

HUMAN RESOURCES

Pay and Grading – Local pay bargaining meetings have been taking place with Trade Unions since they submitted their pay claim at the start of January. Discussions have been productive and unions are likely to ballot members on our full and final offer later in March. It is likely the pay award will be processed in pay in May, however increments will be paid in April and we have just completed the assessment of the performance related increments this month (senior management cohort).

The team has also been progressing a second tranche of voluntary assimilation (c80 roles) within Adults to the new WNC local pay structure (this is following the first tranche which was completed in January).

Health Safety and Wellbeing – We are currently conducting a wellbeing survey which will help shape WNC's wellbeing interventions going forwards. The team are also working on the management actions arising from the internal audit from the Autumn, this includes writing new terms of reference for H&S forums, a revised H&S policy and establishing a H&S steering group established to review the draft strategy.

Learning and Development – Focus has been on preparing for the apprenticeship service disaggregation from NNC. This is involving extensive efforts to review the contracts held by NNC with third party providers to ensure contracts are in place for WNC from 1st April. Our priority is on ensuring all existing learners on apprenticeships are not affected by the change. We have also run our first courses via our new training providers KPMG and Gateway and we will be evaluating this new provision.

Recruitment

The team have been supporting Communities & Opportunities to recruit an Assistant Director Housing and working closely with colleagues at Ridgeway to identify redeployment opportunities. They have also attended a careers fair at Northgate school (special educational needs) and at Silverstone Circuit which was an event for armed forces.

TRANSFORMATION

The Corporate & Finance Transformation team have been heavily engaged over the last quarter on the delivery of the telephony project (a single telephony solution to harmonise legacy provision and contracts). The solution has two parts, back office provision will be in place by 31st March, contact centre call functionality is already live with enhanced provision such as email and web chat available by summer. Its been a tricky implementation as it has been a significant undertaking with multiple partners (NCT, NPH, WNC) and suppliers.

The Office optimisation programme is progressing well, with significant project management support to deliver the next phase which sees the re-modelling of the Forum and relocation of colleagues from Towcester.

Other projects that the team are designing and delivering include the new public mortuary service, a replacement for call care, and the phase two of Revenues and Benefits single system.

CUSTOMER SERVICES

The department have had one of the busiest months of activity, with 34,500 received by phone alone. We have also continued to implement the functionality of the new Storm technology, whilst managing the changes to the Council Tax system which preceded the annual billing cycle.

Customer Services colleagues have taken an active role in testing and shaping the provision of Contact Centre functionality not only across the department, but also with the internal helpdesks. This will allow us to have a system which not only manages incoming contacts from customers, but also produces the data reports and forecasting needed to deliver the service, and schedule resources in an efficient way.

Implementation has been very complex, but the team have carried this out whilst still managing incoming demand. 21 monthly drop-in sessions have also been delivered, with enhanced provision across our One Stop Shops to support with annual billing.

In terms of improving the customer experience and pathways, more work has been completing on simplifying the content and navigation on our website, with the launch of the Moving into West Northamptonshire section, which gives the information and advice people may need when becoming residents of the county, organised by recipient (young family, student/ carer etc).

The focus for the coming months will continue to be the design and development of the triage function, to reduce the demand into NCT MASH and Adult Services. This will also improve outcomes for customers and partners, as it will provide them with the information and advice they need at the earliest opportunity. The reprocurement of a new Customer Record Management solution will also start shortly, with requirements gathering being the first step.

DIGITAL, TECHNOLOGY & INNOVATION

Fixed Telephone Line Project

Our brand new telephony and contact centre system, Storm, has now gone live for most of the council, replacing our four inherited telephony systems. This new tool enables our hybrid working policies, gives us flexibility with our property strategy and ensure more efficient and configurable routing of calls, giving our staff the tools, they need to do the job well. Now that it is live, the project team will be adding features such as voice recognition and integration with social media to give a truly modern, single tool for managing customer interactions.

Unified Digital Network

As per approval from Cabinet, the service has started working with industry experts to devise a new digital network – the wires and digital routes between all of our main offices and satellite sites. This single network replaces all of the existing legacy networks inherited at Vesting day; ensures that we have the capacity and speed to meet the ever-growing needs for computer traffic between sites; and tailors the digital network to meet our new planned property setup. It will be implemented over the course of 2024-5.

Laying the ground for future success

When we became West Northamptonshire, we inherited the separate systems of four predecessor councils, all in various states of maturity and age. One of the least visible programmes of work that nonetheless has the most impact on our productivity as a council is merging and replacing these systems so that staff do not have to move between the four, saving time and money. This then often becomes an excellent opportunity, as we merge them, to identify more efficient ways of doing things.

Our teams are currently:

- Preparing to bring a case for replacement of all our meeting room AV equipment during calendar Q2, to raise the standard of meetings and broadcast events.
- Supporting procurement of replacements for the case management software of both our adults team and the Children's Trust, to work more efficiently and release valuable frontline worker time.
- Devising replacements for our main data storage and disaster recovery tools, to improve reliability and streamline our tools.
- A gradual programme of system mergers – taking four sets of tools in each of our service areas and merging them into a single set, allowing staff to work more efficiently and interchangeably.
- Developing a single "identity management" tool. This system will connect all of the various systems our staff use, allowing them to increasingly use a single login to access things over time, and also for our support teams to remove access to all systems instantaneously upon staff departure (thus improving our security).
- Preparing to replace our primary Housing system, as part of a drive to modernise our housing back office processes.
- Developing a single document management tool, to ensure that all council documents are accessible to the right people internally, backed up, shareable with people with appropriate permissions and protected from inappropriate access.
- Continuing work on service restructure which is focusing on the changing skill landscape that modern DTI departments require notably an increase in cloud technology skill sets and the newer technologies and software sets needed to transform our public services.
- Evaluating all contracts to identify further savings to support our financial position.

CORPORATE SERVICES

Democratic and Electoral Services

Having successfully delivered the Neighbourhood Planning Referendum in Arthingworth and the council by-election in East Hunsbury and Shelfleys, the Elections Team is now focussed on preparation for the scheduled Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner elections in May. The team have made significant progress with the recruitment of staff and booking polling stations, while working with colleagues at North Northamptonshire Council to ensure the successful delivery of the poll across Northamptonshire.

Democratic and Electoral services are also engaged in the delivery of the Community Governance Review. The first stage of formal consultation has now concluded and, following consideration of responses by the Democracy and Standards Committee, a report is set out elsewhere on this agenda for consideration. Following agreement by Council, the second formal stage of consultation, during which the Council will consult on specific proposals for change, will commence at the beginning of April.

Since the last meeting, Democratic Services have supported a number of significant pieces of work, including the budget scrutiny process and the review of the e-scooter trial conducted by the Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee, both of which reported to Cabinet earlier this year. The team are also working hard to schedule admission appeals following the allocation of secondary school places on national offer day on 1 March.

Coroner's

The Coroner's has had a busy winter period. The service undertook annual refresher training for procedures and manual handling in readiness for The Leys being activated and updated Risk Assessments. Leading up to Christmas, between Christmas and New Year and until the end of January, frequent calls took place between Coroner's and the NHS monitoring capacity and agreeing interventions. No request came from NGH or KGH to activate The Leys.

From April 2024 the Medical Examiner system will become statutory. Draft regulations were issued on 14th December 2023 with a consultation until 12th January 2024. An implementation date is yet to be confirmed by the Department of Health, with a detailed timetable. With this death reform, much will remain the same but there will be some key changes requiring system changes. Once the government timetable has been issued, the service will issue communications on behalf of Coroner's and Registrations to local funeral directors and update internal partners.

The service has been looking at the website and adding more content for an improved customer experience.

Registration

The service has been busy with winter and death registrations and has been working with the digital improvement team on their website content. Changes have been made and the introduction of easy read documents, to support customers for a successful registration appointment.

Since November we have approved one new venue and three further new venues are processing through the licensing process and may be available for couples to marry in this summer. The venues will be added to our website once approved by the General Registrar Office and provides more customer choice to marry within West Northamptonshire.

Public Mortuary

The planning application has been submitted, and a decision is expected by 15th April 2024.

Legal Services

Legal Services have supported a number of departments on projects including multiple public inquiries, planning hearings, acquisition of the former bus station, seizure of £2.7m of illegal electronic vapes, harmonising of the taxi licensing regime, updating enforcement processes and protocols, and commencing the establishment a legal gateway panel for community deprivation of liberty applications.

Training has and continues to be delivered to client departments – including around the Code for Crown Prosecutors, Ordinary Residence and challenges to deprivations of liberty. Fortnightly legal surgeries are also being held for the Adult Social Care team.

Legal Services have successfully recruited across the team and is continuing its recruitment programme to secure permanent team members and reduce reliance on locums. A large-scale recruitment process is underway to recruit a Childcare team to be able to deliver legal services to the Northamptonshire Children’s Trust.

Legal Services have been shortlisted for the LexisNexis In-House Legal Team of the Year Award and have two colleagues shortlisted for their Unsung Hero and Rising Star awards.

Councillor Mike Hallam

Cabinet Member for HR & Corporate Services