

HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES of the meeting of the EMPLOYMENT COMMITTEE held in THE CIVIC SUITE (LANCASTER/STIRLING ROOMS), PATHFINDER HOUSE, ST MARY'S STREET, HUNTINGDON, PE29 3TN on Wednesday, 24 June 2026

PRESENT: Councillor A Blackwell – Chair.

Councillors L Ascroft, L Dewey-Beckett, J Francis, D Henly, D McIlwain, P Simpson and S Smith.

APOLOGIES: None.

4 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 11th February 2026 and 21st May 2026 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

5 MEMBERS' INTERESTS

No interests were declared.

6 Workforce Information Report (Quarter 4)

The Committee received and noted the report for Quarter 4 Human Resources (HR) matters impacting on the performance of the Council during the period 2nd December 2025 to 31st March 2026. The report included the latest position and trends relating to employee numbers, salary costs and sickness absence. A copy of the report is appended in the Minute Book.

The Committee heard that the workforce totalled 723, with the fulltime equivalent (FTE) working out at 669.09 Officers in Quarter 4. The figure represented a decrease from the previous Quarter. The period ended with an underspend of £2 million and an overspend of £1.92 million on Contractor and Agency costs.

It was confirmed that 32 individuals left the Council in Quarter 4, which was a slight decrease from the previous Quarter. The overall turnover was 16.95% in Quarter 4. Of these, six were retirements with a combined service period of 107 years. Measures to reduce turnover included enhanced exit interview arrangements better to understand reasons for leaving, regular one-to-one meetings between managers and employees, and the reintroduction of a formal incremental progression process linked to performance discussions. Consideration would be given to providing the Committee with anonymised information from exit interviews on the principal reasons for employees leaving the organisation.

Advertised vacancies decreased slightly from 72 to 67 in Quarter 4, following the significant recruitment activity undertaken in Quarter 3 to support the Food Waste Service launch. Most vacancies were within One Leisure, reflecting the

transfer of Sawtry Leisure Centre and seasonal staffing requirements. Application levels remained strong, although targeted recruitment campaigns continued for hard-to-fill roles, including Planning and ICT.

No new apprenticeships commenced during the Quarter. However, apprenticeship activity continued through course completions and the hosting of an apprenticeship event at Burgess Hall. The Leadership Development Programme had been successfully completed and had now moved into business-as-usual delivery. Following the success of a previous graduate placement, recruitment activity for a new graduate placement took place during April.

The Committee discussed the low balance of the Council's Apprenticeship Levy, whether any levy funding had expired, the proportion of funds utilised, and how apprenticeship programmes contributed to longer-term recruitment and retention. While no levy funding had expired, available funds had been fully utilised to support apprenticeship and management development programmes, including Level 5 and Level 7 qualifications. Levy funds were being rebuilt to provide future apprenticeship opportunities. Additional levy funding had been secured from other councils where required. All apprentices had either been existing employees undertaking development programmes or had progressed into permanent roles within the Council. ICT apprenticeships had proved highly popular and a significant proportion of apprenticeship funding has been utilised within the ICT service. The apprenticeship scheme would not be affected by Local Government Reorganisation (LGR).

The HR caseload remained stable at 91 active cases, with absence management continuing to account for the majority of casework.

Average sickness absence increased slightly from 9.6 to 10.0 days per FTE. Long-term sickness cases reduced from 24 to 23 employees, while short-term absence fell from 684 to 642 days lost. The most common reasons for absence remained stress, anxiety and depression, followed by coughs and colds. Officers highlighted ongoing measures to support employee wellbeing and manage absence, including enhanced occupational health provision, an employee assistance programme, wellbeing initiatives and proactive absence management.

Following a question on absence levels compared with national benchmarks, it was confirmed that the newly procured occupational health provider offered a tailored service, including case conferences, greater engagement with managers, and case-specific advice to support the effective management of absence. Additional services, such as physiotherapy support, were also available to help employees recover and return to work, particularly in physically demanding roles. Officers also advised that reducing sickness absence remained a priority. While sickness levels reflected the wider national picture, the Council was aiming to reduce absence rates towards private sector levels. Proactive measures were being taken to improve attendance and employee wellbeing.

In response to questions regarding sickness absence by Councillor Francis, Officers advised that reporting arrangements were currently being refined to provide this information. Sickness absence costs were approximately £82,000 per annum on a rolling-year basis, which were broadly in line with comparable

authorities. Furthermore, sickness-related dismissals were used where appropriate but progression to a Stage 3 absence management meeting did not automatically result in dismissal.

Councillor Davenport-Ray, Executive Councillor for Employees, stated that a significant proportion of the Council's absence related to long-term sickness, often involving employees in physically demanding roles who were awaiting or recovering from surgical procedures and were therefore unable to undertake their duties, even on a reduced basis. She also highlighted that sickness absence indicators were monitored quarterly by the Performance and Growth Scrutiny Committee. Current targets and intervention levels had been established through the scrutiny process and were regularly reviewed. Councillor Davenport-Ray welcomed the suggestion that the financial cost of sickness absence be included in future workforce reports, subject to the development of a robust methodology for measuring and reporting this information.

The Committee discussed stress-related sickness absence. Stress, anxiety and depression were recorded separately as either work-related or personal. The majority of absences within this category related to personal stress rather than work-related issues. The Workforce Strategy included measures to support employee wellbeing and address personal factors affecting attendance. Where work-related stress was identified, managers followed a formal stress management process, including early intervention, discussions with the employee and the development of action plans to help address the causes of stress.

In relation to sick pay, entitlement was determined locally and formed part of employees' contractual terms and conditions. Any changes would need to take account of wider workforce considerations, including recruitment and retention. Following a question, Councillor Davenport-Ray confirmed that the Council was not considering reducing contractual sick pay to lower absence levels.

Councillor Simpson queried whether the increase in absences relating to coughs, colds and gastrointestinal illnesses reflected a seasonal trend and whether the introduction of the hybrid working policy, requiring increased office attendance, might have contributed to higher levels of transmissible illness. An increase in such illnesses was expected during the winter months, but Officers were unable to draw a direct link between the hybrid working policy and sickness absence levels. The hybrid working policy had not resulted in a significant increase in office-based working, as many employees were already required to attend the workplace regularly due to the nature of their roles.

In response to a question by Councillor Dewey-Beckett regarding the ICT agency staff overspend, Officers advised that, where possible, agency roles were being converted to permanent posts. However, ICT remained a challenging area to recruit to due to competition from the private sector and pay constraints. Officers were working with the service manager to review recruitment challenges and identify opportunities to attract permanent staff. The use of agency staff was being maintained whilst internal service reviews and staffing changes were underway.

Further on the use of agency staff, Officers advised that the Council operated preferred supplier arrangements with approved agencies and thereby benefited

from agreed rates. Alternative agencies might be engaged where necessary to secure the required skills and expertise. Decisions on converting agency roles to permanent posts were considered on a service-by-service basis and were assessed against cost efficiency and operational requirements.

Regarding the retention of staff during the period of uncertainty associated with LGR, Officers advised that this was a key element of the Workforce Strategy. However, it was reported that there was currently no evidence of staff leaving due to LGR. Regular staff engagement sessions and internal communications were provided, and services were expected to continue operating largely as usual during the transition period. Lessons learnt from other councils that had undergone LGR were being used to inform preparations. The Corporate Director of Communities provided additional information on preparations for LGR that were underway both within the Council and across Cambridgeshire and Peterborough.

The Chair raised the point that the number of reported accidents involving non-employees at One Leisure had increased from 27 in the previous quarter to 71 in Quarter 4 and requested further information on the reasons for the increase. This information would be circulated to Members following the meeting.

It was then

RESOLVED

that the contents of the report be noted.

7 Workforce Strategy Update

By means of a presentation (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) Kiran Hans, HR Coordinator – Project Delivery, provided the Committee with an update on the Workforce Strategy. Reference was made to examples of training and development activities, such as the Management and Leadership programme.

Members received an overview of the Workforce Strategy, which was developed following extensive staff engagement across all Council sites in 2024. The Strategy focused on three key themes: attraction and retention, engagement, and wellbeing, and was supported by a detailed action plan.

Officers highlighted progress made since the Strategy's adoption, including the introduction of the Leadership Development Programme, a new one-to-one performance framework, a buddy scheme for new starters, an enhanced Employee Assistance Programme, a revised employee handbook, and the establishment of the "HDC for Everyone" equality, diversity and inclusion network. A new pension salary sacrifice arrangement had also delivered employer National Insurance savings.

Members were advised of a range of initiatives introduced since the previous update, including electric and hybrid vehicle schemes, a new employee rewards platform, a job shadowing programme, improved career development opportunities, coaching and mentoring support, graduate placements, and measures to address pay grade compression. Officers also highlighted ongoing

health and wellbeing initiatives, staff engagement roadshows, and targeted support services aimed at improving employee wellbeing and reducing sickness absence.

Looking ahead, priorities included the development of a Health and Wellbeing Strategy, consideration of healthcare cashback schemes, and a review of mandatory training arrangements. All Workforce Strategy actions were either completed or in progress, with no actions currently outstanding.

Councillor Davenport-Ray welcomed the progress made through the Workforce Strategy and confirmed that it had been developed in response to feedback from employees on ways to improve the workplace. She emphasised that, whilst the initiatives supported staff wellbeing and engagement, they also delivered tangible organisational benefits. These included improved recruitment and retention, reduced staff turnover, fewer hard-to-fill vacancies, and a preventative approach to employee wellbeing that could help reduce sickness absence. Investment in the workforce should be viewed not only as the right thing to do for employees, but also as delivering a positive return on investment for the Council.

Councillor Dewey-Beckett commended Officers for the wide range of initiatives being delivered. He commented that organisational culture was a key factor in employee engagement and retention and noted that feedback from Staff, alongside the activities outlined in the report, demonstrated a positive and well-supported workplace culture. Appreciation was expressed to Officers for their work in developing and delivering the Strategy.

Whereupon, it was

RESOLVED

that the information presented be received and noted.

8 Workforce Equality Report

The Committee gave consideration to a report by the Strategic HR Manager (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book), which contained the annual summary of the profile of the workforce according to their protected characteristics as required by the Equality Act 2010. It covered the period to 31st March 2026. Equality monitoring data was provided voluntarily by employees and, as a result, the Council did not hold complete information for all members of Staff. Ongoing work continued to encourage data completion and raise awareness of the importance of providing this information.

Officers reported improvements in disclosure rates, including a reduction in the number of employees who had not declared their disability status or ethnicity. A range of measures was being implemented further to improve declaration rates, including targeted communications, manager engagement and support for frontline staff.

Members were advised that a further analysis, comparing workforce data with Census information would be presented to the September meeting. It would assess how representative the workforce was and identify any areas for improvement. Progress against existing actions and any new proposed actions

would also be reported. This work was being delivered within existing resources and, to help improve staff experience, belonging and engagement, it would be supported by the Council's Equality and Inclusion Network.

Councillor McIlwain questioned the purpose of collecting information on protected characteristics and sought assurance that employees who chose not to disclose such information were not subject to repeated requests. Officers advised that employees were not required to provide equality monitoring information and that a response of "prefer not to say" was accepted. Follow-up requests were only made where no response had been provided.

Following a question by the Chair, it was confirmed that the introduction of a dyslexia-friendly font through the ICT service remained an action within the Workforce Strategy. As ICT services were delivered through the shared 3C partnership, implementation required coordination across all three authorities. Having noted that work on the initiative was ongoing,

It was

RESOLVED

that the contents of the report be noted.

9 HR Policy Updates- Time off for Volunteering Policy, Expenses, Allowances and Overtime Policy and Recruitment and Selection Policy

By means of a report by the Strategic HR Manager (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) the Committee was acquainted with the terms of policies relating to Volunteering, Overtime and Expenses and Recruitment. The Volunteering Policy had been developed as a new initiative under the Workforce Strategy and supported the Council's social responsibility objectives. Similar policies were already in place at some neighbouring authorities, so the introduction of the policy would help to ensure the Council remained a competitive employer while supporting employee engagement and opportunities for community involvement.

Following a question from Councillor Ascroft, the Committee was advised that requests for volunteering leave were subject to managerial approval and must take account of operational requirements and service delivery. The policy did not impose a restriction on employees with sickness absence records. Decisions would be made on a case-by-case basis. In some cases, volunteering might positively support an employee's wellbeing, particularly where absences related to mental health. Managers were required to seek HR advice where appropriate to ensure decisions were fair, reasonable and compliant with employment and equality obligations.

Councillor Henley wondered if the range of employee benefits, wellbeing initiatives and support measures was having the intended impact, noting that sickness absence levels had continued to rise despite progress in delivering Workforce Strategy actions. In response the Committee was advised that sickness absence was monitored through return-to-work interviews and underlying reasons for absence were analysed. The various wellbeing and support initiatives formed part of a coordinated, long-term approach to improving

employee health and attendance. The benefits of many initiatives were unlikely to be immediate and might take time to influence sickness absence levels. Ongoing efforts in this respect focused on supporting employees and encouraging attendance at work. The Corporate Director also advised that all measures introduced through the Workforce Strategy were regularly reviewed to ensure they delivered positive outcomes. New initiatives, including the Volunteering Policy, would be monitored to assess participation, impact and value, enabling the Council to focus resources on activities that supported staff wellbeing and corporate objectives. Guidance would be provided to ensure volunteering activities aligned with the Policy's aims.

Having commented on the importance of ensuring that monitoring arrangements were proportionate and not overly onerous, the Chair requested an update at the next meeting on the uptake of the Volunteering Policy

Councillor Dewey-Beckett expressed support for the proposed Volunteering Policy, welcoming both the opportunities it provided for staff to engage with their communities and the controls included within the framework. The Policy might help strengthen relationships between residents and the Council by increasing positive interaction with Council employees, thereby supporting the Council's organisational culture and community engagement objectives.

Members then received an introduction to a new Expenses, Allowances and Overtime Policy. The Policy reflected existing working practices and contractual arrangements, while ensuring consistency with neighbouring authorities in preparation for LGR. The policy did not introduce significant changes to current arrangements but provided greater clarity for employees and managers regarding expenses, allowances and overtime claims. The policy would strengthen governance arrangements by establishing clear guidance and approval processes.

The Chair welcomed the Expenses, Allowances and Overtime Policy but expressed concern regarding the requirement for managers to maintain written records relating to vehicle use. She suggested that automated systems might be used and that the implementation of the Policy should be monitored to ensure record-keeping requirements were practical, accurate and not overly burdensome.

Members received an update on the Recruitment and Selection Policy. The proposed changes were minor and followed a recent audit, which identified that the Council's existing practice regarding employment references was not fully reflected within the Policy. The amendments formalised current arrangements for obtaining references for new employees, including the types of references that might be accepted and the circumstances in which references might not be available. The changes aligned the Policy with existing practice.

The Chair raised an issue regarding the use of character references where standard employment references were unavailable, noting the importance of ensuring appropriate checks were in place before individuals were given access to Council systems, premises and information. Assurance was sought on the safeguards and processes used to manage any risks associated with such appointments. Officers advised that character references were only accepted as a last resort and managers were made aware when one had been provided.

Given the increasing difficulty in obtaining detailed employment references, greater emphasis was placed on robust recruitment processes and the probationary period to assess and support new employees.

It was then

RESOLVED

that the Volunteering, Overtime and Expenses and Recruitment policies be endorsed.

10 REPRESENTATIVES OF EMPLOYEES

It was noted that apologies had been received from the Representatives of Employees.

Chair