

This Report will be made public on 2 June 2021



Report Number **P/21/03**

To:	Personnel Committee
Date:	10th June 2021
Status:	Non-executive Decision
Head of Service:	Andrina Smith, Chief HR Officer

SUBJECT: HR ANNUAL REVIEW (2020/2021)

SUMMARY: This report presents a review of the HR function over the last financial year 2020-2021.

REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS:

The Committee is asked to note the contents of the report set out below.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. To receive and note Report P/21/03.

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The HR Service has now been back in-house at Folkestone & Hythe for 9 years following a period of out-sourcing to the East Kent HR shared service. This report is written to give Committee members an annual overview of the service and the HR developments that are in place to support managers in achieving their council objectives.
- 1.2 A report is presented to the Personnel Committee on an annual basis in order for members to be satisfied that the HR team is appropriately supporting the council.

2. HR STRUCTURE AND SERVICE

- 2.1 The HR team has undergone a period of change as a result of the transformation programme. A decision was taken early on in the programme that HR would not be affected until the rest of the organisation had been through the process; this was to enable the team to appropriately support other managers leading their teams through change. The Organisational Development (OD) team was largely unaffected by transformation as much of their work comes from external organisations, however the HR team saw a reduction in 1FTE with the deletion of the HR Manager post plus in addition the 1FTE role of HR Assistant transferred across to the Case Management team in Corporate Services due to the majority of their tasks being transactional and process driven. Job titles were updated across the whole team to mirror the move to levels of Specialist. The current HR Team structure can be seen in **Appendix A**.
- 2.2 The service continues to maintain a Business Partner approach to supporting managers. This enables a greater understanding of the council's service areas particularly for the two HR Specialist roles as they are developing and widening their generalist knowledge, however the team do also provide generalist advice across the whole business.
- 2.3 The HR Senior Specialist and Specialists continue to have monthly meetings with their Assistant Directors and Chief Officers along with some Lead Specialists to discuss a standing agenda of HR items, including recruitment, absence management, casework, restructuring and corporate developments. They will also attend the relevant managers meetings within the service areas when required. The OD Lead Specialist, HR Senior Specialist and HR Specialists each have a monthly 1-2-1 with the Chief HR Officer. The HR team also have a weekly team brief to share knowledge, discuss casework and receive corporate information.
- 2.4 The HR team were already working flexibly from home whenever possible prior to the national lockdown in March 2020 and therefore the team have successfully managed to maintain service levels over the last 15 months whilst the civic centre has been closed due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

3. CASEWORK

- 3.1 During 2020/21 the HR team have supported the following cases:
 - 5 disciplinary cases resulting in 1 verbal warning and 4 written warnings. Under section 4.4 of the disciplinary procedures a penalty can be agreed outside of a disciplinary hearing if the employee is in agreement. Four of the five case numbers mentioned above were issued in this way.

- 2 capability cases resulting in one members of staff leaving before the process concluded and one was dismissed with no appeal lodged.
- 1 grievance was raised during the year which was not upheld. There was no appeal to the outcome.

While not formal cases, the team have supported a number of managers and staff with targeted actions and short-term performance improvement plans following the Behavioural Assessment process.

3.2 As a comparison, during 2019/20 the following cases were dealt with:

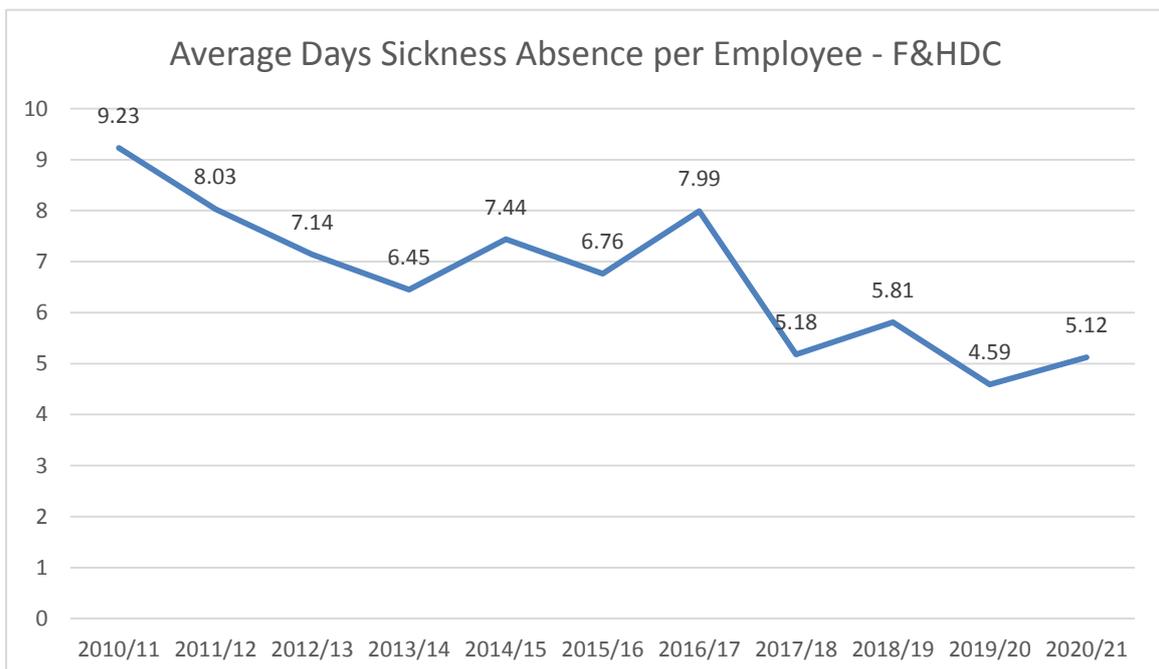
- 8 disciplinary cases resulting in 1 verbal warning, 6 written warnings, and 1 final written warning. Under section 4.4 of the disciplinary procedures a penalty can be agreed outside of a disciplinary hearing if the employee is in agreement. Seven of the eight case numbers mentioned above were issued in this way.
- 1 capability cases resulting in the members of staff leaving before the process concluded.
- 0 grievances was raised during the year.

3.3 These figures show a decrease in the number of disciplinary investigations for minor misconduct. The continuation of the use of section 4.4 to enable warnings to be issued and recorded without the need for a formal hearing continues to reduce the amount of time being spent on formal hearings and the associated preparation time.

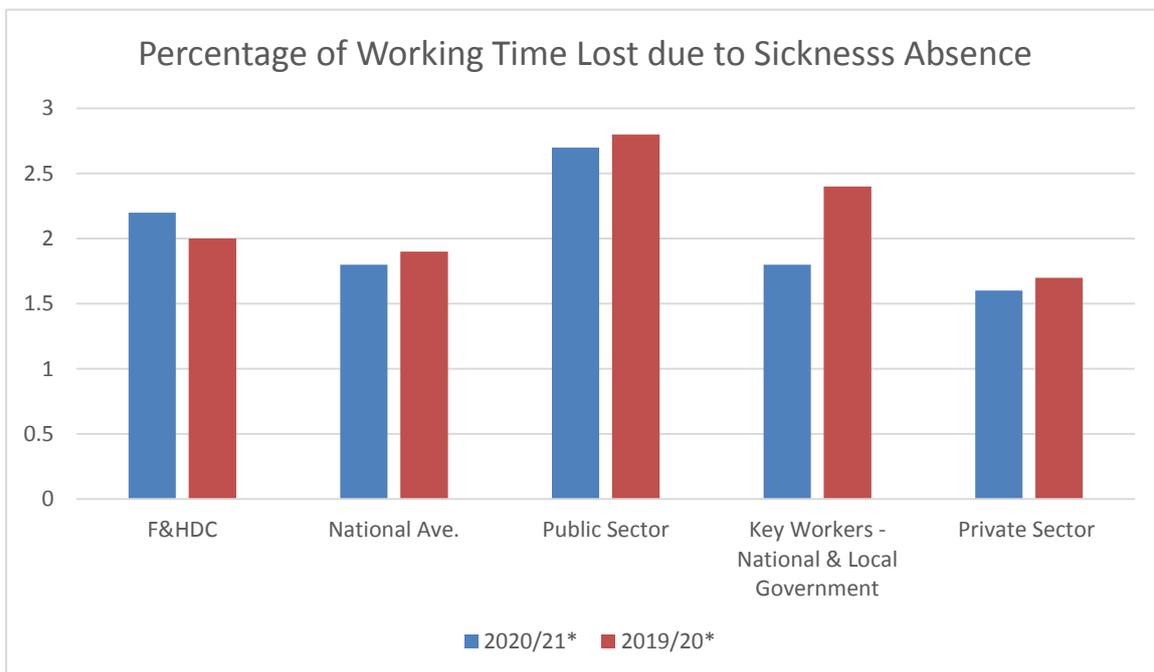
4. ABSENCE MANAGEMENT

4.1 In 2020/21 there was an average of 5.1 days sickness absence per employee (based on an average headcount of 415). During the year, 2.2% of all working time was lost due to sickness absence.

4.2 Despite the impact of the pandemic, sickness absence rates at the Council continue to be relatively low in comparison to previous years:



4.3 Measuring absence rates in terms of the “average number of days per employee” is a widely used formula across different sectors and has previously enabled comparisons to be made using data collected by professional bodies such as the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD). However, the pandemic and associated measures, such as temporary closures, operating at reduced capacity, the furloughing of staff and shielding, have had a deep impact on businesses, the UK labour market and the validity of this as a comparative measure of data; as there were fewer people actively working over the last year there would therefore be fewer people taking days off because of sickness or injury. While we therefore need to be cautious with data comparisons, using the percentage of working time lost due to sickness absence is the measure least impacted by the pandemic measures and therefore utilised for comparative purposes here:



Source: [Office of National Statistics](#), March 2021
 *Comparisons made with 2020 and 2019 data

Nationally, a reduction in sickness absence rates has been reported across all sectors over the past year. While the virus may have led to additional sickness absence, measures such as furloughing, shielding, social distancing and increased homeworking may have reduced other causes of sickness absence nationally. Differences in how Covid-19 related absences have been reported amongst employers may have also had an impact on these national statistics.

4.4 Since the 2014/15 annual report the HR team have provided a breakdown of sickness absence figures in terms of long-term and short-term cases.

Long-term absence is classed as four weeks or more.

The instances of absence and amount of days lost to sickness will be influenced by fluctuations in staffing levels, particularly in the last year as the Council’s headcount increased in line with the new housing service. The average number of days per employee column therefore gives the most accurate indication of the relative impact that short or long-term absences have had on the organisation.

“Days lost” refers to the amount of working days lost to sickness absence.
 “Ave. days” refers to the average amount of days sickness absence per employee.

Year	Short-Term Absences			Long-Term Absences		
	Instances	Days Lost	Ave. Days	Instances	Days Lost	Ave. Days
2014/15	425	1031.5	2.72	36	1788	4.72
2015/16	349	1016.89	2.65	33	1562	4.06
2016/17	375	985	2.62	29	2021.5	5.37
2017/18	345	951.5	2.58	18	957	2.60
2018/19	258	675	1.87	30	1424	3.94
2019/20	294	879.5	2.42	16	787.5	2.17
2020/21	250	768.5	1.85	27	1355	3.27

4.5 Over the past year we have experienced a reduction in short-term absenteeism (absences of less than 4 weeks) and the average number of days lost to short-term sickness cases is the lowest since 2014/15.

Absences relating to Covid-19 were the most predominant cause of short-term sickness absence at the Council last year. While minor illnesses (such as colds and flu, headaches, nausea, diarrhoea etc) are traditionally the biggest reason for sickness absence across the country, it is clear that Covid-19 has significantly contributed to absence levels in the majority of organisations.

4.6 While we may have experienced a reduction in short-term absenteeism, we have seen a rise in long-term sickness absence cases over the past year. 10% of absences were long-term and this equated to 64% of the total time lost due to sickness.

As with 2019/20, the biggest reason for long-term absence over the past year was mental ill health and stress, which accounted for nearly half of our long-term sickness cases (13 of the 27 cases recorded). Covid-19 and the pandemic has undoubtedly had an impact on the mental health of individuals and overall 42% of all time lost due to sickness absence has been classified as relating to “stress, depression, anxiety, mental health, fatigue”. There is a mixture of work and personal related cases and while the team work to get people back into work as quickly as possible such cases have to be handled appropriately, including ensuring sufficient recovery time, in order to enable an effective return to work. The prominence of this type of absence is not unique to Folkestone & Hythe and the CIPD continue to report mental health and stress amongst the most predominant cause of long-term absence across the country.

4.7 With this in mind, the council has implemented a number of measures to support employees in the workplace, proactively manage mental health and prevent stress related issues:

- Specific Learning & Development sessions focused on personal resilience, managing and reducing the causes of stress, and promoting well-being.

- Initiatives to reduce isolation and keep staff connected, including the virtual kitchen (“Chai There”), “Connect sessions” for those isolated at home, New Starters Forum, Armed Forces community staff group, weekly email communications and bi-monthly podcasts.
- Making pro-active welfare calls to all managers and selected individuals throughout the pandemic (c50 calls made and multiple issues related to desk set up and wellbeing resolved).
- Developing a team of mental first aiders.
- Virtual HR “drop in” support sessions.
- Access to an online wellbeing centre, which includes a range of health and wellbeing advice and resources, and an Employee Assistance Programme available through F&H Rewards. Staff can access counselling services and specialist information and support on a range of personal and professional issues that could be affecting them in their work or their health and wellbeing generally, including financial, debt and legal advice.
- A range of resources and support on a dedicated health and wellbeing intranet page, including access to ‘My Wellbeing’ which provides staff with a weekly programme of information aimed at improving overall well-being.
- Health and wellbeing activities including Zen yoga classes (which have continued remotely), free swimming at Hythe Pool and discounted gym memberships available through the council’s reward platform, ‘F&H Rewards’.
- Utilising our occupational health providers and resources such as HSE risk assessment questionnaires to understand the causes of stress and take targeted actions to mitigate these effectively.
- Promoting flexible working options and other policies that may support work/life balance.
- Undertaking staff surveys, which can help us identify both team and organisation-wide issues and assess the positive steps taken to address these.

4.8 An outcome of the 2017-2020 Corporate Plan, under ‘delivering excellence’, was to have sickness absence at less than 7 days per employee per year. This was consistently achieved throughout the lifetime of that plan.

4.9 In addition to the initiatives outlined in paragraph 4.7, a number of other measures are in place to ensure that we continue to support health and wellbeing and reduced absenteeism:

- A robust absence monitoring system. The line manager notifies the generic HR email address when an employee is absent from work. This notification includes the reason for absence and the expected duration of the absence. The email address is monitored daily, ensuring swift interventions from the team.
- As the expected duration of absence is included in the notification, HR can monitor the undertaking of return to work interviews, which form an integral part of effective absence management. If HR have not received a copy of the return to work interview as expected reminders are sent to the line manager to ensure they are completed.
- There are clear absence triggers in place and the HR team provide dedicated and focused support to managers, including attending return to work interviews, if there is a cause for concern. At these meetings supportive

- measures may be discussed that enable the employee to return to work earlier than otherwise anticipated or, in the case of frequent absenteeism, attend work on a more regular basis. If appropriate, it is made very clear to the employee that if their absence(s) continue then we may take the decision to withhold occupational sick pay and formal processes may also be instigated.
- Absence data and cases are reviewed with relevant Directors, Assistant Directors, or Chief Officers as appropriate on a regular basis.
 - Alongside a case management approach and providing focused support to line managers, HR also provide general training on absence management as part of the manager induction process. There was also a specific session on effective absence management and supporting staff health & wellbeing as part of the 2020/21 Manager Development Programme.
 - Occupational Health services continue to be utilised and, through increased contract monitoring, focused KPIs and closer working relationships, we believe we have overseen an increase in quality of medical advice and effective support received in recent years as a consequence.
 - The HR team continue to promote the council's Employee Assistance Programme available through F&H Rewards.
 - The HR team have continued to work with other external organisations and sources of support, such as Access to Work, and relevant internal departments to improve health and wellbeing and support absence management. For example, Health and Safety have undertaken home workstation risk assessments remotely and specialist equipment has been redistributed or provided effectively and where necessary.
 - The Council has historically offered staff free 'flu vaccinations at the Civic Centre. Due to restrictions and the volume of remote workers, staff were reimbursed the cost of private 'flu vaccinations in 2020/21.

5. ORGANISATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

- 5.1 The focus of our small OD and Engagement team is to enhance organisational effectiveness. This is achieved through several areas our People Strategy, with the primary focus being: Learning and Development, Workforce Engagement and the recognition element of Reward and Recognition. Each area will be taken in turn through sections 6, 7 and 8 below.
- 5.2 In March 2020, the OD & Engagement Team were all required to work from home due to the Covid-19 global pandemic. The team were redeployed over several months in various areas of the council (particularly Communications and the Social Response team) and focused on staff well-being. In April 2020, 46 Well-being calls were made to staff and 37 staff contacted re: issues raised in our well-being survey (mostly home office set up) and resolved.
- 5.3 In January 2019, our OD team agreed with Thanet District Council, Canterbury District Council and Dover District Council that we would be the training provider for their management and business administration apprentices and undertake learning and development work for them. During 2020/21 this work brought in £121,000 of income into the council. The cost of additional staff brought in to support with the delivery of these contracts has been covered with this income and our approach has given the OD team greater resilience, economies of scale, and a wider range of facilitators to appeal to different personalities. Working with other councils has meant

that our staff have benefited from a more diverse learning environment, sharing best practice in management with participants from other local authorities. Feedback from the councils we are working with has been resoundingly positive and we have been fostering a deeper sense of community between F&HDC and our neighbouring authorities.

6. LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

- 6.1 Our Learning and Development offer is comprised of general skills development (the team develop managers, deliver training, and run apprenticeships to make sure staff perform well) and technical skills development (we make sure the Council is compliant, appropriately skilled and that the professional skills training budget for the whole organisation is well-managed).
- 6.2 Our Management development programme has, as usual, been updated to reflect the development needs of people managers (based on the learning needs analysis that was completed in July 2020). It is now all delivered online. The majority of sessions are an hour long, with some longer, as needed. Topics covered have included:
- July: Managing during a global pandemic and beyond
 - July: Your role as a manager in driving internal communications
 - August: Human Psychology during a pandemic and the impact of government communications
 - September: Information Access in Local Government
 - October: HR Forum (Health & Well-being; Resourcing; Managing Performance)
 - November: Coaching and Mentoring
 - November: Motivating & engaging your teams
 - December and January: Political insight - working with Councillors
 - December: Medium Term Financial Strategy, Financial systems & processes
 - December: Information Access in Local Government.

This year, we have also run an in-house coaching qualification (ILM L3 Award in Effective Coaching) for 5 managers, who are all now qualified coaches and able to offer coaching sessions to the wider staff group.

OD & Engagement also offer managers ad hoc support and coaching with specific people management-related issues.

- 6.3 Over the course of the 2020/21 year we have offered a variety of online development opportunities for staff at all levels. The OD & Engagement team have run 60 minute to half day sessions on:
- May: Conflict Management Skills x 2
May & July: Preparing for your Behaviour Assessment
September: Personal Resilience & Managing Change
November: Conflict, Time Management, and Customer Care
December, January & February: Practical Presentation Skills

In addition, we have commissioned training on other areas of cross-organisational interest, such as Dealing with Anti-Social Behaviour and Mental Health First Aid.

- 6.4 Following each development session, a review is undertaken to evaluate the success of the topic. Workshops are evaluated based on the extent to which participants felt

that they have increased their competence and confidence in the topic area of the workshop. In general, the majority of participants reported that the workshops have increased their competence and, to a lesser extent, their confidence which develops as they begin to put into practice what has been learnt during the sessions.

- 6.5 Another key, cross-organisational area for the OD & Engagement Team has been supporting the Customer Access Strategy. The team set up and facilitated a working group (now handed over to the Director of Place) and delivered multiple training sessions and internal communications pieces to support the implementation of this important strategy.
- 6.6 Technical training priorities this year focused on enabling us to deliver our services virtually and continue to drive high standards in our business as usual work. Courses have included:
- April-May: Zoom Training for staff and Councillors (multiple, in-house sessions)
 - October: Skype for Business Training (in-house)
 - October: Staff Hub Training (in-house)
 - January: Writing Good Business Cases (ModGov)
 - January: Encrypting Documents (in-house)
 - December & March: Report Writing (ModGov)
- 6.7 Role-specific professional development enables us to deliver the Corporate Plan and this year have included:
- Finance – ACCA qualification; Housing Finance; Closedown; Collection Fund.
 - Case (Corporate) – Introduction to National Non-domestic Rates; HRA Account; Freedom of Information (FOI).
 - HR – TUPE, TAQA (Training, Assessment & Quality Assurance); CIPD module on Sickness Absence.
 - Legal – apprenticeship training course for trainee.
 - Procurement – CIPS qualification.
 - Revenues and Benefits – Mental Health & Autism (for the Vulnerability Team); Housing Benefit Subsidy Training.
 - Community Safety – Resolve.
 - Grounds Maintenance – equipment training.
 - Property – RICS fees & annual Kent RICS conference.
 - Private Sector Housing – Chartered Institute of Environmental Health.
 - Housing: Chartered Institute of Housing (bitesize).
 - Environmental Protection: Dog handling, Anti-Social Behaviour.

Chief Officers, Assistant Directors and Corporate Directors are also offered coaching and bespoke training courses provided by respected organisations such as universities, Roffey Park Institute and the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE).

- 6.8 E-Learning modules have been promoted to all staff in order to comply with our duties for providing relevant Health & Safety and statutory training. We have also offered live online training on key statutory topics such as Prevent & Radicalisation (November). In 2020/21 we reviewed our e-Learning provision and have selected a new supplier to enable us to include courses on Safeguarding (Adult and Child), Modern Day Slavery and Climate Change. This new e-learning platform was launched in May 2021.

6.9 With the introduction of the Apprenticeship Levy in 2016/17 Personnel Committee agreed to focus on apprenticeships. As a council, we decided to become an accredited Apprenticeship Training Provider so that we can deliver our own apprenticeships and draw down on the Apprenticeship Levy funds to pay ourselves to do so. This has the dual benefit of bringing in an income to the council and allowing us to carefully tailor our courses to meet the specific needs of local government. Apprentices are either trained by us in-house or access relevant courses with external training providers.

6.10 In terms of the specific apprenticeships the team offer, we have had 3 officers complete (all with distinction) and have 10 officers currently undertaking a Management Apprenticeship which also involves studying for an ILM Level 3 Diploma for Managers qualification and as we are an ILM Centre we are able to deliver this ourselves. This is a year-long programme and helps develop our talent pipeline in terms of developing aspiring managers. All participants are at different stages as we have had staggered start dates for this course. For several months of 2020, there was an interruption in study due to the COVID-19 global pandemic, but study resumed online for those able in June 2020. Several learners have had to pause their study as they are working on issues related to COVID-19. We are now supporting people in an individual way to work at their own pace. To enhance their development our management apprentices have taken on additional management and cross-training responsibilities as well as shadowing budget managers (where they don't manage a budget themselves) to learn the basics of budget management.

We also have 4 officers undertaking our in-house Level 3 Apprenticeship in Business Administration, having started in September 2020. We also have 2 members of staff studying for a Learning & Development Practitioner Apprenticeship.

6.11 Where appropriate we continue to use external training providers to support apprentices; we have recently signed one officer up for a Project Management Apprenticeship and are exploring other opportunities in the areas of Housing and Finance.

6.12 Councillors have points of contact within the HR team and Committee Services team in order for them to be able to request any individual training or conferences. Councillors also have a specific page on the Learning Zone of the staff intranet. All training presentations are uploaded after each session has taken place to enable those who could not attend to view the materials.

7. WORKFORCE ENGAGEMENT

7.1 A key part of our role in OD & Engagement is to drive employee engagement, which has been proven by numerous studies to drive organisational performance. In 2019, we decided to benchmark ourselves against other organisations and strive for best practice using the Best Companies survey (used by hundreds of UK businesses and not for profit organisations).

7.2 In July 2020, we undertook a baseline survey to understand where we needed to concentrate our efforts in terms of the survey criteria. We were pleasantly surprised to learn that we had already achieved a '1 star' or very good level of employee engagement. We then put in place an action plan to address key areas of feedback.

We enhanced clarity of vision, leadership visibility and highlighted some of the Council's key projects in our communications amongst other things. In March 2021, we undertook the full, formal survey which will see us ranked against other not for profit organisations in the UK. We already know at this stage that the survey showed that we have attained a '2 star' or outstanding level of employee engagement (the maximum rating is '3 star' or world class level of engagement).

- 7.3 Our internal Communications and Engagement strategy is a key document in enabling our ambitions to be a great place to work. Activity is aligned to the 8 factors of engagement (as described by Best Companies). This is delivered via various, currently online, channels:
- Weekly emails with links to videos and intranet articles (Daily emails during lockdown and in the run up to Christmas)
 - Staff briefing (every 2 months)
 - Podcasts (every 2 months) focusing on officers from a variety of teams
 - Connection events: Chai There (monthly), Connect (for people feeling isolated) (bi-monthly), New Starters' Forum and New Managers' Forum (quarterly)
 - Other events (ad hoc) e.g Bingo, Games, Improv, Quiz Time, Hum that Choon.
- 7.4 We ensure strong two-way communication with our people through a variety of interactive workshops and focus groups, e.g Corporate Plan focus groups and the Civic Centre relocation working group. We also regularly survey staff to gain their input and shape our approach. This year the following surveys have been carried out:
- April: Staff Well-being survey
 - May: Recovery survey
 - July: Best Companies pulse survey
 - August: Staff Check-in survey
 - October: Grounds Maintenance engagement survey
 - November: Civic Centre Relocation survey
 - December: ICT survey
 - March: Full Best Companies survey
- 7.5 As well as our usual induction events, the OD & Engagement Team had the additional task of on-boarding almost 70 new Housing staff in October 2020. This was all done remotely and involved multiple events, as well as organising a programme of training activity, including:
- Induction day
 - Join John Q&A sessions
 - 'Meet the wider leadership team' session (including Portfolio Holder).
 - New Manager Induction for Housing Managers
 - Housing Leadership Team team-building event
 - Housing Management Team team-building event
 - Multiple Housing Skills workshops on various topics.
- Feedback from the new recruits was that they felt welcomed, informed and valued.
- 7.6 The OD & Engagement team have also run online meetings and Away Days for teams to help them review progress and plan for the future. These have included sessions for Development Management, the Place Directorate Management Team, Case Management, and the Corporate Leadership Team. We have also supported meetings of the wider management team, engaging Middle Managers in the organisation's strategic thinking and planning.

8. RECOGNITION

- 8.1 We have continued with the delivery of our recognition scheme (albeit online). The peer-nominated scheme recognises those who have noticeably displayed behaviours aligned to our core values. The panel meets three times a year and small prizes are issued shortly afterwards. We also focus on embedding our core values through the corporate induction (which we have updated with a new induction video) and our behaviour framework. This year, we have launched a new E-cards service, making it easier for staff to recognise one another for displaying our values at any time of year.
- 8.2 In January 2021 we awarded the first Employee of the Year award that we introduced this year to recognise a single individual who has relentlessly demonstrated our core values. The winner was Andrew Rush (Communities, Regulatory Services & Contract Management Lead Specialist), nominated by one of his team members, who had shown himself to display our values consistently in spite of a very challenging year responding to the Covid-19 pandemic.

9. STAFF BENEFITS PLATFORM

- 9.1 For several years now staff have been able to benefit from some locally sourced discounts with businesses within the district, a privilege discount card with MacArthur Glen Designer Outlet in Ashford and wider discounts via the CSSC scheme (Civil Service Sports Council) where for a small fee each month staff could access English Heritage sites at a reduced rate along with discounts locally and nationally for cinema tickets, theatre trips and sporting activities.
- 9.2 In August 2018 we launched a new online staff benefit scheme called F&H Rewards in conjunction with Reward Gateway enabling staff to access a wide range of online and high street shopping instant discounts or cash back opportunities including supermarkets, general retailers, holidays, insurances, cinemas and restaurants. This remains an extremely popular reward platform with our staff.



- 9.3 Since the launch approximately 87% of staff have been active users of the scheme – with the majority of discounts continuing to be obtained in the supermarkets, Halfords, B&Q, Currys PC World and cinemas. The scheme was also opened to councillors during 2019/2020.
- 9.4 Part of the F&H Rewards Scheme offers a salary sacrifice option to staff using the 'Cycle to Work' scheme where they can order a bicycle (and equipment) worth up to £1,000 which is paid by the council upfront to the relevant store with the staff member repaying the amount over 12 months through the payroll system which enables tax savings of between 32-42%.

Despite the pandemic and national lockdowns, this has remained a relatively popular part of the scheme and we are currently in the process of increasing the amount that can be applied for to £1,500 to enable staff more opportunity to purchase electric bikes.

- 9.5 A further development of the F&H Rewards Scheme will be a new element – SmartTech. This is run by Currys PC World and operates as a way for staff to purchase white goods and electronics up to the value of £1,000 at 0% interest with monthly deductions over a 12 month period through the payroll system. We have flexibility within this option to enable a higher value and/or longer repayment schemes however in the first instance it was felt more appropriate to have a lower value and to mirror the 12 month repayment that exists within the Cycle to Work scheme. We are aiming to launch this part of the platform within the next 4-6 weeks.
- 9.6 The F&H Rewards platform also has a ‘wellbeing centre’ enabling staff to access our Employee Assistance Programme (provided via BHSF), healthcare cashplans, healthy recipes and meal plans, discounted gym memberships, advice on mental health issues and also impartial financial advice. These pages of the platform are regularly accessed by a number of staff and regular health promotions are publicised to all staff as part of our internal communications strategy.

9. PEOPLE STRATEGY

- 9.1 As part of the transformation programme, work was undertaken to devise a new People Strategy for the council. Over the last 24 months the strategy became embedded within the council framework and underpins not just the transformation programme but all of our people related activities.

The 2019 People Strategy can be seen at **Appendix B**.

- 9.2 The 6 main themes of the people strategy were:



- 9.3 A comprehensive review of the strategy was undertaken and discussed at Continuous Improvement Board in April 2021. A snapshot of the review and actions that have been undertaken can be seen in **Appendix C**.
- 9.4 The HR team are very proud of the work that has been completed over the last couple of years, particularly as the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdowns had a minimal impact on the service delivery whilst we also focused on supporting the council with its response to Covid-19 ensuring that resources were appropriately redeployed, the effect absences were having on service areas, wellbeing calls, ensuring staff had the appropriate resources to be able to work from home etc. and also monitoring and promoting opportunities for staff to have the Covid-19 vaccinations.

9.5 Transformation

- 9.5.1 Throughout 2019/20 and 2020/21 the Chief HR Officer and HR Project Officer have continued to support the transformation programme.

Stages 1 (Corporate Services) and 2 (External Services) of the transformation programme were completed successfully prior to March 2020. However Stage 3 (Development Management, IT and Communications) and Stage 4 (HR & OD) were completed during lockdown. Regular meetings led by the Chief HR Officer have also taken place with the branch Unison chair and regional Unison officer with the option for the regional GMB officer to also attend to ensure that the unions are kept up to date with progress towards the completion of transformation.

- 9.5.2 The stages of restructuring outlined above were carried out with minimal compulsory redundancies and a few voluntary redundancies. There were no appeals against the process at any point over the last 2 years.

9.6 Behavioural Competency Framework



9.6.1 Following on from the work outlined in section 10 of the HR Annual Review 2019/20 (report P/20/01) throughout the transformation programme we assimilated the vast majority of staff into new positions with no competitive process. However, we made it very clear throughout the process that we would still expect all staff to undertake a behavioural assessment focusing on relevant behaviours for the role with the outcomes being used to design a personal development plan for each member of staff providing them with the opportunity to improve on certain behaviours should the need arise. This is enabling us to embed a high performance culture across the council.

9.6.2 By the end of the 2019/20 financial year all staff within stage 1 of the transformation programme had undertaken a behavioural assessment led by their manager and supported by a member of the HR team.

9.6.3 After a short break whilst everyone adjusted to using Skype or Zoom for meetings, from May 2020 the staff who were part of stages 2, 3 and 4 completed their assessments by the end of 2020.

9.6.4 In addition, the staff who transferred to the council from East Kent Housing in October 2020 also had a behavioural assessment at the start of 2021.

9.6.5 During the 2020 calendar year all selection interviews that took place had at least half the questions taken from the bank of behavioural competency interview questions and as a result after approximately 3 months of employment each member of staff worked with their line manager to devise a development plan based on their interview and their work in that first 3 months.

9.6.6 Therefore by the end of the 2020/21 financial year, every member of staff will have a personal development plan based on their assessment with the exception of grounds maintenance and Hythe Pool. The team are currently discussing with the relevant managers the best way to ensure our behavioural framework is embedded within these teams day to day work.

9.6.7 Looking forward the next stage to further embedding our behaviours will be to design, write and implement different selection exercises and methods that will enhance our recruitment and selection processes and provide more opportunity outside of a traditional interview for candidates to demonstrate their abilities and attitudes. Of course this will also naturally mean training managers in how to appropriately assess these types of exercises with the added consideration of whether some are face to face in the future or whether using media such as Skype will remain a preferred option.

9.7 People Strategy 2021-2024

9.7.1 Work has already begun on a refreshed People Strategy for 2021 – 2024 which will align not only with the new Corporate Plan, the Customer Access Strategy and also the Carbon Action Plan. Whilst the themes remain largely the same, we have adapted them slightly to ensure wellbeing is adequately referenced as well as agile working.



The draft of the new People Strategy 2021-24 can be seen at **Appendix D**.

9.7.2 The Covid-19 pandemic saw an unplanned overnight change for office based staff from being office-based with regular periods of working from home to becoming home-based agile workers. The last 12 months have clearly demonstrated the benefits of agile working in balancing work and home life whilst continuing to deliver high quality services to our residents.

As an employer, we continue to recognise the need to develop and encourage modern working practices to enable employees to maximise their performance and productivity and deliver the greatest value to the business, whilst maintaining high levels of customer service and a good work life balance.

During the pandemic whilst the civic offices were closed we continued to listen and engage with staff and based on a significant volume of feedback there was a considerable evidence base to further support the advantages that come from agile working. As a result, in line with the draft People Strategy, a new Agile Working Framework has been developed which takes steps towards making this a permanent feature in the way in which we operate. The first three months from July 2021 (subject of course to the government's roadmap) will be very much a test and learn phase where we will take feedback to ensure that the framework benefits not only staff, but also our residents continue to receive high quality services.

The draft of the new Agile Working Framework can be seen at **Appendix E**.

9.8 Best Companies 2021

9.8.1 As noted in section 7.2 above, in April 2021 the Council was awarded a '2-star' rating for outstanding employee engagement by Best Companies. This marked a big improvement from the pulse survey in July 2020 where we were rated as a '1 star' organisation.

9.8.2 Before moving on from the People Strategy section of this report, the final outcome of the Best Companies has to be mentioned. Whilst the outcomes were not divulged until recently at the end of May 2021, the survey itself that the outcome was based upon took place in March 2020 and therefore the results should form part of this report.

At a live virtual event on 21st May 2021, we were informed that we had achieved the following results:



More specifically, we were awarded 4th in the national Top 10 Best Not for Profit Bodies to work for and 57th in the Top 100 Companies in the South East – this is a significant achievement for the council and reflects on the incredible amount of work undertaken by the HR & OD team over the last 2 years to support the organisation to achieve this award.

10. PAYROLL

- 10.1 Following Cabinet approval in February 2014, Ashford Borough Council have provided our council payroll service and our election payroll. The delegation arrangement and service level agreement are reviewed annually by the Chief HR Officer and the Head of Personnel at Ashford
- 10.2 The payroll service continues to run in a very efficient manner between the two councils. This is clearly demonstrated by the smooth transition of the East Kent Housing staff onto the council payroll in October 2020 with 100% accuracy following a substantial amount of planning by the HR team to ensure that the structural hierarchy was correct and all personal information was checked.
- 10.3 East Kent Audit have carried out annual audit reviews of the payroll service and placed substantial assurance on the systems of internal controls in operation with no recommendations or actions, with one report stating that 'the success...is reflected by there not being any payroll errors since the payroll went live in November 2014'. The most recent audit report from March 2021 confirms again that there was 'no scope for improvement identified'.

11. HR SERVICES IN 2021/22

- 11.1 Some of the work already identified for the team during the 2021/22 year includes:
- Further development of the behavioural framework to embed competency based recruitment and selection activities including developing a range of selection and development methods which link to our values and behaviours as well as assessing knowledge, skills and experience;
 - Support to the project covering the new Customer Access Point and future relocation of the Civic Centre, leading on the changes that will directly affect our people;
 - Reviewing the technology that exists to further enhance the ways in which we can best continue supporting the council's objectives;
 - Development of additional employee benefits to enhance reward & recognition;
 - Supporting the continued development of the case management approach to ensure there is greater resilience and flexibility in how we deploy our people; and
 - Continuation of the ILM internal and external delivery.

In addition, following the Covid-19 pandemic and periods of national lockdown the HR team are working to support the senior management team in enabling staff to continue working successfully from home whilst feeling supported and part of a wider team across the council as the civic centre looks to reopen in July 2021, in line with the draft Agile Working Framework.

12. LEGAL / FINANCIAL AND OTHER CONTROLS / POLICY MATTERS

12.1 Legal Officers Comments (AK)

There are no legal implications arising from this report.

12.2 Finance Officers Comments (CS)

There are no financial implications arising directly from this report.

12.3 Diversities and Equalities Implications (ASm)

There are no specific Diversities and Equalities Implications arising from this report.

13. CONTACT OFFICER AND BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

Councillors with any questions arising out of this report should contact the following officer prior to the meeting:

Andrina Smith – Chief HR Officer

Tel: 01303 853405

Email: andrina.smith@folkestone-hythe.gov.uk

The following background documents have been relied upon in the preparation of this report:

None

APPENDICES:

Appendix A – HR & OD Team Structure Chart

Appendix B – People Strategy 2019

Appendix C – Review of the People Strategy

Appendix D – Draft People Strategy 2021

Appendix E – Draft Agile Working Framework