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Recruitment, Retention and Leaver Processes Task and Finish Panel  
12 February 2024

WELWYN HATFIELD COUNCIL

Minutes of a meeting of the RECRUITMENT, RETENTION AND LEAVER PROCESSES TASK AND FINISH PANEL held on Monday 12 February 2024 at 5.30 pm in the Chestnut Board Room, Campus East, Welwyn Garden City, Herts, AL8 6AE

PRESENT: Councillors

A.Hellyer, A.Nix, R.Platt, P.Smith, C.Stanbury and  
K.Thorpe

OFFICIALS

PRESENT: K.Ng, Chief Executive  
J Pilbeam, Head of Human Resources and Organisational  
Development  
R. Misir, Democratic Services Officer

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7. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Cllr Birleson.

8. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

9. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 29 January 2024 were approved as a correct record.

10. PRESENTATION

The Panel was taken through a presentation which is attached with these minutes. Key points raised were as follows:

**Homeworking:**

- Consolidation of office space has led to increased income and lowered overheads.
- The presentation provides a summary of workplace attendance. Almost 20% of staff are in the workplace 5 days a week with a further 65% in between 2 – 4 days per week. 11.5% of staff work at Campus West and the museum etc who are unable to work from home.

**Sickness Management**

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- Support for staff health and wellbeing is provided through access to the Employee Assistance Programme, counselling, wellbeing events, mental health awareness training etc. A health passport has been introduced for staff with long term disabilities/ health conditions; should their manager change, relevant information is available to the new manager.
- The Council is a Mindful employer (meaning it supports a positive approach towards mental health) and a Disability Confident employer (a guarantee that disabled prospective employees who meet the essential criteria are offered an assessment for the role; the focus is on what they can do rather than what they cannot). The Access to Work scheme can support individuals back into the workplace or to remain in the workplace. However some employees do not want their disability recorded.
- Sickness absence data was shown in the presentation. There tended to be more sickness in winter. Sickness figures can be skewed by someone who is absent for an extended period and some staff currently have long term sickness absences. The main reason for sickness absence is mental health/ anxiety/ stress and depression. Sometimes staff have cited work-related stress when action is taken against them which can lead to a period of absence. A member noted mental health issues were a significant cause of absence and wondered if this was indicative of why some staff might be leaving. Officers noted this may not always be work-related and it can be hard to find the right intervention; it can also take longer to recover from such issues which can skew absence figures. Use of GoodShape (an outsourced service) means HR is immediately aware if someone is absent for these reasons and can make referrals as soon as the issues are clear. It is thought people are reporting stress more and there is more talk about wellbeing - some people are likely to be less resilient than others. The Council tries to give affected employees the opportunity to speak with professionals as well as identifying how they can support themselves, and has a clear monitoring process.
- Responding to a comment about how employers do not always know when staff are stressed, officers noted stress is often a combination of factors; it can take a while for people to return to work and medication can take time to take effect. Staff are given flexibility with appointments in order that they can receive professional support.
- Sickness absence fell during the pandemic but has now gone up. Due to the nature of their roles, not all staff can work from home if they are a little under the weather.
- The Council monitors sickness closely, utilising quality conversations and specialist help in order to provide support. Many people were unable to get NHS appointments during the pandemic and so are only now absent for surgery. If staff are supported when they are first absent it aids their recovery and helps keep them in the workplace, and the Council's approach is to look at what they can do, not what they cannot. Consideration can be given to providing cover if someone is known to be on long-term sick but usually colleagues pick up their work. While the Council has a duty of care to the individual, it also has one to those remaining at work.

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- Sickness pay is in accordance with national terms and conditions. Hertfordshire County Council had introduced a policy whereby staff were unpaid during the first two days of sickness absence and their sickness rates increased as a result; they have now reverted to previous arrangements. Employees with more than 5 years service are eligible for 6 months full pay followed by 6 months half pay. Sickness absence triggers are as follows: 6 days in a 12 month period (pro rata for part time employees), any block of absence exceeding 20 days, and any noted pattern of absence. Staff who are sick call GoodShape and speak to a nurse.
- Sometimes when it is not possible to find suitable alternative employment for staff, their contract will need to be terminated. Those in the pension scheme may be able to access ill health retirement but that it is increasingly difficult.
- In terms of sickness absence, the Council is probably in the middle ranking compared with other local authorities. Councils have different inhouse services, so some councils will have more manual or operational staff who can have more absences due to physical issues, whereas office workers can sometimes work from home if they have a minor ailment. It was agreed that comparative data would be provided to members.

#### **Staff Benefits, Development and Reward**

- Members were given a flavour of courses that would be held over the next month which included statutory and mandatory training as well as wellbeing support. Directors stipulate what skills a postholder needs. Each directorate has a training budget and there is also a central budget for softer skills. There is a Course of Study policy to support employees with the cost of a qualification where appropriate, and an apprenticeship fund that supports trainees. While there is not a stipulated amount of training staff need to periodically complete, HR monitors who has attended courses (which staff can access via MyLearn). There can be bespoke training which would be decided at director level and would come from the CPD budget. It was **agreed** that officers would try to obtain figures about how our training budget compares to that of other local councils.
- Staff benefits and rewards were itemised in the presentation and included competitive salaries, pay progression and staff discounts. The Panel also noted the Council's leave allowance, flexitime system and the opportunity to buy or sell annual leave. Staff are asked in February whether they wish to buy or sell up to 5 days of leave (buying 5 days means they lose 5 days salary over a 12 month period). Some staff do not have access to flexitime and appreciate the opportunity for additional leave and others would rather be paid for selling it. There were more requests this year to buy rather than sell leave.
- There are long service awards, employee recognition awards and opportunities for learning and development, as well as access to the Local Government Pension Scheme. Hybrid working options are available in most roles; access to green travel options (including the cycle to work scheme, Arriva travel discount etc) are available; and HR works with local

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retailers who promote benefits to staff. Members commended these benefits and it was noted that while local government salaries may not be the highest, the overall combination of benefits was not available to other employers in the borough. The Council's recruitment website has been redesigned and highlights the benefits of working for it.

- There is not a bonus scheme as equal pay means it would be hard for this to be implemented fairly across the organisation. Members noted that recognition awards meant staff were recognised for exceptional performance.
- Members discussed working from home and officers reflected that while it needs to meet the Council's business needs (and staff need to be on standby to come into the office if, say, cover is needed) there are advantages in that it avoids commuting time and means the organisation can recruit from a wider area as it will attract people who do not want or are unable to work from the office 5 days per week. A member commented that disengaged staff will not want to work wherever they are located; as far as working from home or the office was concerned, some people welcomed the social interaction in the office while others appreciated the time not spent commuting. However he observed working from home might be a concern for new starters as it was important they felt comfortable to ask questions.
- Members noted working from home had been custom and practice prior to the pandemic and **agreed** it would be helpful to have a statement about how this worked and the approach behind it.
- A member noted that staff benefits were extensive and asked how the Council was able to differentiate itself in recruitment terms if the same benefits were offered by other local authorities. Officers advised they looked at what other councils were offering nationally and broke down the benefits – for example, retirement would be a key issue for some staff whereas a reduced carbon footprint might be an attraction for others. It is also about having a brand for the Council, ie promoting our achievements, being a welcoming employer and an inclusive organisation with training opportunities and good work life balance. A member commented that this was similar to some private sector employers who also wanted to showcase what they could offer. It was **agreed** members would be sent a link to the new recruitment website which featured stories from employees about why they had chosen to work at the Council.
- A member highlighted the value of staff surveys and noted it had been a while since the last one.

### **Flexible Working**

- Employees have a legal right to request flexible working from their first day of service. Two requests can be made per person per year and the Council needs a business reason to decline. There are 140 different working patterns in the Council which demonstrates its willingness to retain dedicated staff who may have commitments at a certain time and also means staff can be available for customers for longer periods of time.

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- The flexitime scheme was explained, which is by management agreement.

#### **Leaver Process and Feedback**

- Most staff have a 4 – 12 week notice period although staff on long term sickness absence may not be able to work but remain employed for the duration of their notice.
- Exit interviews explore the reason for leaving including the role, management, and perception of the Council, as well as if the employee left during their probationary period. The only time exit interviews do not take place is if the employee is being made redundant or dismissed. Figures were shared showing job satisfaction: 90% of staff felt their skills were effectively utilised, 62% felt their salary was fair and 83% felt they had the necessary skills to undertake their duties.
- Most staff's experience of the Council is positive (61% rated it good and 25% rated it excellent) and they would recommend the organisation as an employer.
- Jadu is a case management system which makes it is clear who is doing what work and how it is being progressed when someone leaves; a member noted it provided hard data about people's workloads which might give comfort about productivity wherever staff were working from.
- Use of shared drives mean if someone is out of the office, progress on work is easily identified. It is down to each manager to manage the leaver process including identifying what they want to happen to the leaver's emails (eg have them forwarded for a month).

It was **agreed** the Panel's terms of reference would be sent to the Chair ahead of the next meeting in order that he could discuss items for the next meeting with the Head of Human Resources and Organisational Development.

11. SUCH OTHER BUSINESS AS, IN THE OPINION OF THE CHAIRMAN, IS OF SUFFICIENT URGENCY TO WARRANT IMMEDIATE CONSIDERATION

There were no items of urgent business.

12. DATE OF NEXT MEETING:

Monday 26 February 2024 at 5.30 pm, Chestnut Room

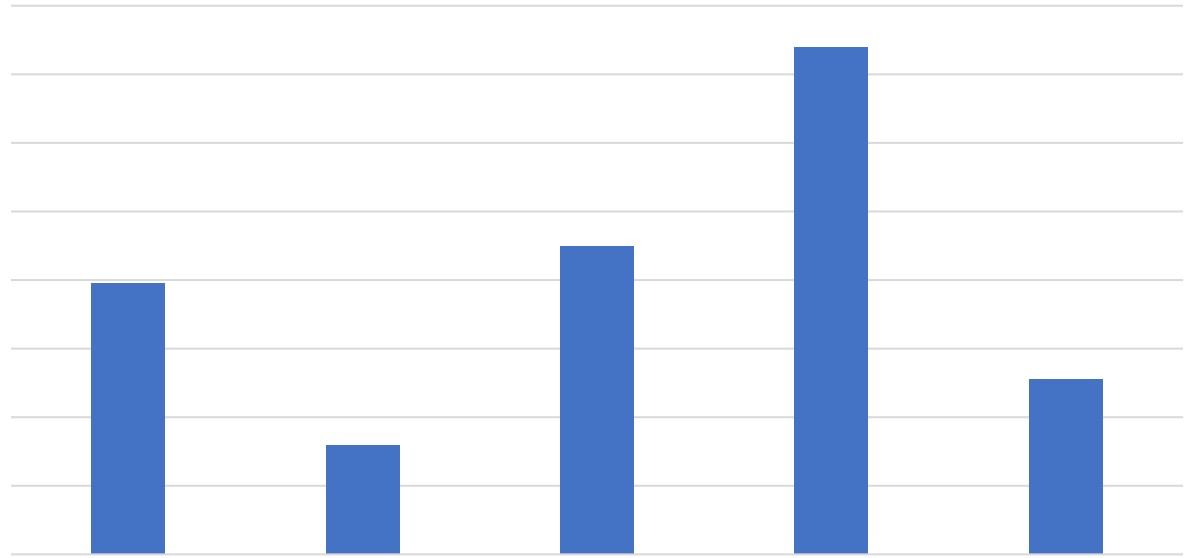
Meeting ended at 6.55 pm

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