

PERSONNEL COMMITTEE MEETING MINUTES - 15 MARCH 2023

Present: Councillor Terry (Chair);
Councillors Brock (Vice-Chair) and Ennis

Apologies: Councillors Lovelock, Mitchell and Page

13. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING 17 NOVEMBER 2022

The Minutes of the meeting held on 17 November 2022 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

14. PROPOSALS TO ENHANCE EMPLOYEE BENEFITS

The Interim Assistant Director of HR and Organisational Development submitted a report which proposed a range of additional employee benefits that would enhance the comprehensive benefits package that the Council already offered to staff. The proposals include both employee and employer funded benefits. The following documents were appended to the report:

Appendix A: Health Cash Plan summary;
Appendix B: Plan4Life Cancer Care Plan summary;
Appendix C: Wage Stream App information.

The report explained that the following optional benefits would be funded by employees and contributions would be deducted from their monthly salary. In most cases there was an option to increase the payment made in return for a higher level of cover and/or to cover family members.

Health Cash Plan - This was a way to manage the cost of essential healthcare. Employees would pay a small monthly premium and could claim cash back on a wide range of healthcare costs and other benefits including discounted gym membership, a 24/7 counselling and information helpline, private prescriptions. A table summarising the levels of cover available and costs to the employee was set out at Appendix A to the report.

CARE4LIFE Insurance Top Up Plan - The Care4 Life Insurance Top Up Plan, was designed to help dependents by paying a lump sum in the event that an insured person died during the period of cover. An employee could insure themselves under personal cover or cover their spouse/partner as well under couple cover.

PLAN4LIFE Cancer Care Plan - This was an insurance policy that would provide a lump sum for the insured person if they were diagnosed with cancer. There were different levels of cover available and summary of the scheme benefits was provided at Appendix B to the report.

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The report also set out details of the Wage Stream App which would be funded by the Council and available to all employees. This would give employees the opportunity to take control of their finances. The App gave access to budget tracking, streaming (early access to a small proportion of their earned wage at any time of the month to help absorb any financial shocks during the month), financial coaching and a saving through salary scheme. There was a one-off set up cost to create the interface with the Council's HR system, iTrent and the cost to the Council for 1700 employees would be £1,250 per month (including 1-2-1 personal financial coaching).

The report also proposed that the maximum leave entitlement for Chief Officers with 10 years' service be increased to 33 days, to ensure continued parity with staff on grades 1-10 whose maximum leave entitlement would also increase to 33 days. No changes were proposed for Chief Officers with less service. Chief Officers were not entitled to time off in lieu or flex-leave in the same way that staff at grades 1-10 were, so this represented the maximum amount of leave they could take.

Resolved:

- (1) That the three new employee-funded benefits (Health Cash Plan, Plan4Life Cancer Care Plan and Care4Life Insurance Top Up Plan) be implemented to enhance the comprehensive offering already provided;**
- (2) That the Wage Stream App, be implemented to give employees the opportunity to take control of their finances with visibility and flexible pay; and build skills for long-term financial wellbeing;**
- (3) That the maximum annual leave entitlement for Chief Officers be increased to 33 days each year (pro rata for part-time staff) from 1 April 2023, to ensure continued parity with staff covered by NJC for Local Government Services terms and conditions, following an increase in their leave entitlement resulting from the 2022 national pay agreement.**

15. UPDATE ON APPRENTICESHIPS, WORK EXPERIENCE AND MENTORING PROGRAMMES

The Interim Assistant Director of HR and Organisational Development submitted a report which provided an update on activity being undertaken as part of the Team Reading Programme to support young people in the Borough to prepare for work and see the Council as a potential future employer, whilst also providing opportunities to upskill Council employees. The report covered four areas Apprenticeships, a corporate work experience programme, mentoring and a proposal that the Council signed the Social Mobility Pledge. The following documents were attached to the report:

- Appendix A - Apprenticeship details as at August 2022;
- Appendix B - Apprenticeship three-year Strategy;
- Appendix C - 2021/22 Apprenticeship Strategy Performance Update;
- Appendix D - Proposed FTE target for each service area and current apprentice numbers.

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The report explained that apprenticeships could support the Council's People Strategy by attracting, recruiting and retaining the best staff and by developing skills, knowledge, competencies and talent so that staff could reach their full potential and make a maximum contribution. Appendix A provided a breakdown showing the number of apprentices by directorate/team. The report also gave an update on the Council's three-year Apprenticeship Strategy, attached at Appendix B. Appendix C to the report showed the agreed success measures for the Apprenticeship Strategy and progress against these in Year 1 and Year 2.

The report explained that there were challenges with recruitment and retention of apprentices which would be addressed as follows:

- Increasing the pay for apprentices to the Living Wage Foundation hourly rate which was currently £9.90 per hour, rising to £10.90 per hour on 1 April 2023;
- Each Assistant/Deputy/Director would be set a target to ensure that 2.3% of posts in their service area were employed as apprentices, excluding any existing staff already undertaking an apprenticeship. This equated to 35 apprentice posts (the Council currently had 20). A breakdown showing the FTE target for each service area and current apprentice numbers was included in Appendix D.
- Funding for the 15 new apprentice posts would be created by top-slicing a percentage of existing salary budgets in order to create funding for each service area to appoint the minimum number of apprentices shown in Appendix D.
- Raising managers' awareness of the benefits of employing apprentices, and the commitment required of both them and their apprentice, through manager's briefings, seminars, guidance notes etc.
- Encouraging cross working between departments if teams do not feel they had capacity to train an apprentice over the full duration of the course.
- The Council would be allowed to advertise some apprenticeship posts in particular areas to encourage applications, but not discriminate against others that applied from outside those areas.

The report also stated that the HR and Organisational Development team was working with managers across the Council to create a new corporate work experience programme, initially for students in Years 10 and 11 which aimed to show the wide range of career opportunities available, manage work experience placements more efficiently, support more students and provide a more impactful experience aligned to schools' needs. The work experience programme would be delivered to students over three separate weeks in the calendar year, allowing teams plenty of notice to plan for placement support. The new programme had been piloted in February 2023.

The report explained that the Team Reading Programme for 2022/23 included an objective to explore opportunities for RBC managers to mentor young people in the Borough, prioritising secondary schools for young people from the lower income or least affluent areas of the Borough. Ten organisations had been approached for details about their mentoring programmes, two of which (Starting Point and Chapter 2 Reading) would be supported initially. Staff would be given the opportunity to volunteer to support these schemes and the Council's existing Volunteering Policy would be reviewed to ensure that

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it could accommodate the volunteering commitment required by these mentoring programmes.

Finally, the report explained that the Social Mobility Pledge was a coalition of businesses and universities that encouraged organisations to be a force for good by putting social mobility at the heart of their purpose and committing to outreach, access and recruitment. Organisations signing the pledge were required to make three commitments:

Outreach We will work to reach out to schools or colleges to provide coaching through quality careers advice, enrichment experience and mentoring to people from disadvantaged backgrounds or circumstances;

Access We will work to provide structured work experience and apprenticeship opportunities to people from disadvantaged backgrounds or circumstances;

Recruitment We will work to adopt open employee recruitment practices which promote a level playing field for people from disadvantaged backgrounds or circumstances.

The Outreach and Access commitments were covered by the proposals in this report whilst the Recruitment commitment was covered through work with Job Centre Plus and attendance at local job fairs at least once every quarter. The report recommended that the Council signed the pledge to demonstrate its commitment to social mobility.

Grace Andrews and Maximilian Kalyuzhnov, members of the Youth Parliament, attended the meeting and asked questions of the Committee.

Resolved

- (1) That an increase in the hourly pay rate for apprentices, for example to at least the Living Wage Foundation rate (currently £9.90 per hour, increasing to £10.90 per hour from 1 April 2023), in line with the Council's commitment to be a Living Wage Foundation employer be approved;
- (2) That each service area be required to ensure that at least 2.3% of their full-time equivalent posts were employed as apprentices. This excluded current staff who were upskilling through an apprenticeship. This would create at least 15 new apprentice posts at the Council by March 2024;
- (3) That the Council be able to advertise some apprenticeship posts to certain groups in line with social inclusion objectives, such as care-leavers, those living in the lower income or least affluent areas of the Borough and those with protected characteristics;
- (4) That the Council's new approach to work experience which would commence with a number of pilot programmes during 2023 be noted;

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- (5) That Council staff be offered the opportunity to volunteer as part of a number of mentoring programmes for young people in the Borough;**
- (6) That the Council to commit to the Social Mobility Pledge.**

(The meeting closed at 7.02 pm)