

**People Select Committee**  
**Overview Meeting 2022**  
**14 February 2022**  
**HR, Legal and Communications**

**Context**

Members are reminded of the Council's Vision that supports decision-making:

A place where people are healthy, safe and protected from harm

- This means the Borough will be a place where:
  - People live in cohesive and safe communities
  - People are supported and protected from harm
  - People live healthy lives

A place that is clean, vibrant and attractive

- This means we will enjoy:
  - Great places to live and visit
  - Clean and green spaces
  - Rich cultural experiences

A place with a thriving economy where everyone has opportunities to succeed

- This means that the Borough will have:
  - A growing economy
  - Improved education and skills development
  - Job creation and increased employment

The Council plays its part in making sure this is achieved by being a Council that is ambitious, effective and proud to serve.

- This means that we will make sure that we provide:
  - Financial sustainability and value for money
  - Dedicated and resourceful employees
  - Strong leadership and governance

**Performance Reporting**

Performance across the Council Plan was reported on a six-monthly basis to Executive Scrutiny Committee. Please see the link:

<http://www.egenda.stockton.gov.uk/aksstockton/users/public/admin/kab71.pl?cmte=SCR>

## **HR, LEGAL AND COMMUNICATIONS**

### **Director – Becky Brown**

Relevant services include:

- Human Resources
- Legal Services
- Communications, Consultation and Engagement
- Information Governance

### **Council Plan 2021-2024**

The Council Plan sets out the aims and objectives for all services and is refreshed on an annual basis.

The key 2021-2022 priorities for HR, Legal and Communications directorate are attached at *Appendix 1*. However, as the 92 employees in the directorate work predominantly as a support service to the whole organisation, they play a role in supporting all the priorities in the Council Plan. There is also a direct and expert role for a number of our teams in working with colleagues to deliver the Council Plan key vision of having “*dedicated and resourceful employees*” and “*strong governance*”.

### **Human Resources - priorities for the year ahead reflecting emerging issues, and our current challenges and opportunities**

The HR Service team of 22 employees remains focussed on providing a proactive HR support service to the organisation through:

- The HR Advisory team
- The Employee Health and Wellbeing team (incl. the occupational health service)
- The Organisation Planning and Change team
- The Learning and Development team

The Council faces a number of HR challenges, opportunities and emerging issues:

1. A key challenge for the year ahead is to continue to support the SBC workforce by providing a safe and Covid-secure working environment as we adapt to working under the latest phase of the pandemic. We will:
  - Ensure that the organisation retains Covid-Secure status. We moved urgently in 2020 to establish safe working practices and establish Covid-Secure status for the organisation. We have maintained this throughout the pandemic and the challenge now is to review and update the operating and building risk assessments, working practices and policies to reflect the gradual lifting of Covid restrictions. Our organisation-wide risk assessment sets out how we are delivering this and we will ensure that we continue to monitor and update this to keep track of the changing situation  
<https://intranet.stockton.gov.uk/coronavirus/covid-19-risk-assessments/>
  - We will continue to provide and develop support for employees suffering from Post Covid – we have nine employees still absent from work and we need to establish how this sickness absence will be treated in future. Covid related sickness absence is currently being treated differently from other sickness

absence (absence is not counting towards long term absence limits) – we are reviewing this policy decision with regional colleagues and with the unions. A decision on the long term policy will be established in the coming year and is related to current reviews of whether the condition meets the definition of a disability.

2. We face a challenge and opportunities associated with completing the flexible working pilot. The pilot, which began in September 2021, was paused in December 2021 due to implementation of the Government Covid Plan B restrictions which required home-working where possible but was re-established on 31 January 2022. The 7-month pilot which runs to 31 March 2022 is testing arrangements which enable employees whose roles have been classified as flexible (approx. 50% of employees) to work 40% of their time away from the office. A survey of employees and Members will be carried out later this month to assess how the pilot is working and a final decision about the implementation of flexible working will be made in April 2022. This marks a significant development in working practices and will bring with it significant contractual and ongoing training demands, however we are keen to build on the ICT and working practice developments we built up over Covid and see this as an opportunity to capitalise on progress and support the office consolidation developments outlined in 3 below.
3. Work to consolidate our office accommodation from ten to two buildings will be stepped up in 2022 with plans to complete the design of Dunedin House and a new base in Billingham. The HR team are supporting the Office Accommodation workstream to ensure HR policies and practices are in place to ensure a smooth transition.
4. We continually review our pay and reward package as we recognise it is a key aspect of our ability to recruit and retain employees. This is a particular priority this year as the national negotiation of the 2021 pay award is still ongoing. Of particular focus is our ability to continue to deliver on the Council commitment to pay the Real Living Wage (RLW) to employees. This commitment was made in 2018 and has been achieved up to and including the November 2020 RLW of £9.50. However, as the pay award for 2021 has still not been agreed our current lowest salary of £9.62 (which has been in place since April 2020) has now fallen behind the RLW of £9.90 which came into force in November 2021. If the 2021 pay settlement goes through at the current offer level, our lowest pay point will be £9.79 which is still below the RLW level but above the National Living Wage level of £8.91. It has not been possible to review our pay and grading structure whilst national negotiations are ongoing, as these negotiations include options around “bottom-loading” pay awards to deliver higher % increases for lower pay grades and possible changes to pay structures. However, we will need to consider the Council commitment to the RLW and our pay and grading structure once the national negotiations are complete. It is also apparent that we are already significantly behind the normal timetable for the 2022 pay negotiations and it is anticipated that the RLW will increase significantly in November 2022, increasing the gap from current SBC levels.
5. We continue to face the challenge of Sickness Absence. Sickness Absence levels remain high at 8.6 average days lost per FTE last year compared with the target of 8.5 average per FTE. It is becoming increasingly apparent that absence due to Stress /Anxiety/ Depression/Mental Wellbeing is the ongoing most significant underlying cause, accounting for 36% of all absences this year. This is by far the most common cause of absence this year with the next highest cause being Covid-related illness accounting for 16% of absences. We are reviewing our packages of

support for employees affected by mental health issues, including a review of our early help, support and wellbeing services, the occupational health service, the impact of the Mental Health First Aid training and the anonymised evidence from our contracted counselling and wellbeing service provided by Mind.

6. The implementation of the Senior Management restructure which is being considered by Cabinet on 17 February 2022 represents a big commitment for 2022/23 – recruitment, reorganisation and transition planning demands will be significant over the next 12-18 months.
7. We have made some progress in our aspiration to achieve a more diverse workforce. BME employees made up 4% of the workforce at 31 March 2021 this is an increase from the position of 2.3 % at 31 March 2020. However, despite various approaches over recent years, the percentage of BME staff in the Council's workforce remains below our stated aim for the diversity of our workforce to be representative of the Borough's population (5.4% BME). Opportunities within the Council were promoted with the BME community in 2019/20 and we continue to work with our BME Staff Forum regarding recruitment and retention of BME staff. Proactive recruitment work was reduced during 2021, we plan to increase this activity as Covid restrictions are lifted and to make the most of this opportunity in 2022.
8. We have continued to recruit apprentices where we are able and an additional 41 new apprenticeship appointments were made as part of our annual apprenticeship programme in September 2021. At 31st December 2021 the Council had a total of 103 Employees undertaking an apprenticeship qualification. The apprenticeships are at all levels (Level 3-7) and in all Directorates. In addition to our commitment to apprenticeships, the Council has also created 7 "Kickstart" opportunities for 16-24 year olds on Universal Credit and as of 31 December 2021 had recruited 3 individuals to the scheme. We intend to expand this programme in 2022 and to maximise usage of the Apprenticeship levy.
9. The People Select Committee Task and Finish Group has just completed a review of the Local Government pension scheme and its review of why 15% of employees are not members of the pension scheme. The review has produced a number of recommendations to increase take-up and we will implement these over the coming year.
10. We continue to deliver the Shaping a Brighter Future approach following completion of the initial 5-year period. Work continues to ensure that the agreed workplace culture thrives across the organisation. Development work has continued this year to ensure that staff forums, Setting the Scene and Setting the Scene Showcase events are all available online to support the new flexible working approach.

### **Legal Services - Priorities for the year ahead reflecting emerging issues and our current challenges and opportunities**

The Legal Services team of 27 employees remains focussed on providing a proactive legal service to the organisation through:

- The Property, Contracts and Regulatory team
- The Children's Social Care team
- The Adults & Litigation team
- The Legal support team
- And, through the delivery of Monitoring Officer and Proper Office functions.

1. We continue to face operational demands arising from pressure across the Children's Social Care system. The high level of demand (we currently have 100 open cases in formal legal process) is exacerbated by the backlogs and pressures in the court process from operating under Covid-19. We have a full team in place (following Covid absences), however we are still reliant on the external partner support contract with Cygnet. We will continue to review workload and operating arrangements.
2. We successfully implemented additional online court processes during 2021 and intend to expand the use of digital services and the Single Justice Procedure in 2022. The extension of SJP to micro-chipping, littering and unauthorised school absence cases will lead to improved efficiency in the service.

### **Information Governance - Priorities for the year ahead reflecting our current challenges and opportunities**

The Information Governance team of 14 employees remains focussed on the development, implementation and maintenance of the Council's information governance framework, including key information governance policies and procedures and the provision of information governance advice and guidance. The Council's Data Protection Officer role sits within this team. The team also lead the preparation of responses to all external information requests, co-ordinate the Council's complaints process and lead on the Council's approach to records management including the Records Management Retention and Destruction policy.

1. The priority for the team in the coming year is to support the roll-out of Microsoft 365 by leading on the records management and information governance aspects of the project. The continued roll-out will allow us to maximise the opportunities available to the organisation from the Microsoft 365 products and to sustain and build on the developments made at speed during the pandemic.
2. We aim to complete the digitisation of all of the Children's Services records in the data room this year. This 3-year project has been a huge undertaking and digitisation and transfer to the Liquid Logic system will produce significant operational and information security benefits.

### **Communications, Consultation and Engagement (CCE)- Priorities for the year ahead reflecting our current challenges and opportunities**

The CCE team of 28 employees combines all consultation, communication and engagement activities. Through:

- The Media team
  - The Marketing and Web team
  - The Internal Communications and Employee Engagement team
  - The Consultation team incl. BMBF
  - The Community Engagement and VCSE sector support team
1. One of the key challenge for the year ahead remains the delivery of the comprehensive Covid-19 Communications and Engagement Plan. The team continues to lead on the delivery of this activity under the guidance and oversight of the Local Outbreak Engagement Group.

2. The teams have been stepping up plans to support delivery of a full year of events in 2022. Marketing and promotional activity has been adapted to reflect the transition from virtual events but also to retain the benefits developed during the online activity.
3. The continuing developments and changes in Social Media and the associated changes in traditional media continue to present challenges and great opportunities for the Council. We continue to develop our Social Media presence with 141,751 followers across our 27 Facebook, 11 Twitter, 11 Instagram and 2 LinkedIn accounts. We achieved strong growth again last year with a 12% growth across all platforms, building on previous years' growth. Monthly reach figures are now routinely over 1 million. We will continue to develop and trial new approaches across all platforms in the coming year.
4. We continue to work closely with colleagues in Customer Services and Xentrall on the development of a new core Council website and improved online services for customers. The new site is on track for launch in March 2022. The site will provide a much improved online service via the "My Council" option and will provide a platform to launch and grow an e-newsletter. Once launched, development capacity will move onto the Stockton Information Directory and e-genda site.
5. The new Communities Strategy was launched in 2020 along with the new Community Partnerships approach. The new strategy set out our vision and hopes for our communities and specifically that they will be cohesive, strong and welcoming and that they will join us in tackling poverty across the Borough and ensuring people across the Borough aren't lonely. The Communities Strategy is underpinned by a refreshed approach to delivery through 7 Community Partnerships which cover 7 geographical areas, the Infinity Partnership which brings together organisations in the Borough that are committed to promoting and progressing financial inclusion and the Housing and Affordable Warmth Partnership. The new approach is now well established and is working well and we plan to incorporate the work in the new approach to delivering the Fairer Stockton on Tees Strategy in 2022.

### **Potential Areas for In-Depth Review**

Members are reminded that topics are being sought for the Scrutiny Work Programme 2022-2023. Using the information provided as part of the performance updates and this Overview meeting, the Committee is invited to identify potential topics for review within this theme.

Proposed topic suggestion to be considered at Executive Scrutiny Committee on 22 March 2022. The teams are currently implementing the recently completed review of the LGPS and are working on the review of the Tees credit Union.

## **Appendix 1: Council Plan – Key Priorities 2021-2022 (HR, Legal and Communications)**

We are committed to being a Council that is ambitious, effective and proud to serve means providing:

- Financial sustainability and value for money
- Dedicated and resourceful employees
- Strong leadership and governance

We have identified these key priorities for 2021-22 to help us achieve this vision. This year we will:

- Deliver the Shaping a Brighter Future programme to ensure this remains a great place to work.
- Create opportunities for work experience, internships and apprenticeships in the Council's workforce.