

Subject: Covid-19 Staff Recognition - Options
Date of Meeting: 21st January 2020
Report of: Executive Director for Finance & Resources
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Ward(s) affected: (All Wards);

FOR GENERAL RELEASE

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT AND POLICY CONTEXT

- 1.1. The council has faced unprecedented challenges as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. Employees across all directorates have stepped up to meet those challenges, keeping essential services running for the City and adapting rapidly to new ways of working.
- 1.2. Members asked officers to present proposals on how we might recognise and reward the contribution of employees in these exceptional circumstances, and this report presents the outcome of that work.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1. That the Policy & Resources Committee (P&R) agree to an additional day's leave being awarded to all directly employed staff, as set out in paragraphs 3.10 – 3.13, during the 21/22 annual leave year.
- 2.2. To note that the council will introduce a new scheme to recognise those individuals and teams who have made a significant contribution to our Covid-19 response.
- 2.3. To note that further work will be done to promote the benefits to wellbeing of taking time off.

3. CONTEXT / BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Covid-19

- 3.1. The council recognises the level of hard work and commitment demonstrated by individual employees and teams to ensuring ongoing delivery of essential services in the face of an unprecedented global pandemic. Whether working at home or on the front line, council staff have risen to the challenge of new ways of working, adapting quickly to evolving national guidelines to ensure the city has been able to respond to the pandemic, protecting the most vulnerable and minimising disruption to citizens, businesses and service users.

- 3.2. In these exceptional circumstances it is appropriate to consider how the council might recognise the individual and collective efforts of staff and in keeping to Our People Promise to fairly reward staff and recognise their exceptional efforts.

Existing Reward and Recognition Mechanisms

Pay & Reward Review

- 3.3. The council has an extensive package of reward and recognition, and a fair system of pay and allowances for all staff.
- 3.4. To improve the council's employment, offer a range of reward initiatives have been implemented as part of the Pay & Reward Review which took place in 2019.
- 3.5. The following improvements were previously agreed by P&R following the 2019 review:
- Annual Leave Purchase Scheme (due April 2021)
 - Rental Deposit Loan Scheme (due 2021)
 - Shared Cost AVC Scheme (implemented April 2020)
 - Pay Protection for medical redeployees (implemented October 2019)
 - Payment of professional fees where essential to carry out the role (implemented January 2020)
 - A financial wellbeing offer comprising salary deducted loans and savings and financial education (subject to a further paper to P&R)
 - Pensions awareness provision (commenced April 2020)
- 3.6. Since these initiatives were approved, and as part of our commitment to employee financial wellbeing, Members have asked officers to work to ensure that the services of the East Sussex Credit Union are available to employees, specifically salary deducted savings and loans, which we expect to be of particular interest and benefit at a time of financial uncertainty for households.
- 3.7. In addition to these new initiatives the council continues to provide a range of discounts and savings via the My Staff Shop staff benefits portal. While many of the offers have become less relevant due to lockdown and social distancing measures (e.g. cinema tickets, travel), others, such as discounts on food shopping at a range of supermarkets are likely to have become more valuable as employees' household finances have come under pressure.

Staff Recognition

- 3.8. The council has an established programme for recognising the exceptional contribution of individuals and teams through The Big Difference Award Scheme (BDAS). Due to the nature of the Award, which involves a ceremony attended by the Mayor and Chief Executive, the BDAS has been suspended until such time as restrictions on gatherings have been eased.
- 3.9. In the interim the council will introduce a new Scheme to recognise those individuals and teams who have made a significant contribution to our Covid-19 response.

Time off

- 3.10. The Reward Focus Groups which took place in 2019 established that many council employees also value time off as much as financial reward. In addition, awarding time off is less costly than a direct financial award which is an important consideration for a publicly funded organisation. It is therefore proposed that directly employed council staff are awarded an additional day off during the annual leave year 21/22 as a Thank-you Day to recognise the amazing achievements of the last year.
- 3.11. Further work will be undertaken to promote the wellbeing benefits of time-off, and how this additional time might be used to also promote the positive impact of taking time off, particularly for activities that support wellbeing.
- 3.12. While significantly less costly than a financial payment it is important to note that it is not cost free due to the requirement to pay for agency cover in certain key services, namely: Social Care, Nurseries and City Clean. The cost of one day's cover for these services is estimated at approximately £85,000. This calculation assumes that the additional day off can be managed by all other services without agency cover, however it cannot be ruled out that some additional cover may be required, and /or that some groups (for example regular casuals) may need to be paid a cash equivalent.
- 3.13. A key consideration has been the potential impact on schools, where annual leave arrangements are different from those applying to non-school staff. Additional leave is harder to accommodate, and also likely to be less impactful. Feedback from the Schools Block Working Group (a representative group of Headteachers) confirmed that individual governing bodies would be determining appropriately how to thank staff in schools and using their delegated authority they will determine how to recognise the work of their staff. During the pandemic the council has provided schools with advice and support, including advice on the wellbeing of staff. A package of wellbeing support is in place for Head Teachers and teachers, and in the New Year a wellbeing steering group coordinated by Public Health will be established, alongside a full staff survey of school staff in the Autumn.
- 3.14. In addition to the additional days leave, a Thank You Scheme centred around web-based nominations from both staff and the public to recognise outstanding work will be developed by the council's Communications Team, and further consideration will be given to how we celebrate the work of the council post-Covid.

4. ANALYSIS & CONSIDERATION OF ANY ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

- 4.1. A financial award was considered; however, while this might have been a desirable option, any award would need to be paid from the General Fund, which is under severe pressure this year and next and cannot provide the flexibility for a financial reward of any significance. As an example, to award all council staff £100, including casuals who have worked during the period, would cost circa £1.05m. Furthermore, it is noted that such an award would be reduced significantly by tax and N.I.

- 4.2. As regards Schools, which are not included in the proposals, the council was keen to ensure their views were sought (see also paragraph 5.1) and we are aware that work to support staff wellbeing is in progress. In addition, the Public Health team is conducting a School Staff Wellbeing Survey (closing 31.1.21) and plans, subject to feedback from Head Teachers, to establish a School Staff Wellbeing Steering Group in March 2021 in order to develop further proposals arising from the Survey. This will build on activities already delivered, including a physical activity programme that was offered during the 2020 summer holidays.
- 4.3. From our research, initiatives by other councils have almost all been focused on employee wellbeing, with some councils offering additional time off. Other than an initiative announced by the Welsh government to pay Care Workers £500 each, and recent reports in the press of a similar initiative by the Scottish government, we are only aware of one financial scheme being implemented at another council – Surrey County Council. There are examples of non-financial recognition schemes that we know of, including a Thank You Scheme at East Sussex, operated via email, and other examples of additional time off awarded to staff.

5. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT & CONSULTATION

- 5.1. We have consulted Schools via the Schools Block Working Group. Given the complexities described in 3.13 the group asked that schools should not be included in this proposed one-off additional day's leave.
- 5.2. Constructive conversations have been held with Trade Unions. There is an understanding that affordability is a key issue, and that time off is valued by council staff.
- 5.3. We have consulted the Fora (BME, LGBT, Disabled Workers, Women's Network). Feedback from the Disability Workers' Forum suggests that additional time off would be welcomed by staff across the council, and good recognition of the challenges that have been faced.

6. CONCLUSION

- 6.1. The council wishes to continue the development of *Our People Promise*, central to which is the appropriate reward and recognition of its employees within the context of a wider employment offer that remains attractive to both existing and new employees.
- 6.2. The proposal for an additional day's leave is considered to be relatively low cost, while evidence suggests that it is likely to be appreciated by Council staff.

7. FINANCIAL & OTHER IMPLICATIONS

Financial Implications:

- 7.1. The anticipated cost of the proposed additional day's leave is £85,000. While this will place added pressure on the General Fund, it is a relatively modest sum compared to the value of recognising the efforts of staff and supporting the

approach adopted in Our People Promise. In the current financial year, the latest monitoring position indicates that the overall position is close to break-even and therefore this sum should be manageable within this context.

Finance Officer consulted: Nigel Manvell

Date: 22/12/20

Legal Implications:

- 7.2. As an employer, the Council is able to exercise its discretion to award a one-off additional day's leave to members of staff in recognition of the circumstances reflected in the report. This one-off exercise of discretion does not amount to a change to terms of conditions of employment. On the basis that the Council is acting rationally, proportionately and reasonably it is for it as employer to determine the scope of its reward scheme. As noted in the report, the proposal will not be extended to staff based in school settings, due to the different nature of leave arrangements in schools. Governing Bodies have delegated authority to determine appropriate rewards schemes for their staff.

Lawyer Consulted: Elizabeth Culbert

Date: 21/12/20

Equalities Implications:

- 7.3. There are no specific equality implications identified in these proposals, though COVID19 and the related social restrictions have had significant disproportionate impacts on groups sharing particular legally protected characteristics (including disabled people and carers, people who are Black, Asian and of multiple ethnicities, women (especially those who have school age children) and people from all groups who are socially isolated), Staff who have been particularly and additionally negatively impacted in the pandemic are likely to benefit from these proposals and the additional support provided by the council.

Sustainability Implications:

- 7.4. None

Any Other Significant Implications:

- 7.5. None

