs during the uncertainty of a pandemic. Similarly, sickness absence had dropped as previously discussed. Members should not expect this reduction to be permanent.

**RESOLVED** – that the report be noted.

133 STANDBY AND OUT OF HOURS POLICY

The Head of HR and OD presented a report on the updated Standby and Out of Hours Policy. He said that this report had been approved by the Local Joint Panel (LJP). Members of this Committee had also had advanced sight of the document. He highlighted that the key change was to cease the Corporate Standby Rota, due to a reduction in usage of the scheme and

lack of value for money.

Councillor Ruffles said he was nervous about this change, especially in respect of prospective call outs relating to Traveller communities. This had previously been a problem area for the Council. As far as he was aware, there were legal procedures in relation to sites which were inhabited by Traveller communities, and he was concerned the Council would not now have adequate staff to facilitate this process.

The Head of HR and OD said the out of hours provision was previously a manned phone line, which would then pass on any out of hours referrals to the relevant teams the following day. This system was being replaced by an email address, so referrals could still be received out of hours, and there would be no real effect on the subsequent action taken by the Council. Call outs relating to Traveller communities would continue to be managed by the Leadership Team Out of Hours service and would not therefore be affected.

It was moved by Councillor Newton and seconded by Councillor Alder that the recommendation, as detailed, be approved. After being put to the meeting and a vote taken, this motion was declared CARRIED.

**RESOLVED** – that the changes made to the Standby and Out of Hours Policy following the decision to cease the Corporate Standby Rota, be approved.

134 GENERAL LEAVE POLICY

Vicki David, HR Officer, presented the updated General Leave Policy to the Committee. She said that statutory changes meant the Council needed to update the policy to include statutory parental bereavement leave. The Council already offered the first week of this leave on full pay. UNISON had requested that this provision be extended to a second week. The request had been accepted by the Local Joint Panel (LJP). The LJP also supported a proposal to remove the 26 week length of service qualifier for this entitlement.

It was moved by Councillor Alder and seconded by Councillor McMullen that the recommendations, as detailed, be approved. After being put to the meeting and a vote taken, this motion was declared CARRIED.

**RESOLVED** – that (A) the update to the General Leave Policy to reflect legislation changes from 6 April 2020 regarding statutory parental bereavement leave and pay be approved;

(B) that the proposal to enhance the second statutory week of bereavement pay to full pay as requested by UNISON and agreed by Leadership Team and LJP be approved; and

(C) that the removal of the statutory qualifying period of 26 weeks for the second week of full pay, be approved.

135 HR AND PAYROLL TEAM UPDATE

The Head of HR and OD presented the HR and Payroll Team Update to the Committee. He briefly summarised the contents of the report. Specifically, he mentioned:

- The Council's drive for consistency in customer service standards, such as uniform email signatures and voicemails.
- The Council had been working on building its online visibility and presence, such as on recruitment sites like Indeed.
- As previously mentioned, some staff had returned to the office, and others were supported by giving access to local Launchpad facilities.
- The Council would proceed with plans to buy a number of influenza vaccination job vouchers for staff, which had been supported by the previous fall in short-term absence.
- There had been ongoing issues with the payroll system, which had led to talks about the provider hosting the system itself. However, as this was a shared system with Stevenage Borough Council, the partner authority would need to agree to any changes.

Councillor Ruffles said that the tone of the report was positive and Members could be pleased about this. However, the report contained some jargon which could make it difficult for the general public to understand.

The Head of HR and OD said he would endeavour to

ensure future reports had further explanatory wording alongside any industry-specific language.

Councillor Alder said it would be helpful for staff voicemails to be kept up to date as in some cases the messages were months out of date. The Head of HR and OD said that the Infrastructure Contributions and Spend Manager had been leading work to improve this problem as part of the East Herts Together initiative.

Councillor Dumont said he was encouraged to see the uptake of influenza vaccinations. This protection was particularly important this year so that there would be no potential confusion between symptoms of influenza and COVID-19 amongst any unwell staff.

The HR Officer said that in previous years, only those with underlying health conditions would have been eligible for a free influenza vaccination via their GP, but this year anyone over the age of 50 would qualify, subject to demand, which would be made clear to staff.

The Head of HR and OD said previously some staff had taken the voucher simply because it was more convenient than visiting their GP. However, this would be discouraged if the staff member was eligible for a free vaccination with their GP as this was not the best use of the Council's resources.

**RESOLVED** – that the report be noted.

The meeting closed at 8.40 pm