

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

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

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE:

Jackie Bruce	- Infrastructure Contributions and Spend Manager
Peter Dickinson	- Health and Safety Officer
Simon O'Hear	- Head of Human Resources and Organisational Development
William Troop	- Democratic Services Officer
Brad Wheeler	- Senior Licensing and Enforcement Officer

227 APOLOGIES

No apologies for absence were received.

228 MINUTES - 5 AUGUST 2020

It was moved by Councillor Alder and seconded by
Councillor Newton, that the Minutes of the meeting of

the Committee held on 5 August 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 5 August 2020 be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

229 CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chairman alluded to the ongoing and evolving COVID-19 pandemic and the pressure this had put on staff, including Human Resources. She thanked Officers for their hard work and referred in particular to the impressive implementation of the new rates of pay, and all of the associated work which had been carried out.

230 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

231 SAFETY COMMITTEE MINUTES - 3 AUGUST 2020

Councillors Alder and Newton asked about multiple items within the Minutes upon which feedback had been invited from the Committee, and asked if any progress had been made.

The Head of Human Resources and Organisational Development (HR and OD) said there had been another Safety Committee meeting recently, but there had not been sufficient time to prepare the Minutes

for presentation to the Committee. However, a number of policies had now been finalised and the Minutes detailing this would be presented at the next meeting of the Committee.

RESOLVED – that the Minutes of the meeting of the Safety Committee held on 3 August 2020, be received.

232 HEALTH AND SAFETY QUARTERLY STATISTICS/UPDATES
(QUARTER TWO)

The Health and Safety Officer presented a report to the Committee on Health and Safety covering the period July – September 2020.

Councillor Ruffles referred to the Chairman's earlier comments thanking Officers for their work during the COVID-19 pandemic. He asked whether there were any particular organisations or service areas that the Committee should formally place its thanks to on record.

The Head of HR and OD said all staff had contributed and it would not be viable to single them all out for praise, but Environmental Health, the Health and Safety Officer, Revenues and Benefits and Customer Services had all played an important role.

The Chairman asked that the Committee's thanks to the aforementioned individuals and services be placed on record.

Councillors Ruffles and Newton asked about the

payment kiosk at Wallfields. Councillor Ruffles said some residents in his ward had struggled without this service.

The Head of HR and OD said that residents could still make cash payments at Post Office branches. Most payments to the Council had been taken online and the demand for in-person services had dropped further in view of the pandemic; very few residents had been affected by the closure of the payment kiosk.

Councillor Newton asked why the rate of accidents at Grange Paddocks leisure centre was higher than at other sites. The Health and Safety Officer said that this was due to the higher level of footfall at this site, due to the size of the leisure centre and the extent of the facilities there.

RESOLVED – that the report be noted.

233 HUMAN RESOURCES QUARTERLY STATISTICS (QUARTER TWO)

The HR Officer presented a report to the Committee on HR statistics covering the period July – September 2020.

Councillor Ruffles asked why there had been a reduced level of sickness. He asked whether this was due to reduced spread of other illnesses aside from COVID-19 or a lack of reporting when staff had been working from home.

The Head of HR and OD said that when staff had been

working from home, there were fewer barriers to prevent them working if they were suffering from a minor illness. Lack of a commute and more flexible working arrangements potentially meant staff had been more willing to continue working. Symptom reporting had likely been enhanced due to the Council's tracking of potential COVID-19 symptoms and infections. The dialogue between staff and their managers had also arguably improved, given there had been an increasing acceptance that staff's mental well-being was important and may be effected by the ongoing pandemic.

The Chairman commented on the reduction in long-term absence. She also asked about provision of training and whether this had been available to complete remotely. The Head of HR and OD said it had and would continue to be.

Councillor Newton asked why there had been so many applications for the role of Sustainability Policy and Projects Officer. She also asked about the seemingly low number of staff attending training courses.

The HR Officer said the large number of applications was likely a combination of a higher number of people in the job market due to the pandemic, and that sustainability was a specialism growing in popularity and importance.

The Head of HR and OD said the reported number of staff attending courses was only for the financial quarter, rather than the whole year as had previously been reported. The number was also made up solely

of online courses, as others had been postponed due to the pandemic. However, there had been other informal sessions not accounted for in the figures, such as to support staff's mental well-being.

Councillor Dumont asked whether the decrease in staff turnover could be attributed to an increased appreciation for job security during the pandemic.

The Head of HR and OD said that the Council had significantly reduced staff turnover prior to the pandemic, but that the pandemic was also likely to be a further contributory factor.

The HR Officer said she believed that the work that had been done to support staff's well-being also contributed to the reduction.

RESOLVED – that the report be noted.

234 ANNUAL STAFF EQUALITIES REPORT

The Head of HR and OD presented the report to the Committee in the absence of the HR Officer.

Councillor Dumont said he was pleased to see plans to acquire software which could facilitate name-blind recruitment. He asked whether staff relied on the Council's mental first aiders and knew how to access this support, which was of increased importance. He was concerned that indicators of staff struggling may be missed when working remotely.

The Head of HR and OD said that engagement with

mental health first aiders had been better when staff were working from the office, although staff did know who the first aiders were, and there was a diverse range of staff engaged in delivery of the scheme. There had been efforts to remind staff of groups and sessions to support their well-being.

The Infrastructure Contributions and Spend Manager said that it was very useful to have the mental first aiders and that lots of staff used the buddy system which was available. As UNISON Branch Secretary, she also reminded Members of the well-being support offered by the union.

The Head of HR and OD said that managers had been given guidance on how to support their team remotely, such as arranging regular video calls so that they could gauge their well-being more effectively than via a telephone call or email.

Councillor Alder asked about the variety of religions that were practised by staff across the Council and queried whether their needs were adequately supported, such as by allowing time and a space in which to pray.

The Head of HR and OD said there was a reflection room at Wallfields and the Council operated a flexi-time scheme which could be utilised to make time for prayer.

Councillors Newton and Dumont asked about the Council's monitoring of protected characteristics amongst its staff and how this information was used.

The Head of HR and OD said the Council strongly encouraged staff to declare this information as the Council was duty-bound to monitor this under the Equality Act. The purpose was not to monitor specific individuals, but to build an overall picture of the workforce, although unavoidably some staff were wary of providing this information. Missing information was unhelpful to HR as it meant there was potential for them to create initiatives to increase engagement with certain minority groups when recruiting, whilst there may already be current staff members who belonged to this group, unbeknownst to HR. The Head of HR and OD added that further equalities information would be available on residents in future as Hertfordshire County Council had recently employed an Equalities Officer who would work with East Herts.

The Chairman and Councillor Ruffles said that they were pleased to see the move towards implementing unconscious bias training and name-blind recruitment.

The Head of HR and OD thanked Claire Kirby, Human Resources Officer for her work in producing the report. HR were investing in an online product to use during recruitment which would make name-blind recruitment possible.

The Chairman asked whether spot checking performance development reviews (PDR) had become more difficult when working remotely.

The Head of HR and OD said that a number of staff had started the PDR process before they began

working from home, and this process had often been continued via video calls, as had appraisals and one-to-one meetings with managers. Spot checking had been more difficult but engagement with these processes had increased again after an initial reduction.

It was moved by Councillor Ruffles and seconded by Councillor Dumont 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 report be noted;

(B) that the recommendations set out in the 2020/21 action plan be approved; and

(C) that the proposal for the Annual Equalities report for 2020-2021 to be reported to the July 2021 meeting of the Committee, be approved.

235 HUMAN RESOURCES AND PAYROLL TEAM UPDATE

The Head of HR and OD presented the report to the Committee.

The Chairman said that this was a good report and again praised Officers for their hard work on the implementation of the new rates of pay. The Chairman asked if the East Herts Together initiative had been continuing as planned and whether the timeframe allotted for the staff survey was realistic given the various challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Head of HR and OD conveyed his thanks in

particular to Gill Coleman, Payroll Manager, for her hard work. The East Herts Together initiative had been continuing as planned despite some earlier difficulties. The staff survey had recently been discussed with the Leadership Team (LT). It was proposed that the staff survey would be combined with a further survey to assess the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and working remotely on staff. It had become clear since the last survey that some staff had been struggling. The combined survey would be conducted in December, with the questions to be finalised in consultation with LT. The last well-being survey had a 93% response rate, which HR wanted to capitalise on. This survey would also allow HR to follow up with staff on any negative feedback, which had not been possible after previous anonymised staff surveys.

Councillor Bull asked whether the proposal to make ten Hertford Theatre staff redundant was wise, especially in view of the recent extension of the furlough scheme, and said the Council may benefit by retaining these staff. He also questioned the proposal to re-assign the staff to COVID-19 marshal roles for the remainder of their employment, given that this could potentially put staff at risk due to anti-lockdown sentiment amongst some.

The Head of HR and OD said there had been some further consideration given to this since the report was written as some staff had expressed concerns over this role, although they would not be put at risk. It had been recognised that some staff's skillset would not be best suited to this role, so alternative administrative roles had been considered for some. The furlough

scheme did not totally negate the proposal as there was still a cost to the Council under this scheme. If staff were redeployed, they would receive 100% of their pay. These proposals were still subject to change during the consultation period.

The Infrastructure Contributions and Spend Manager, as Unison Branch Secretary, said UNISON would work collaboratively to ensure that any redeployments were mutually beneficial to the Council and the employees. The situation in relation to the pandemic and the furlough scheme was fast-moving. Whilst UNISON understood the difficult decisions to be made in relation to Hertford Theatre, it would work to ensure Officers were protected as far as possible.

Councillor Dumont asked whether the staff that had been furloughed would be allowed to continue with this in light of the scheme's extension.

The Head of HR and OD said that this was still to be considered as the extension of the scheme had only been announced recently. However, the furlough scheme would likely only stave off redundancies, some of which had been inevitable due to the restructuring of Hertford Theatre and the impending closure to allow refurbishment works. Presently, redeployment was favoured as there were roles which the Council needed to fill and this would mean staff remained on full pay and could potentially secure a permanent position in a new area.

Councillor Alder asked whether under the furlough scheme the Council were paying 20% off staff wages

with Central Government paying 80%. She also asked how many staff had been participating in the daily mindfulness sessions.

The Head of HR and OD said until August employers paid staff 80% of their wages and then claimed this back from Central Government, including national insurance and pension contributions. However, the right to reclaim national insurance and pension contributions had then been curbed. Theatre staff had initially been asked if they preferred to be furloughed or redeployed. All but one staff member chose to be furloughed on 80% pay. The Head of HR and OD said he did not have exact attendance figures for the mindfulness sessions, but was aware they had been popular.

The Infrastructure Contributions and Spend Manager said she had attended the mindfulness sessions and found them very useful. She also assured Members that a meeting between herself and the Head of HR and OD was due to take place and the permutations of the furlough extension would be discussed.

The Chairman said she was reassured by the hardworking and caring nature of the HR Officers.

The Head of HR and OD thanked the Chairman for this praise and reiterated that HR would continue to support staff as much as possible, including Hertford Theatre staff.

Councillor Newton asked for further information on the mindfulness sessions. The Head of HR and OD

agreed to provide this to Members following the meeting at the suggestion of the Chairman.

Councillor Dumont said he was happy to see the budget limit on the cycle to work scheme had been doubled. Exercise was important in supporting staff's well-being.

The Head of HR and OD said this increase had partly been agreed to allow staff to purchase electric bicycles, but there would still certainly be benefits in supporting staff well-being as well as contributing to sustainability targets.

RESOLVED – that the report be noted.

The meeting closed at 8.17 pm

Chairman
Date