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, 23 September 2026.

PRESENT: Councillor A Blackwell – Chair.

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

11. MINUTES

Subject to the deletion of £82,000 from the third line of the tenth paragraph of Minute No 6, to be replaced by £802,000, the Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 24th June 2026 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

12. MEMBERS' INTERESTS

No interests were declared.

13. WORKFORCE INFORMATION REPORT (QUARTER 1)

The Committee received and noted a report on Human Resources (HR) matters impacting on the performance of the Council during the period 1st April until 30th June 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 749 people, the fulltime equivalent working out at 694.73 Officers, which was an increase from the previous Quarter. The forecast outturn for 2026/27 was £39.745 million against a budget of £39.856 million, resulting in a projected underspend of £110,600. This position reflected an anticipated underspend of £1.51 million on employee salaries and an overspend of £1.4 million on contractors and agency workers, against a budget of £1.3 million.

It was confirmed that 41 Employees left the Council, which whilst an increase to 18.97%, remained below the LGA benchmark. There had been an increase in recruitment with 143 appointments made. Sickness had increased to 10.1 FTE, with long-term absence accounting for over 70%.

In response to a question on agency staffing levels, it was confirmed that agency worker numbers had reduced overall. The highest use of agency staff remained within Operational Services, primarily to cover

loader and driver roles. Long-term sickness absence had also contributed to agency staffing requirements in some areas. Agency use in office-based roles has decreased where recruitment to previously hard-to-fill posts has been successful, particularly for positions based at Pathfinder House.

In response to a question regarding sickness absence attributed to coughs, colds and flu, Officers confirmed that this category accounted for 21% of absences during the reporting period, compared to approximately 19% in the previous quarter. The increase was unusual when compared with historical trends. Analysis of the data had not identified a specific cause, and the rise could not be attributed to periods of hot weather. Councillor Simpson requested that further analysis be undertaken to better understand the reasons for the increase.

Councillor Henly queried the increase in average sickness absence from 7.9 days per full-time equivalent employee in 2023 to 10.1 days, alongside the increase in payroll costs over the same period. Officers advised that this was consistent with national trends and was not unique to the Council. The rise in payroll costs reflected a number of factors, including increased staffing levels, approved service growth, new initiatives, and cost of living pay increases. Examples of workforce growth included staffing required for new Council initiatives and facilities, such as Aquapark operations, as well as resources allocated to Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) work. Staffing levels were determined through the budget-setting process and approved Council priorities. A more detailed breakdown of payroll growth, including the relative impact of workforce expansion and pay awards would be provided.

In response to questions regarding staff recruited for LGR work, Officers advised that the Government had paused, but not cancelled, the reorganisation programme and that timescales remained uncertain. Resources were currently being deployed on preparatory and "no regrets" activities, such as contract reviews and asset management work, which would remain beneficial regardless of any future reorganisation model. An active review of these roles was ongoing, with future decisions dependent on further clarity from Government.

Councillor Ascroft asked whether the Council was proactively exploring opportunities to increase entry-level apprenticeships for school leavers, noting national declines in apprenticeship availability and competition for such opportunities. Officers advised that the Council's apprenticeship programme had historically focused on upskilling existing employees, particularly through higher-level apprenticeships at Levels 6 and 7 and management development programmes. As these programmes concluded and apprenticeship funding became available, a strategy would be developed for expanding apprenticeship opportunities within the organisation, including routes for new entrants over the next 12 months.

In response to a question, Officers outlined the Council’s three-stage sickness management process. Additional measures were being introduced to help reduce long-term absence, including rehabilitation support through Active Lifestyles and One Leisure, targeted

interventions for musculoskeletal conditions, and access to the Work Well programme, which provide coaching, physiotherapy and return-to-work support. Some long-term absences related to serious health conditions, pregnancy, or delays in receiving medical treatment and were therefore less responsive to workplace interventions. Officers further highlighted that Huntingdonshire was one of 15 national pathfinder areas delivering the Work Well programme and that its approach had been recognised as national best practice.

Councillor Henly sought information on absences attributed to stress, anxiety and depression, including the proportion classified as long-term sickness absence and the effectiveness of interventions in reducing such cases. Officers advised that this category included absences related to personal circumstances, such as bereavement. A breakdown of cases resulting in long-term absence would require further analysis. In response to a query regarding workplace injuries, Officers agreed to explore whether absence data could be further categorised, subject to data protection considerations where case numbers were low.

It was queried how anonymised exit interview data would be reported in light of the annual staff turnover rate. Officers advised that the exit questionnaire and process had been revised to improve response rates and that sufficient data had now been collected to allow for meaningful analysis. A summary of the findings would be reviewed and circulated to Members. Exit interview trends could be incorporated into future Workforce Information Reports, subject to confidentiality requirements.

Councillor McIlwain stated that he had recently become aware of an employee who had been involved in a work-related vehicle accident and had sustained an injury. The Member was pleased to learn that the employee had returned to work shortly afterwards and asked that the Committee's thanks and appreciation be passed on to the employee for their commitment to the Council.

Whereupon, it was

RESOLVED

that the information presented be received and noted.

14. WORKFORCE STRATEGY CLOSURE REPORT

By means of a report (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) Kiran Hans, HR Coordinator – Project Delivery, provided the Committee with an update and the conclusion on the Workforce Strategy.

Members heard of the increased internal career progression, reduced recruitment agency costs, enhanced employee engagement through improved communications and one-to-one discussions, and improvements in employee wellbeing, including a reduction in work-related stress as a cause of sickness absence. It was further noted that the successful initiatives delivered through the strategy would be incorporated into ongoing HR activities to support future workforce priorities.

The Chair welcomed the successful delivery of the Workforce Strategy and noted the positive feedback received from employees throughout its implementation. She recognised the efforts of the HR team in delivering initiatives across the organisation in a way that accommodated different working patterns. It was commented that the Programme had been delivered within budget, had achieved positive outcomes, and that its successful initiatives would now be embedded into business-as-usual activities. The Chair thanked the HR team for their work in delivering the Strategy.

In response to a question relating to ongoing costs, Officers advised that the Workforce Strategy was a three to five-year programme and that remaining funds would continue to be used to support workforce initiatives as they became embedded within business-as-usual activities.

Responding to a query regarding reported improvements in employee health metrics, Officers advised that health kiosks had been introduced at Pathfinder House and Eastfield House to provide Staff with measures such as those relating to BMI and blood pressure. Employees identified as having potential health concerns were offered follow-up appointments with a nurse and, where necessary, referred to their GP. The health assessments were repeated six months later, allowing the Council to compare results and measure changes in employee health indicators over time.

Councillor Simpson queried the consistency of recruitment application trends across quarters and whether recruitment activity was timed to maximise candidate interest. Officers advised that application levels were influenced by both the type of role being recruited to and seasonal factors, with recruitment activity typically generating lower interest during the summer and the Christmas period. While most vacancies were advertised as they arose, a more strategic approach was taken for specialist or hard-to-fill roles to maximise candidate attraction.

The Committee also heard that the Council used targeted recruitment methods, including professional networks and direct candidate engagement, rather than relying solely on advertising. This approach had improved recruitment outcomes and attracted positive feedback from candidates regarding the recruitment process and the organisation's values.

Councillor Henly expressed concerns regarding the level of expenditure on workforce wellbeing initiatives in the context of increasing sickness absence and questioned whether sufficient value for money was being achieved for taxpayers. In response, Officers advised that a number of wellbeing initiatives had been delivered at little or no cost to the Council, including health kiosks and staff wellbeing webinars, which had been provided free of charge. Officers highlighted that care had been taken to ensure expenditure on workforce initiatives achieved value for money. Whereupon, it was

RESOLVED

that the information presented be received and noted.

15. HEALTH AND WELLBEING STRATEGY

The Committee received and noted a report by HR Coordinator – Project Delivery (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) , on the Health and Wellbeing Strategy, which had been developed from the Workforce Strategy and Action Plan.

Members were advised that the Strategy had benefitted from input from HR, managers and staff and provided a five-year framework to support employee wellbeing, particularly during organisational change and local government reorganisation. The Strategy focused on mental, physical, social and financial wellbeing and brought together existing support measures, including the Employee Assistance Programme, occupational health services, wellbeing initiatives, menopause support, buddy schemes and financial wellbeing support. Progress would be monitored through staff engagement, recruitment and retention, sickness absence, uptake of wellbeing initiatives, agency spend and workplace wellbeing data. It aimed to improve employee wellbeing, support organisational performance and help the Council remain an employer of choice.

The Chair sought clarification on whether any additional funding from the now-closed Workforce Strategy would be available to support the Health and Wellbeing Strategy. It was confirmed that the Health and Wellbeing Strategy was an action arising from the Workforce Strategy. Funding allocated to the Workforce Strategy remained available to support wellbeing initiatives delivered through the Strategy as required.

Members queried whether the remaining balance of approximately £630,000 from the Workforce Strategy reserve could be returned to general reserves. Members were advised that the funding remained allocated to the Workforce Strategy and Health and Wellbeing Strategy. Any decision to reallocate the reserve for another purpose would require Council approval. The reserve had been established by Council to support delivery of the Workforce Strategy and had demonstrated positive outcomes in recruitment and workforce performance. Remaining funding would support ongoing delivery on a business-as-usual basis.

Councillor Ascroft queried whether the measures of success for the Health and Wellbeing Strategy would be aligned with the Council's wider performance reporting framework and reflected within future performance reports. Officers advised that monitoring of the Strategy would be reported through the Employment Committee. However, the impact of the Strategy should also be reflected through wider organisational KPIs and performance measures reported across other committees.

Members queried the salary cost associated with the Strategy and were advised that it related to temporary resources established to deliver the Workforce Strategy. The management role would cease on completion of the programme, while the coordinator post had been incorporated into the permanent establishment and would continue to support delivery of the Health and Wellbeing Strategy. Furthermore, it was agreed to seek further advice from Finance colleagues and

provide a written response setting out the costs and use of the reserve in greater detail. Councillor Francis commented that the figures presented appeared to show expenditure exceeding the identified savings and requested greater clarity on the overall financial benefits achieved through the programme. Councillor Henley requested that the written response include a clear comparison between the costs incurred and savings achieved to enable Members to assess the value of continuing the programme. Whereupon, it was

RESOLVED

that the information presented be received and noted.

16. WORKFORCE EQUALITY PROFILE 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.

Members were advised that the workforce remained broadly representative of the local community, with gender and disability profiles closely reflecting district demographics. The report also highlighted the need to improve data quality and employee disclosure rates in some areas. The Action Plan would continue to support inclusive employment practices and address areas for further improvement.

The Chair raised the ongoing issue of introducing a dyslexia-friendly font across the Council and asked whether progress was being made. Members were advised that work was ongoing to introduce a dyslexia-friendly font. However, implementation was dependent on the shared 3C ICT system and required coordination with the partner councils. Progress is being made and it was hoped the matter would be resolved in the near future.

Councillor McIlwain commented that some of the equality monitoring questions appeared intrusive and asked when the information was collected and whether there had been any negative feedback from employees. Members heard that equality monitoring information was collected during the recruitment and onboarding process and could be updated at any time through the employee self-service system. Employees were able to select "prefer not to say" if they did not wish to provide the information. No negative feedback had been received regarding the collection of this data.

Councillor Smith commented on the importance of increasing disclosure rates for equality monitoring data and asked how the Council could continue to encourage employees to provide information without making them feel pressured or uncomfortable. It was confirmed that communications to Staff explained why the data was collected and how it was used. Awareness campaigns,

supporting information and guidance on equality categories were provided to help employees make informed decisions about sharing their information.

Councillor Henly asked why information such as sexual orientation was collected. Members were advised that the Council was required to report workforce equality information under the Public Sector Equality Duty. While employees were not required to provide the information and may choose not to do so, the Council encouraged disclosure to help meet its reporting obligations and monitor workforce equality.

Councillor Simpson suggested that "prefer not to say" responses should be reported separately so that percentage figures were based only on the data disclosed by respondents, arguing that this may provide a clearer picture of workforce demographics. Members were advised that "prefer not to say" responses were currently included within the reported data, as they formed part of the overall workforce profile and must be reported. Officers agreed to consider whether future reporting could present this information differently.

Councillor Ascroft asked whether the same workforce dataset was used across all equality categories and suggested that maintaining a consistent dataset was important to ensure the information remained representative of the workforce. It was advised that employees may choose to provide information for some categories and not others. As a result, the number of responses can vary between characteristics such as disability, marital status and sexual orientation, meaning the datasets were not necessarily identical across all categories.

The Chair requested that future updates be provided on the pilot scheme relating to long-term fitness and wellbeing initiatives, suggesting that, in addition to gym membership, future updates could also include participation in Active Health activities and organised walks. Whereupon, it was

RESOLVED

that the information presented be received and noted.

17. EMPLOYMENT POLICIES UPDATE

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 Shared Parental Leave (updated), Paternity Leave (Updated), Unpaid Parental Leave (updated), Probation Policy (updated), Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Policy (new) and the Recruitment and Selection Policy (updated).

Councillor Henley queried the proposal to reduce the probation period from six months to three months and
Members were advised that the current probation period created difficulties where performance or conduct issues arose close to the end of the probationary period, particularly in light of forthcoming employment rights legislation. Reducing the initial probation period to three months would allow greater flexibility to extend probation where necessary while ensuring issues were identified and managed earlier.

Councillor Henley further asked about the process followed where an employee took sick leave during their probation period and was advised that sickness absence during probation was managed through a separate probationary process. Employees would be subject to review meetings where absence triggers were reached, with the option to escalate matters to a final probation hearing where appropriate. In cases involving significant periods of absence, the process could be accelerated and a final probation hearing convened before the end of the probation period if required.

After a further question regarding Employee sickness, the Committee heard that, once an employee had passed their probation period, any sickness absence would be managed under the Council's normal sickness absence procedures rather than the probation process. Legal advice had been obtained that the proposed approach was considered the most appropriate and consistent way of responding to forthcoming employment rights changes.

Councillor Dewey-Beckett welcomed the enhanced parental support within the Policy, particularly the provisions relating to paternity leave and attendance at antenatal appointments. He expressed support for the Policy and suggested that further consideration could be given to increasing paid leave and support available to parents in the future.

Councillor Henley commented that, while Members had a responsibility to ensure value for money for residents, consideration should be given to the cost of enhanced employee benefits and policies, particularly in the context of pressures on council taxpayers. Councillor Ascroft observed that the Council also had a responsibility to be a compliant and supportive employer. Investing in workforce wellbeing, retention and employment practices could provide organisational and financial benefits. Maintaining an attractive workplace supported the recruitment and retention of staff required to deliver services effectively for residents. Councillor Smith endorsed these comments and drew attention to the fact that the Workforce Equality Profile highlighted improvements in recruitment and retention. Attracting and retaining employees reduced the need for ongoing recruitment and reliance on agency staff, which in turn provided financial benefits to the Council and residents while supporting effective service delivery. Councillor Henley acknowledged the importance of being a fair and compliant employer but reiterated the need to demonstrate value for money and ensure investment in workforce initiatives delivered measurable benefits for residents.

It was then

RESOLVED

that the Shared Parental Leave, Paternity Leave, Unpaid Parental Leave, Probation Policy, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Policy and the Recruitment and Selection policies be endorsed.

18. REPRESENTATIVES OF EMPLOYEES

It was noted that apologies had been received from the Representatives of Employees and that they had no issues to raise with the Committee.

Chair

This page is intentionally left blank