

Human Resources

Pay & Grading

The local pay award was successfully negotiated and following TU ballot was paid in May across WNC. Nationally again they are running at a slower pace but have presented to TUs a full and final offer in May which unions are balloting members on over the summer. The national offer is slightly less favourable than the WNC offer. Voluntary Assimilation to the new pay structure also continues with a tranche in Housing and Pensions and Education are in planning stages.

Payroll

Payroll accuracy rates continue to remain high for the provision of services across all partners, and regular service review meetings are providing the service with excellent feedback rather than partner issues. The team have had a busy couple of months ensuring the elections staff engaged across CCC, NNC and WNC were paid after the PFCC elections which means running additional elections payrolls to the normal ones for partners. Payments should be made in June, but with additional runs in July for WNC.

Supporting the General Election

Given the announcement of the General Election, members of both HR and Transformation have been asked to step in and take the lead of staffing the elections for 4th July to allow the Elections Service to focus on other arrangements. This has been very time intensive, however we have now re-designed the processes to make them less admin heavy through using MS forms and automation. We have a live Power BI dashboard so can report on fill rates at a glance and over 3000 applications were received to work following a recruitment campaign.

Learning & Development

I am pleased to announce the service is now fully disaggregated from North Northants and new contracts between apprenticeship suppliers and WNC have been signed.

Recruitment

Having had some settling in and fact-finding time, our has re-viewed processes and roles across the team, with the aim of focussing on our organisationally; wicked roles' (hard to recruit or critical to service delivery) and long-term agency. She is also working to embed the processes around the care leavers covenant to ensure we can maximise the opportunities we have to support our care leavers into employment.

HR Advisory & Business Partnering

Organisational change continues to take up the bulk of the resource rather than employee relations casework. The DTI restructure being particularly resource intensive since December given the approach of seeking voluntary redundancy applications followed by service design, and the need to extend the consultation period. However, with consultation now closed recruitment to posts is underway, then it can be handed to Recruitment to support where required with external roles and head hunting. The other significant restructure has been in Housing, which again is now in recruitment stage and there are several more in the planning stages across services including Adults, Education and across Communities & Opportunities.

LEGAL, DEMOCRATIC & ELECTORAL SERVICES

Coroner's

The Coroner's Service has been very busy over recent bank holidays and have had to respond to the potential of an activation of the Leys Storage which thankfully did not prove to be necessary.

The service has been preparing for the inquest of Harry Dunn in June 2024 which due to the high profile of this case is likely to attract significant press interest.

Department of Health announced the implementation date for the Statutory Medical Examiner Service as 9th September 2024. Final regulations were issued following the consultation period and the Service is attending a webinar hosted by the Royal College of Pathologists on 11th June. Local partnership meetings will then take place with both Lead Medical Examiners. There will be some key changes requiring system changes. There will be changes to our website and the local communications to our local funeral directors.

The Head of Service and Senior Coroner have met with Northamptonshire Combating Drugs and Alcohol Partnership (CDP) and discussed how information following toxicology testing can be shared, and the service is involved in reviewing Northants Police sudden death policy relating to this aspect with support from Public Health. The LRF are planning a mass fatality exercise in November 2024, which will be spread over three separate days.

Registration

The service has been working to prepare for and now have successfully implemented the new council income management solution. In May the General Registry Office laid regulations in Parliament to increase some statutory fees and charges. The changes came into effect from 28th May 2024. The booking system and website have been updated to reflect the new fees.

Pre-season planning has taken place for summer wedding ceremonies.

Public Mortuary

Good progress is being made towards the building of the new Mortuary at Booth Meadow. The Build Contract is currently out to tender and bids are due to be received by mid-June to allow the building to be operational from the next financial year.

A partnership meeting was held at Guildhall on 10th May 2024 which involved managers from services across both Northampton General Hospital and Kettering General Hospital to explore closer working with the NHS and the Mortuary. The meeting was well attended. Conversations continue with both KGH and NGH regarding transfer of the coroner's work to the new Mortuary when it opens next year.

Legal Services and Information Governance

FOI Requests

Though there was a significant spike in FOI Request numbers in April (170 this year compared to 100 in 2023), it appears to have been across the whole council rather than being focused on one topic or one service area. This trend has not continued and May's outrun is 117 requests compared to 126 in 2023.

Data Governance

Now that most of the Legal Service provision has returned to the inhouse team Data Governance have been working more closely with them to provide support drafting data protection contract clauses and data processing schedules.

The number of Subject Access Requests remains fairly constant however the complexity of the requests continues to increase, particularly when data from Adults and Education is being requested.

The redrafting of the Data Sharing Agreement with Northampton Partnership Homes has started. This work has taken a completely fresh look at the way the Council interacts and shares tenant's personal data and was instigated following the transfer of the Housing Allocation Service to the Council.

Legal Update

The Legal Service has been preparing for taking over the new Childcare legal work from the Children's Trust from 1st July 2024 in partnership with North Northamptonshire Council. The proposal is that all cases will in future be delivered in house, and that we will welcome the transfer of the staff from the outsourced teams to support that. This change will achieve closer working between the Children's Trust and the Councils on the cases concerning children within our area, it will also help the Children's Trust to reduce cost whilst maintaining or improving the quality of service provided. A recruitment campaign including the hosting of collaboration events, was very successful in attracting some high-quality candidates for the new team. The first appointments have now been made and they will be joining us shortly.

The Legal Team has started to carry out the Housing Disrepair cases for Northamptonshire Partnership Homes, helping to reduce costs and support NPH in their work. The Legal Team has also been supporting the Housing Team in a review of the Management Agreement with NPH.

The place legal team have been supporting the planning team in their enforcement work and the use of planning performance agreements. They have also generated £21,650 of revenue from external sources by drafting s106 agreements. They have also raised £20,000 in legal fees relating to the completion of highways agreements.

There have been successes in court for the legal team including the publicised Banning Order against a rogue landlord which resulted in fines in excess of £100k.

[West Northamptonshire Council obtain Banning Order against rogue landlord | West Northamptonshire Council \(westnorthants.gov.uk\)](https://www.westnorthants.gov.uk/news/west-northamptonshire-council-obtain-banning-order-against-rogue-landlord)

The litigation team have also been improving the Council's approach to prosecution and enforcement across the council through training on the a) Code for Crown Prosecutors and b) Disclosure. Legal Services also represented the Highways Authority at the Harry Dunn Inquest, and the Coroner was satisfied with the steps that had been taken to date.

The Legal Team continue to be very busy dealing with the SEN matters and currently have an appeal caseload of 106 cases. We have been successful in recruiting a permanent member of the team to lead our SEND legal team. An initial meeting with School Headteachers has taken place to introduce the team and training will be provided on 5th July to better support Headteachers in tribunals.

The Legal Team were nominated for three award categories for the LLG awards on 7th June 2024.

- Legal Team of the Year
- Legal Professional of the Year (Cath Whitehead)
- Junior Lawyer of the Year (Jacob Martin from the property team)

On the night Cath Whitehead was successful in being awarded the Legal Professional of the Year. She acknowledged the support of Sarah Hall and the wider legal team in the extraordinary successes of the legal team this year which enabled her to achieve the award.

CUSTOMER SERVICES

Another very busy month for Customer Services, with increased demand related to Council Tax collection and money and debt matters. The team have improved their ability to manage customer enquiries by cross-skilling an unprecedented number of advisors and enhancing their access to the knowledge and systems needed to respond to complex queries.

We are currently testing the roll-out of SMS and webchat as the next releases in our telephony upgrade, which will allow us to share web links, forms and essential information with customers when they are on the phone, without losing or forgetting important details which would assist them. We will also be exploring the use of SMS for sending out reminders for appointments, due payments, etc.

Webchat will allow us to support customers in real time while they are navigating the website, improving their ability to self-serve, whilst also helping us gather essential learning about what is needed to improve online content.

The website content review has continued at pace, with significant improvements made to pages such as Education, Waste Services, and moving onto Elections pages to support everyone, regardless of their communications needs, to engage with the democratic process and voting in the upcoming General Elections. Easy Read guides have been produced for our most used pages, and a Translation button is currently being tested, to assist the 11% of people living in West Northants who don't speak English as a first language.

The next few months will be heavily focused on standardising processes across our two main services, Revenues and Benefits, and Housing, following the hugely positive move to single policies and single systems completed by colleagues in these departments. We will also continue to engage with residents to improve the navigation and content on our web pages, such as improved content on the Family Hub website specifically aimed at Care Experienced young people. Feedback from colleagues and residents has been excellent, and customer services will continue to prioritise accessibility and inclusivity of information and advice across all council services.

DIGITAL, TECHNOLOGY & INNOVATION

Finding Efficiencies

Given the financial challenges faced by WNC, the team has worked hard to find efficiencies in our work to support the overall budget position.

Despite starting the year with a target of £1m to find as well as £2.4m of pressures driven by high inflation, unbudgeted legacy contracts and rising demand, the division has finished the year with a £0.9m underspend through rigorous work and a laser-like focus on opportunities to reduce costs.

Consultation also concluded on a restructure that took effect from April 1st 2024, which will deliver an ongoing budget reduction of £973k from last year's budget position. For context, the gross budget for DTI in 2023-4 was £14.1m (with just under half of this recharged to other organisations), making in-year reductions equivalent to 30% of gross budget, and ongoing reductions equivalent to 14% of net budget.

Innovation

Most recently, we have:

- Created a new Innovation Hub programme, working with all service areas to identify potential game-changing technologies that can deliver both efficiencies and better services, which will rapidly pilot promising ideas and move successful ones swiftly into delivery.
- In-housed the popular Merged Futures event: the annual flagship Digital Northants events held at the University of Northampton that showcases the best of technology in Northamptonshire and brings together private exhibitors, academics, community organisations and public bodies. Merged Futures 6, the latest event, was held on June 14th.
- Supported the developed of Streets of Change, a film put together by members of the homelessness community among others to give a voice to some of our most underprivileged residents.
- Started an AI pilot in our SEND service, which is showing great early promise in cutting the backlog of SEND applications and using automation to make rapid decisions on cases.

Councillor Mike Hallam

Cabinet Member for HR & Corporate Services