

 <p><b>Northwards Housing</b> North Manchester's Council Homes</p>	<p><b>Report to:</b></p> <p>Northwards Housing Board</p> <p>28<sup>th</sup> April 2020</p>	<p><b>Item No:</b></p> <p><b>8c</b></p>
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<b>Title:</b>	HR Update		
<b>Date:</b>	20 <sup>th</sup> April 2020		
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<b>Confidential:</b>	<b>No</b>		
<b>For:</b> (Please tick action required)	<b>NOTING</b> ✓	<b>DISCUSSION</b>	<b>APPROVAL</b>
<b>PURPOSE OF REPORT</b>			
To update the Board on some of the key HR activity taken in direct response to the Coronavirus pandemic.			
<b>RECOMMENDATION</b>			
It is recommended that Board notes the content within the update			
<b>IMPLICATIONS</b>			
<b>Risk Management</b>	Business Continuity Plan – Covid-19 Employee Relations Agile / Remote Working Redeployment		
<b>Regulatory &amp; legal compliance</b>	Employment Law Employment Policies & Procedures Statutory obligations – Training, PHE and HSE guidance GDPR Equalities Act – EDI Strategy		

**Consultation/Consideration:**

	<b>Yes, No or N/A:</b>	<b>Name:</b>	<b>Date:</b>
<b>Sub-Committee:</b>	N/A		
<b>Task Groups:</b>	N/A		
<b>Ward Councillors:</b>	N/A		

## **COVID-19 OUR PEOPLE RESPONSE**

### **Objective**

As we enter the fifth week of the Covid-19 lockdown, we would like to take the opportunity to update the Board on some of the key HR activity taken in direct response to the Coronavirus pandemic.

### **Background**

As part of the business continuity planning, initial measures were put in place at the end of February 2020 in response to an emerging situation. Our initial response in policy and guidance related specifically to individuals returning from Wuhan, China and Italy and advice has been taken from Public Health England guidance at every stage.

Fortunately, in February we ordered and were able to provide all employees with personal hand sanitisers, washroom sanitisers and advice on hand washing. Week commencing 16<sup>th</sup> March 2020, a total of 47 employees were known and identified to be within a recognised vulnerable category (over 70, underlying health conditions or pregnant). These individuals were prioritised to work from home, where possible. This group has now risen to 60 as more underlying health conditions were highlighted through the NHS 'shielding' initiative.

With effect from Friday 20<sup>th</sup> March 2020, Northwards Housing adhered to government advice for all employees, wherever possible, to work safely from home and closed all office locations. With the exception of 72 front-line services personnel (Estates, Caretaking and Retirement Scheme teams), 260+ employees equipped and enabled to work from home.

It is important to note that whilst we had a schedule to move to more agile working in the future, up until this point only 50 employees were enabled to work from home. Mobilising two-thirds of the workforce to have the right equipment in place was a major exercise which was supported and executed superbly by the ICT team.

Outlined within this document is our people response categorised under the following key headings:

1. Communications and Engagement Plan
2. Health & Wellbeing
3. Learning and Development
4. Employee Engagement Survey
5. Redeployment / Volunteering
6. Staying Safe at Work
7. Employee Voice
8. Northwards and Furlough

## 1. Communications and Engagement Plan

In any period of great uncertainty or change it is critical for communication to be clear, concise and increased in frequency. It is even more crucial that employees have confidence in the leaders of the organisation and can trust that the right measures are being taken to protect individuals, tenants, jobs and the business.

With employees self-isolating, many balancing home schooling / carer responsibilities with working from home and distancing from colleagues, we are acutely aware that physical and mental health and wellbeing may be adversely affected and have stepped up our internal communications accordingly.

On a weekly basis we have introduced:

- Daily staff updates - emails from the Executive Management Team
- *'Happy Monday'* – Health & Wellbeing hints and tips such as Working from Home with Kids; Staying Positive; Setting up your Home Work Station'
- HR Weekly Managers Update
- FAQ's – weekly update to staff
- *'Friday Feeling'* – text to all staff to reach out to a colleague, or have a *'Virtual Brew'* with the team
- CEO Vlog – weekly video update from Robin

In addition:

- Set up a Northwards *Just Giving* page – staff are able to pay their normal dress down money online. All money raised will be distributed to local charitable organisations. As of 21.4.20 £1,539.00 raised.
- Our internal social media tool 'Yammer' – we're encouraging everyone to post good news stories and build our Northwards Staff Community spirit

Using Northwards webpage to inform and praise those staff who are still coming into work, as their role doesn't allow them to work from home, as they continue to provide an excellent, albeit revised service.

## 2. Health and Wellbeing

At the point of office closures, the HR team conducted, and continue to conduct, regular welfare 'keep in touch' calls to any employees unable to be at work whatever the absence reason.

It is undoubtedly a worrying time for many and for a myriad of reasons. We have referred 12 employees to the Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) for telephone counselling and advice.

Our Occupational Health provision also remains as support and two days' worth of sessions have already taken place with telephone consultations for 16 employees

We currently have 14 employees absent from work with coronavirus related reasons, in that they are self-isolating / family member has symptoms or they work in a role where they would be unable to attend work (front-line services).

In addition, we have 13 employees who are currently off work with non-coronavirus related illnesses and 4 on maternity leave.

### **3. Learning in a Crisis**

To support employees we have been working with Jo Banks from What Next Consultancy to deliver training in these extraordinary times. Jo has worked with the Executive Team and Heads of Service over the last two years and understands our operating challenges. Jo is delivering initial sessions titled *Resilience in Challenging Times* – a webinar to all Heads of Service and managers. The one and half session covers the following subject matter:

- The Stress Response (fight/flight/freeze), affects our long-term health and well-being.
- Thoughts Become Things – How our thoughts affect our lives, and how to gain control of the unhelpful thoughts that lead to excessive anxiety, worry and potential overwhelm.
- Emotion Control – How to actively take control of your emotions with easy to use tools and techniques.
- ‘State’ Management – How to manage physiology and language to create positive stage changes.
- Well-Being – Practical tools and advice designed to build and maintain resilience

A further and more indepth Resilience three-hour course is also available online for all staff – covering the same topics as above but with more emphasis on self-reflection and practical tips. Although not mandatory we anticipate a high take up and individuals can learn at their own pace and to suit their learning style.

We are also aware that for many of Northwards managers this is the first time they have managed a team remotely and this brings with it many new challenges. Jo has devised a second webinar titled *‘Managing Remote Teams in a Crisis’* which will provide useful hints and tips to effectively managing individuals and performance. This is scheduled for May 2020.

We are encouraging all employees to maintain professional development and to utilise the elearning courses available.

We have also been able to secure the move to online learning for all supported learning courses including our apprenticeship programme, Chartered Institute of Housing Level 3, and sponsored learning for those studying degrees and professional qualifications.

### **4. Employee Engagement Survey**

We have teamed up with Worbuzz, an independent engagement specialist provider and who we have worked with closely in the past few years to conduct our annual engagement survey. Week commencing 28<sup>th</sup> April 2020 we will be conducting a ‘pulse survey’, a limited list of questions sent out to all employees.

The survey will be open for a one week period and the aim is to provide us with qualitative information as to how staff feel we have managed the process, communication and resources throughout the Covid-19 crisis. The results of the survey will be quick to access and help to shape and inform a response as to what we need to do differently or focus on for the next few weeks.

WorkBuzz are kindly providing this service free-of-charge.

## **5. Redeployment**

Whilst we aim for employees to work from home not all job roles are 100% conducive to this. With some employees having a reducing level of work to fulfil we have redeployed individuals across the business and to support the increasing volunteer network and local organisations.

To date, we have 62 employees having worked in excess of 860 hours redeployed to support :

- Befriending calls – outbound calls to vulnerable Northwards tenants;
- Welfare and money advice calls – outbound calls referred from MCC helpline;
- Food parcels and deliveries for The Bread & Butter Thing; The Mustard Tree; Rainbow Surprise and The Well of Hope Food Pantry;
- Delivery of food parcels - liaising with MCC to collect from New Smithfield Market;
- Feed the City – delivery of over 600 hot meals to Northwards residents in Retirement Housing Schemes

In addition, we have redeployed some members of the Property Services team to work with Estates Services colleagues and release some of the Estates team to restart the concessionary gardening service for tenants.

## **6. Staying Safe at Work**

We have been able to provide all front-line personnel with full PPE as required to keep them safe during this time. Stock of hand sanitiser, disposable gloves and face masks have been supplied. Risk assessments have been conducted for all those continuing to physically attend work and those 'out and about' volunteering.

At this time, the Health & Safety Executive have suspended the requirement for employers to conduct and fulfil any equipment request raised via a DSE (Display Screen Equipment) Assessment. We have however, asked all staff to be mindful of their home working setup and carry out a Home Working Checklist. By priority, any requests for equipment will be considered and if the employee is unable to 'attend' the office to retrieve or the item is too heavy (such as a chair), arrangements will be made to deliver equipment to the home address.

## **7. Employee Voice**

Employee Voice is our EDI (Equality, Diversity & Inclusive) staff forum made up of individuals from different backgrounds across the organisation. Made up of 12 employees they are appointed Employee Diversity Champions and we have invested both in time and training to support them in their role.

The majority of the group are also trained as our Mental Health First Aiders and are the 'go-to' representatives for any employees who may have a concern or suggestion as to how we can improve employee relations across the business.

Mike Burnett from Diversity McKenzie conducted Northwards EDI Gap Analysis in December 2018 which helped shape and inform our 3-year EDI Strategy 2019-2021. Mike will support Jan Norris on Tuesday 21<sup>st</sup> April 2020 to hold the first Employee Voice virtual meeting – an opportunity for us to 'sound out' any concerns and to support our Employee Engagement activity in the coming months.

## 8. Northwards and Furlough

The term 'furlough' is a very recent addition to UK employment law having been used more commonly in the United States for a more transient employment market.

The Job Retention Scheme (JRS) under furlough was introduced by the Government as a measure to enable employers to avoid lay-offs or redundancies whilst they are unable to offer work to their employees because of the Covid-19 pandemic. It allows employees to remain on the payroll of their employer, retaining employment rights and benefits with the potential to pick up employment when the lockdown is lifted.

Furlough is in itself complex and every employer must make a decision based on sustaining a workforce balanced against financial security.

As an ALMO and not-for profit organisation, Northwards currently receives a management fee to cover payroll staff costs to deliver a service. The government guidance is clear in that:

*“where an employer is in receipt of public funding for staff costs, and that funding is continuing, employers should use that money to continue to pay staff in the usual fashion – and correspondingly not **furlough** them. This also applies to non-**public sector** employers who receive **public** funding for staff costs.”*

Whilst we are unclear of the longevity of the Covid-19 lockdown period, we have to anticipate that if this continues for a longer term, we may have to look to furlough employees. We will keep the board apprised of any changes and associated plans as, and if, we are required to furlough.