

This Report will be made public on 27 May 2026



Report Number **P/26/01**

**To:** Personnel Committee  
**Date:** 4<sup>th</sup> June 2026  
**Status:** Non-executive Decision  
**Head of Service:** Andrina Smith, Chief HR Officer

**SUBJECT: HR ANNUAL REVIEW (2025/2026)**

**SUMMARY:** This report presents a review of the HR function over the last financial year 2025-2026.

**REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS:**

The Committee is asked to note the contents of the report set out below.

**RECOMMENDATIONS:**

1. To receive and note Report P/26/01.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The HR Service has been back in-house at Folkestone & Hythe since March 2012 following a period of out-sourcing to the East Kent HR shared service. This report is written to give Committee members an annual overview of the service and the HR developments that are in place to support managers in achieving their council objectives.
- 1.2 A report is presented to the Personnel Committee on an annual basis in order for members to be satisfied that the HR team is appropriately supporting the council.

## 2. HR STRUCTURE AND SERVICE

- 2.1 Following the Taking Stock review and subsequent Transformation restructure that took effect on 1<sup>st</sup> April 2024 and the successful reintegration of the case management officers into the team, work has continued to streamline and automate processes enabling many routine queries to be dealt with via the Staff Hub. The current HR & OD Team structure as at 31<sup>st</sup> March 2026 can be seen in **Appendix A**.
- 2.2 Overall, the service continues to maintain a Business Partner approach to supporting managers. This enables a greater understanding of the council's service areas particularly for the four HR Business Partner roles as they continue to develop and widen their generalist knowledge, however the team do also provide generalist advice across the whole business and work in an agile way to ensure that adequate support is always provided.
- 2.3 The team continue to have regular meetings with a range of Service Area Managers to discuss a standing agenda of HR items, including recruitment, absence management, casework, restructuring and corporate developments. They will also attend the relevant managers meetings within the service areas when required.

The OD & Engagement Manager and Senior HR Business Partner both have a monthly 1-2-1 with the Chief HR Officer.

The HR team also have a weekly team brief to share knowledge, discuss casework and receive corporate information.

- 2.4 The HR team have continued to work flexibly over the last year, attending the office when required for certain tasks or meetings and in addition coming into the office on Tuesdays and Wednesdays each week to enable further interaction and knowledge sharing.

## 3. CASEWORK

- 3.1 During 2025/26 the HR team have supported the following cases:
  - 15 disciplinary cases resulting in 2 verbal warnings, 8 first written warnings and 1 final written warning. Under section 4.4 of the disciplinary procedures a penalty up to and including a final written warning can be agreed outside of a disciplinary hearing if the employee is in agreement. All of these warnings were issued in this way. 3 staff left the council prior to the conclusion of the

disciplinary process and 1 case remains ongoing with a conclusion expected imminently.

- 2 formal capability cases, of which 1 resulted in required improvement and 1 resulted in dismissal due to poor performance. In addition, one employee was dismissed as a result of a failed probationary period.
- 2 formal hearings were held relating to long-term sickness absence cases, both of which resulted in dismissal.
- 1 grievance was submitted, which was not upheld.

Whilst not formal cases, the team continue to support a number of managers and staff with interventions including targeted actions and short-term performance improvement plans using our behavioural framework.

The continuation of the use of section 4.4 to enable warnings to be issued and recorded without the need for a formal hearing continues to reduce the amount of time being spent on formal hearings and the associated preparation time unless the case is particularly serious or complex in nature.

3.2 As a comparison, during 2024/25 the following cases were dealt with:

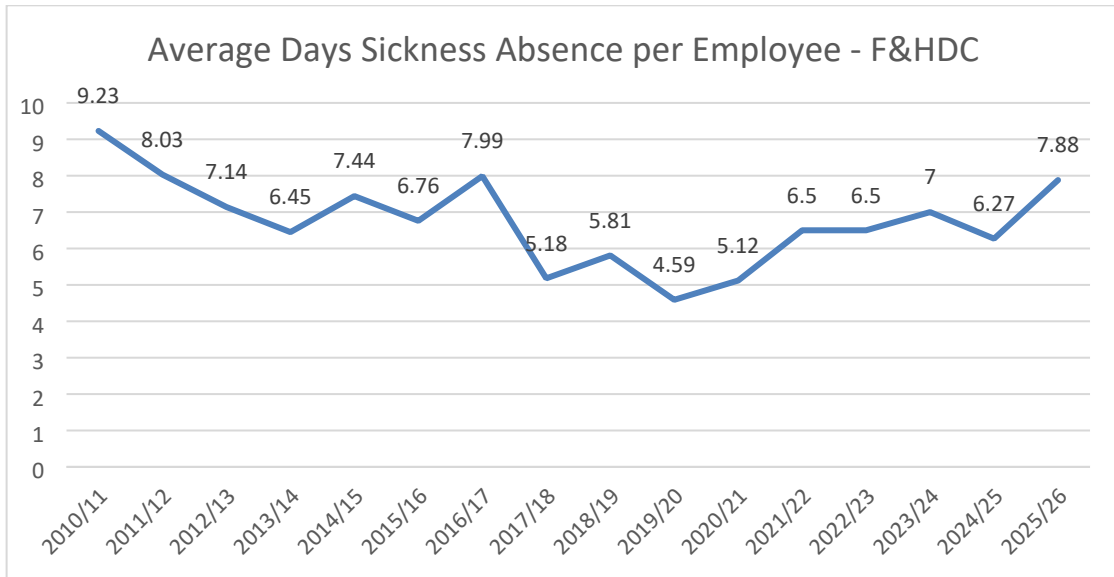
- 8 disciplinary cases resulting in 4 verbal warnings, 3 first written warnings and a dismissal with notice. Under section 4.4 of the disciplinary procedures a penalty up to and including a final written warning can be agreed outside of a disciplinary hearing if the employee is in agreement. All of the cases mentioned above, with the exception of the one resulting in dismissal, were issued in this way.
- 2 formal capability cases during the year however in both cases the employee chose to leave the council before this was brought to a formal conclusion.
- 0 grievances were submitted.

3.3 In addition, the HR team have supported the recruitment and selection of 43 new starters to the council, processed 41 leavers along with numerous internal changes either to contract length, hours of work or job changes as a result of other internal recruitment initiatives.

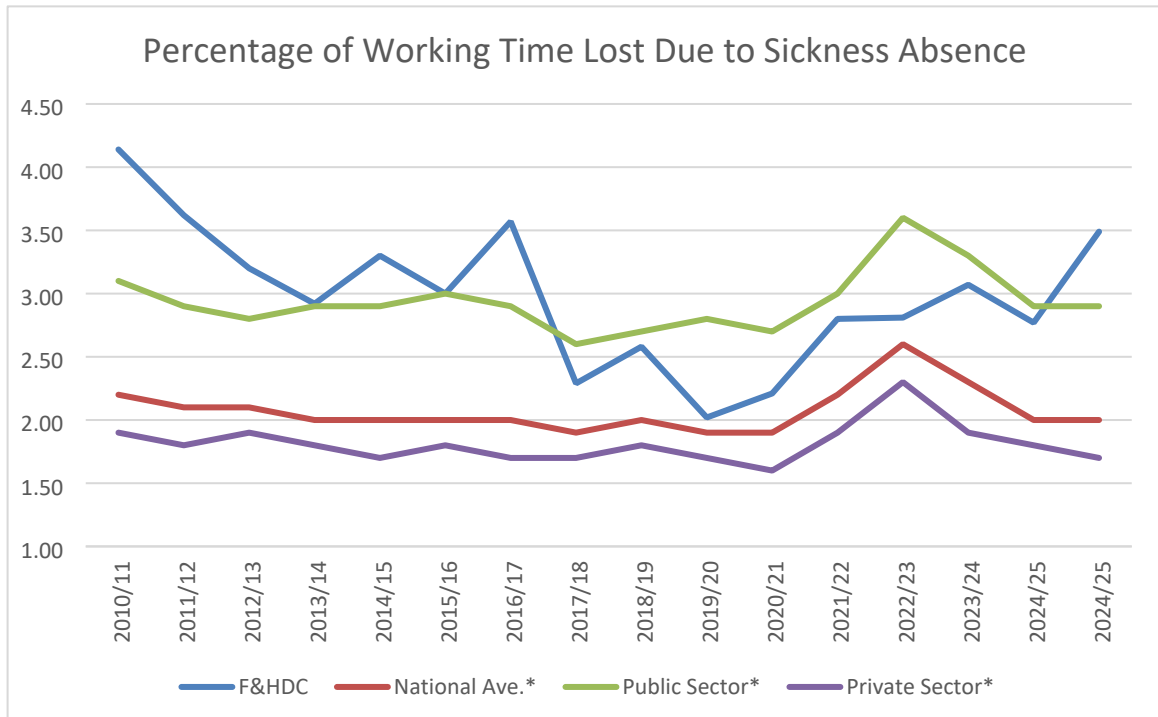
#### **4. ABSENCE MANAGEMENT**

4.1 In 2025/26 there was an average of 7.88 days sickness absence per employee. This is based on an average headcount of 453.5. During the year, 3.49% of all working time was lost due to sickness absence.

4.2 This represents an increase in the level of sickness absence across the authority when compared to last year:



4.3 Measuring absence rates in terms of the “average number of days per employee” is a formula widely used by organisations across different sectors. However, the coronavirus pandemic and associated measures had a deep impact on businesses, the UK labour market and the validity of this as a comparative measure of data in both the 2020/21 and 2021/22 reporting years. Using the percentage of working time lost due to sickness absence is cited by the Office of National Statistics (ONS) as the measure least impacted by those pandemic measures and is therefore used for comparative purposes alongside the most recent ONS data here.

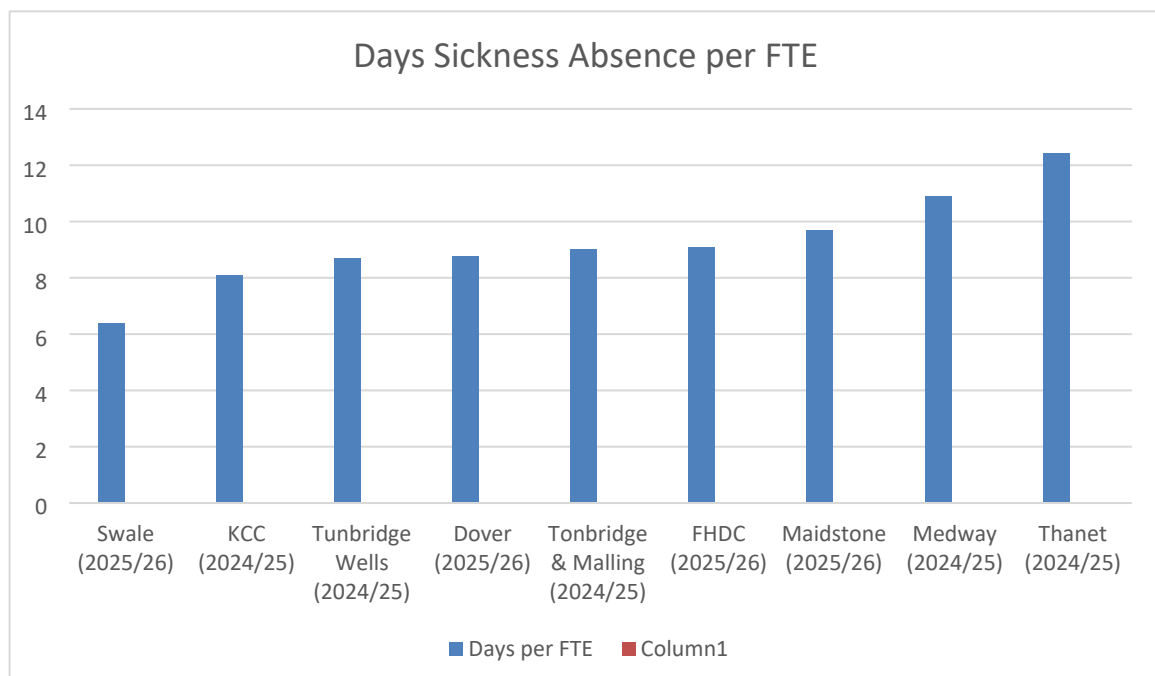


Source: Office of National Statistics (ONS), released 1 May 2026, ONS website, article, [Sickness absence in the UK labour market: 2025](#)  
 \*Comparisons made with calendar year data

The coronavirus pandemic has had an impact on sickness absence data over the past six years. While Covid-19 infections may have led to additional absences, measures such as furloughing, social distancing, shielding and increased homeworking helped to reduce other causes of sickness and national absence rates actually fell to a record low in 2020. However, the reduction in these measures, coupled with new Covid-19 variants, led to a rise in sickness absence across the UK and by 2022 was at the highest level in nearly 20 years. National sickness absence rates have subsequently fallen in the years following their 2022 peak, although the latest available data shows that it remains slightly above the pre-pandemic 2019 level. While the size of our workforce means individual cases can lead to some volatility in our data, the council followed this national pattern to some extent, with 2019/20 absence rates the lowest reported in 10 years followed by an increase in the subsequent two years.

Sickness amongst public sector workers have consistently been higher than in the private sector and there are several factors that may cause this, including the types of work undertaken in the public sector. Indeed, the most recent Local Government Association workforce data publication shows the average sick days per worker in the sector to be 8.8 days<sup>1</sup>, higher than the 7.88 days experienced at FHDC in 2025/26.

4.4 In order to provide local comparisons, we have been able to obtain data from some Kent local authorities as part of a benchmarking exercise. The data uses the measure of sickness absence per full-time equivalent member of staff. Due to the timing of the report some data relates to the previous year.



4.5 Since the 2014/15 annual report the HR team have provided a breakdown of sickness absence figures in terms of long-term and short-term cases.

<sup>1</sup> [Local Government Association: Local government workforce data, November 2025](#)

Long-term absence is classed as four weeks or more.

Instances of absence and amount of days lost to sickness will be influenced by fluctuations in staffing levels. The introduction of the new housing service in October 2020, for example, increased the council's headcount and therefore had some influence on instances of sickness absence. The average number of days per employee column gives the most accurate indication of the relative impact that short or long-term absences have had on the organisation.

"Days lost" refers to the amount of working days lost to sickness absence.

"Ave. days" refers to the average amount of days sickness absence per employee.

Year	Short-Term Absences			Long-Term Absences		
	Instances	Days Lost	Ave. Days	Instances	Days Lost	Ave. Days
2014/15	425	1031.5	2.72	36	1788	4.72
2015/16	349	1016.89	2.65	33	1562	4.06
2016/17	375	985	2.62	29	2021.5	5.37
2017/18	345	951.5	2.58	18	957	2.60
2018/19	258	675	1.87	30	1424	3.94
2019/20	294	879.5	2.42	16	787.5	2.17
2020/21	250	768.5	1.85	27	1355	3.27
2021/22	454	1372.5	2.98	34	1630.5	3.54
2022/23	547	1717	3.66	32	1317	2.81
2023/24	491	1467.5	3.21	39	1735.5	3.79
2024/25	461	1348	3.01	28	1461	3.26
2025/26	445	1141	2.51	37	2434	5.37

- 4.6 Levels of short-term sickness absence (absences of under 4 weeks) have reduced for a third year in a row.

The most recent Office of National Statistics data shows minor illnesses (such as coughs, colds, sickness, nausea and diarrhoea etc) are the most common reason for absence in the country. Mirroring the national picture, such illnesses are recorded as the most prominent reason for sickness absence instances at the council.

- 4.7 Long-term sickness absences (absences of more than 4 weeks) have, however, increased markedly in comparison to last year. Overall, 7.7% of absences were classified as long-term and this equated to 68% of the total time lost due to sickness.

The most prominent reason for long-term absence over the past year remains mental ill health and stress, which accounted for 46% of our long-term sickness cases. This is followed by post-surgery recovery, which accounted for 16% of our long-term absence cases.

Overall, 42% of all working time lost to sickness absence has been classified as relating to "stress, depression, anxiety, mental health, fatigue". While the number of absence cases related to mental ill health and stress were comparable to last year

and remain lower than in preceding years, the duration of working time lost to such absences has increased.

There is a mixture of work and personal related cases and while the team work to get people back into work as quickly as possible such cases have to be handled appropriately, including ensuring sufficient recovery time, in order to enable an effective return to work. The prominence of this type of absence is not unique to Folkestone & Hythe, with research undertaken by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (the professional body for Human Resources and Learning & Development) finding mental ill health by far the top cause of long-term absence across the country.<sup>2</sup>

4.8 With this in mind, the council has implemented a number of measures to support employees in the workplace, proactively manage mental health and prevent stress related issues:

- Specific Learning & Development sessions focused on personal resilience, handling difficult conversations and situations, managing and reducing stress, promoting well-being (including financial wellbeing) and the positive management actions that can be taken.
- Initiatives to support engagement, including in person corporate inductions, MS Teams channels, weekly newsletters and staff briefings. Staff updates have increased in frequency over the year in order to share information and address concerns relating to Local Government Reorganisation. The council has also used a range of mechanisms to listen to and understand staff opinions and concerns, take positive actions, and support staff through periods of change as a result. Further details are outlined in section 8 of this report.
- Developing and maintaining a team of mental health first aiders and promoting their role throughout the council.
- Access to an online wellbeing centre, which includes a range of health and wellbeing advice and resources, and an Employee Assistance Programme available through F&H Rewards. Staff can access counselling services and specialist information and support on a range of personal and professional issues that could be affecting them in their work or their health and wellbeing generally, including financial, debt and legal advice.
- A range of resources and support on a dedicated health and wellbeing intranet page, including access to 'My Wellbeing' which provides staff with a weekly programme of information aimed at improving overall well-being.
- Health and wellbeing activities including free swimming sessions at Hythe Pool and the use of the East Cliff sports facilities for staff, discounted gym memberships available through the council's reward platform 'F&H Rewards', and initiatives organised and supported by the Civil Service Sports Club.
- Initiatives to support financial wellbeing, including retail and entertainment discounts available through our corporate membership schemes, salary sacrifice lease car and cycle to work schemes, and SmartTech, where staff can spread the cost of items interest free through their salary over a 12 or 24

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<sup>2</sup> Sinclair, A. and Suff, R. (2025) Health and wellbeing at work. London: Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development.

month period. Specific sessions on financial wellbeing and pension planning were also delivered by an external provider to our staff during the year.

- Utilising our occupational health providers and resources such as HSE risk assessment questionnaires to understand the causes of stress for individuals and teams, and taking targeted actions to mitigate these effectively.
- Promoting flexible working options and other policies or initiatives that may support work/life balance and those with caring responsibilities.

Further detail and specific initiatives to support health and wellbeing are outlined in sections 7 and 8 of this report.

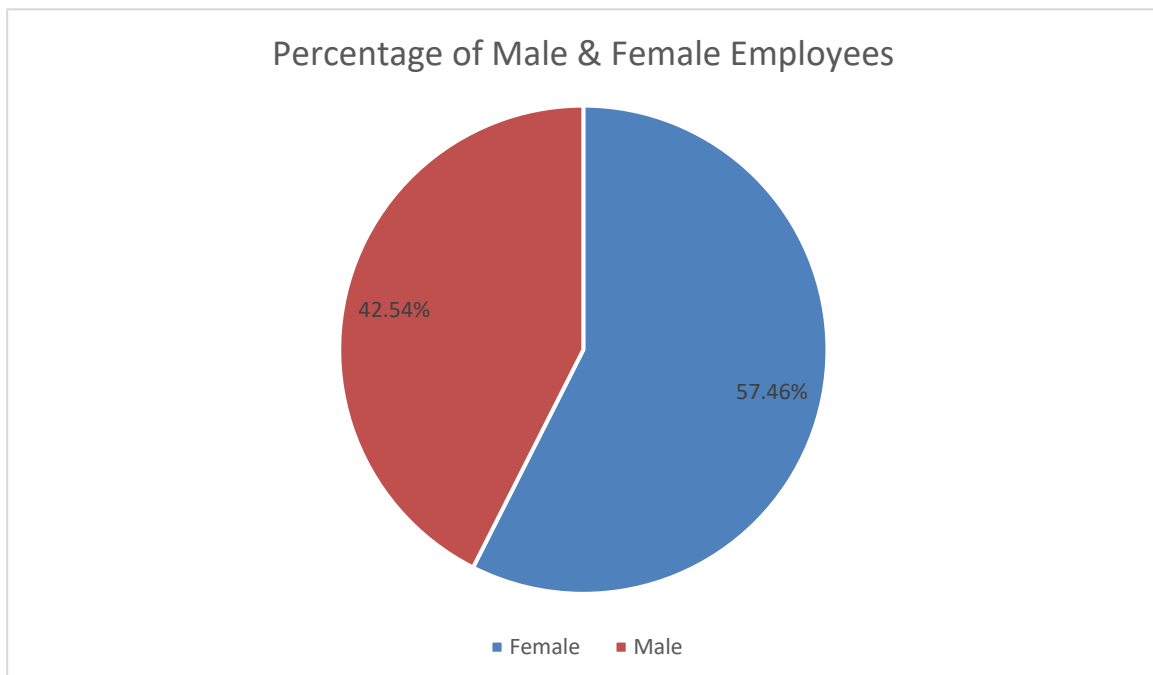
4.9 In addition to the initiatives outlined in paragraph 4.8, a number of other measures are in place to ensure that we continue to support health and wellbeing and reduce absenteeism:

- A robust absence monitoring system is in place. The line manager immediately records the absence, cause, and expected duration on the Staff Area, ensuring swift interventions from the team.
- As the expected duration of absence is included in the notification HR can monitor the undertaking of return-to-work interviews, which form an integral part of effective absence management. If HR have not received a copy of the return-to-work interview as expected reminders are sent to the line manager to ensure they are completed.
- There are clear absence triggers in place and the HR team provide dedicated and focused support to managers, including attending return to work interviews if there is a cause for concern. At these meetings supportive measures may be discussed that enable the employee to return to work earlier than otherwise anticipated or, in the case of frequent absenteeism, attend work on a more regular basis. If appropriate, formal processes may be instigated and/or the continuation of occupational sick pay considered.
- Absence data and cases are reviewed with relevant Directors, Assistant Directors, or Chief Officers as appropriate on a regular basis.
- Alongside a case management approach and providing focused support to line managers, HR also provide general training on absence management as part of the manager induction process. Specific training sessions are also delivered to managers and team leaders on effective absence management as part of the council's Management Development Programme, with the most recent session taking place in October 2025.
- Occupational Health services continue to be utilised to advise on actions to reduce causes of absenteeism, manage absences effectively and support return to work processes.
- The HR team continue to promote the council's Employee Assistance Programme available through F&H Rewards.
- The HR team have continued to work with other external organisations and sources of support, such as Access to Work, and relevant internal departments (such as Health & Safety) to improve health and wellbeing and support absence management.
- The council's agile working culture enables staff who are well enough to work from home to continue to do so.

- To help protect staff and customers, the council has also reimbursed the cost of obtaining a 'flu vaccination if one is not available on the NHS.
- Our Reasonable Adjustments procedure has also assisted the HR team and managers to provide appropriate support for a range of individual cases.

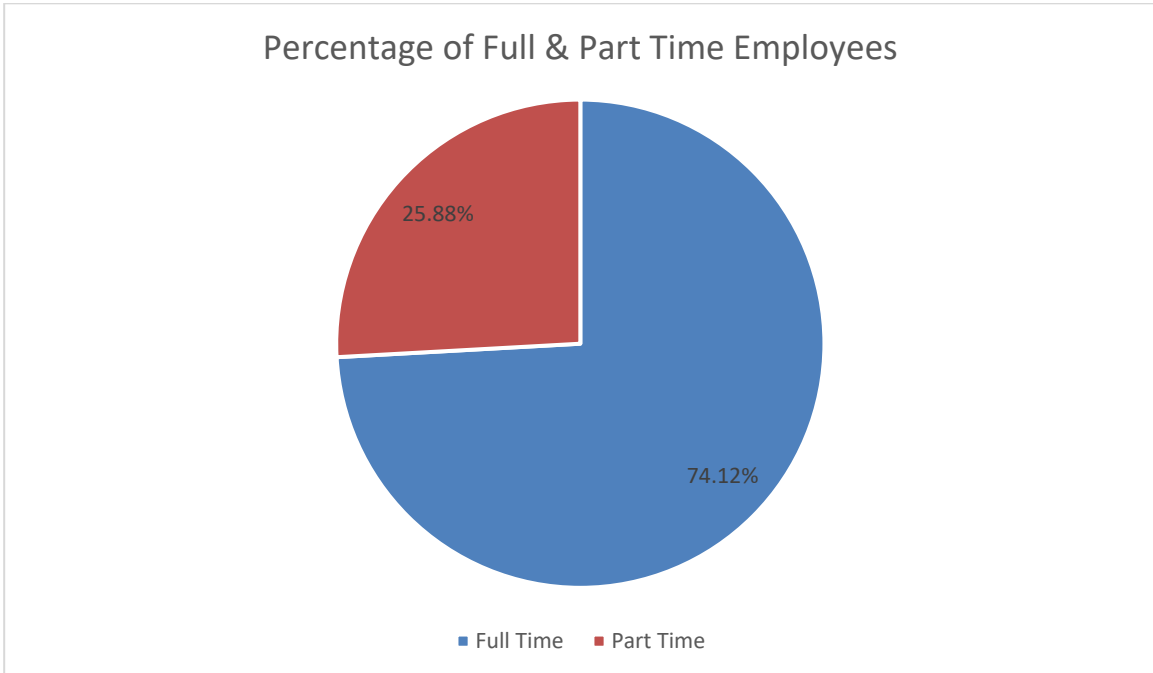
## 5. WORKFORCE INFORMATION (31<sup>st</sup> March 2026)

5.1 As at 31<sup>st</sup> March 2026 the Council employed a headcount of 456 staff, equating to 395.07 FTE (Full Time Equivalent).



To provide a comparison with the previous year, as at 31<sup>st</sup> March 2025 we employed a headcount of 452 staff, equating to 393.2 FTE. 56.86% of staff were female and 43.14% male.

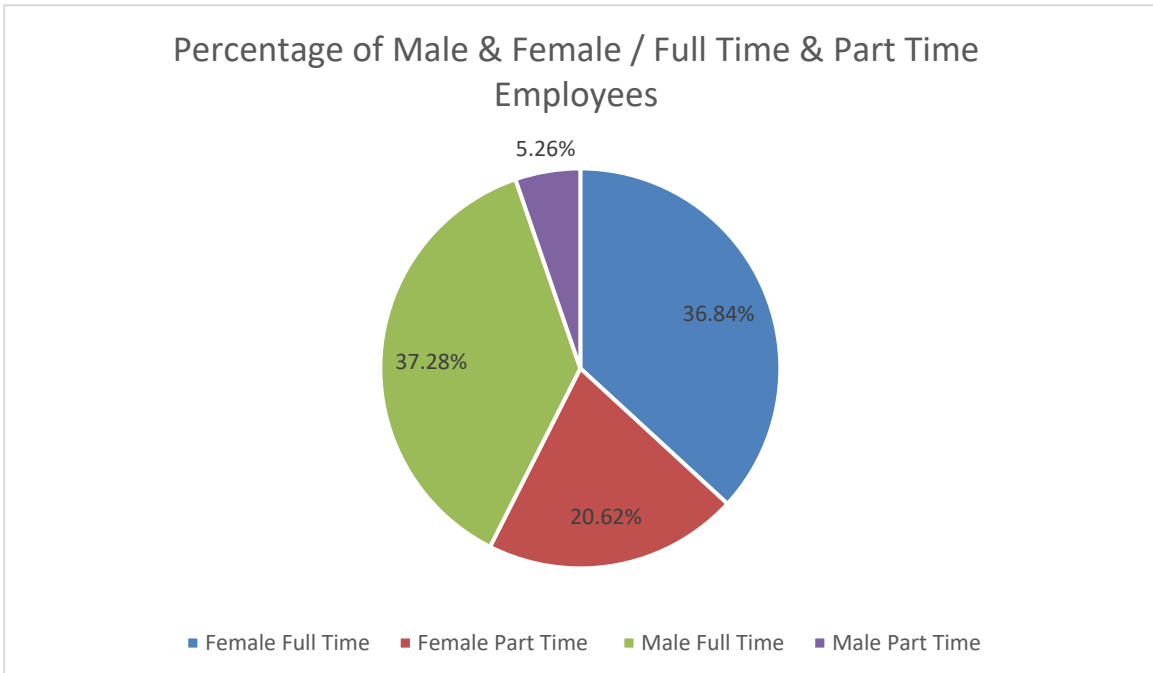
5.2 Staff are employed on a contract which specifies the average number of hours to be worked each week. Full time is considered to be 37 hours per week and part time contracts could be anything up to 36 hours per week.



Of the 118 staff (25.88% of the workforce) who work part time, 94 are female and 24 male.

To provide a comparison with the previous year, as at 31<sup>st</sup> March 2025 113 staff (25% of the workforce) worked part time, 89 of which were female and 24 male.

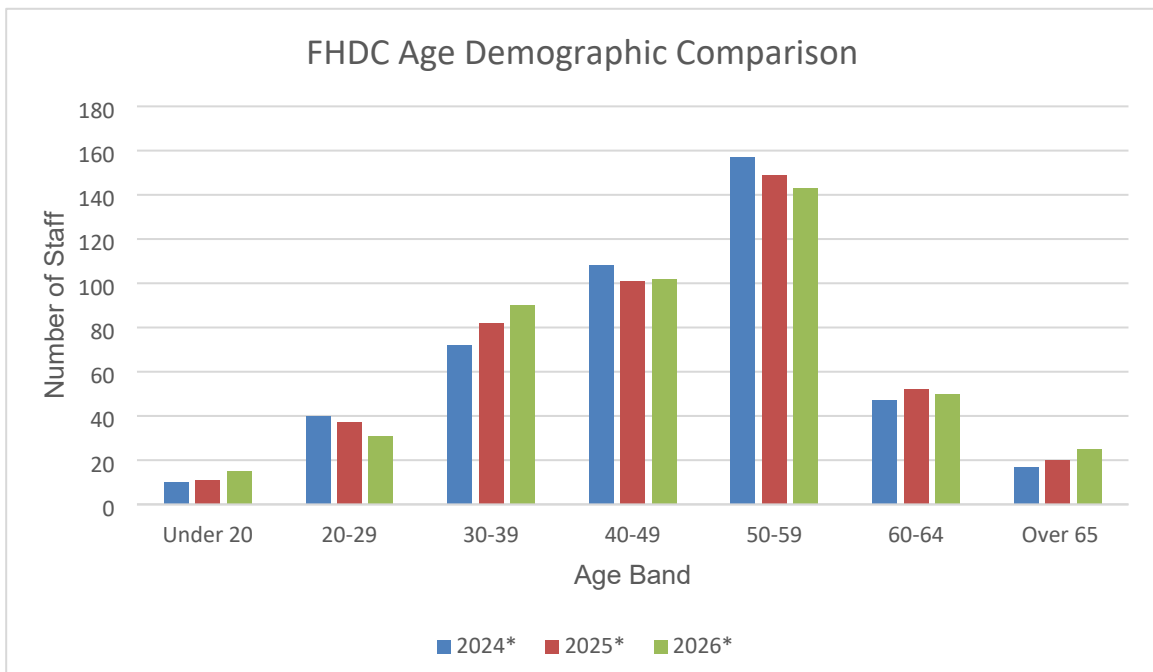
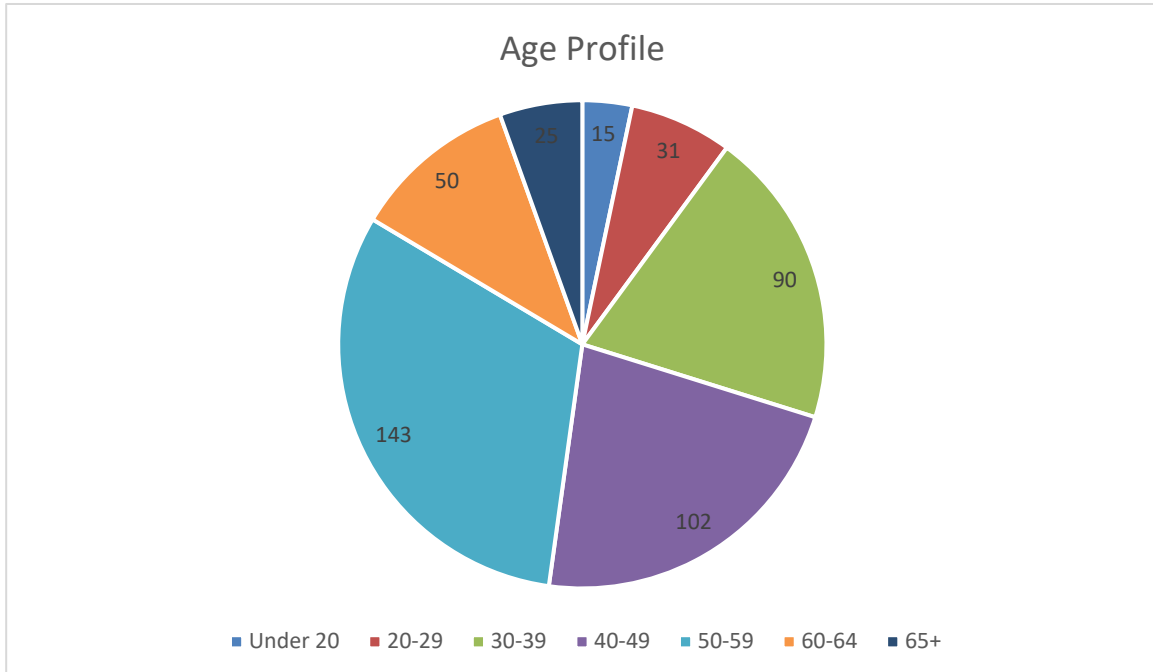
5.3 When looking at the breakdown of male & female employee in terms of whether they work full time or part time:



This break down is broadly comparable to the previous year's data.

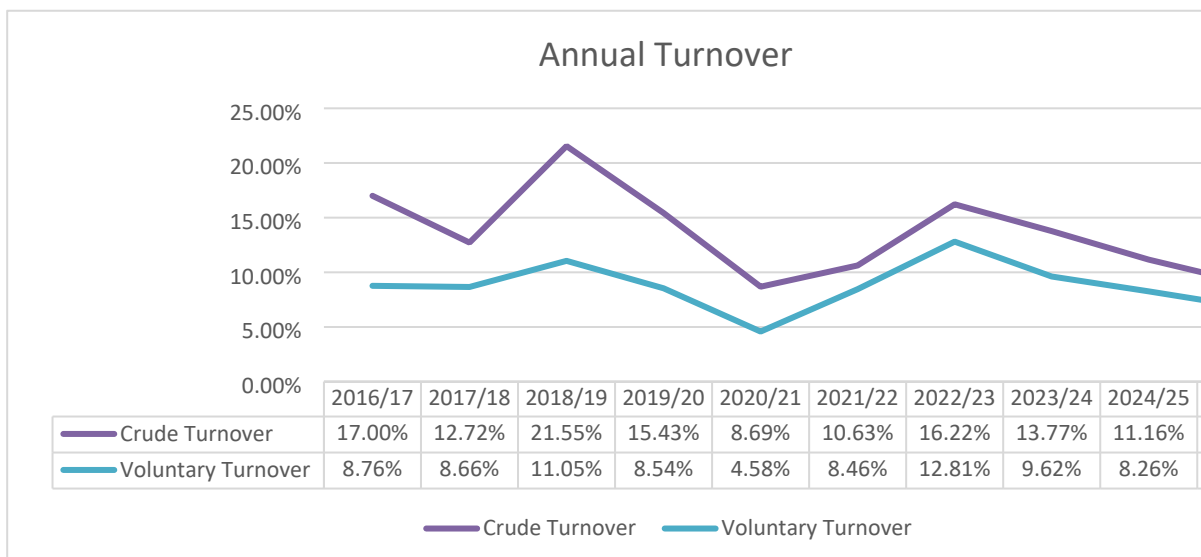
5.4 The average staff age is 46.

The age profile of the council does demonstrate an ageing workforce with nearly 48% aged 50 or over. Over 10% of staff are aged 60-64.



\*As at 31<sup>st</sup> March each year

5.5 Employee turnover is monitored annually and the chart below tracks the turnover over the last 10 years:



Employee turnover reflects the percentage of staff that have left the council each year. People may leave employment for a number of reasons; staff may resign, retire, their casual or fixed-term contract to cover for example maternity leave or work on a short-term piece of work such as the annual canvass may end, there may be redundancies, ill health, or staff may be dismissed because of their conduct, capability or failed probation.

Crude turnover figures include all those that have left the council, whatever the reason. Voluntary turnover figures only include those that have left because they have decided to resign or retire.

### 5.6 Zero Hour Contracts

Zero hour contracts continue to be highlighted as a concern nationally and the subject of legislative changes in the coming years as aspects of the Employment Rights Act 2025 are implemented.

Across the council we have 28 people on zero hours contracts (based on 31<sup>st</sup> March 2026) with the vast majority for contracts at Hythe Pool covering swimming teachers, leisure attendants, supervisors and aqua fit instructors. In some instances we have individuals with multiple zero hour contracts to enable them to be paid at the correct rate for each of the named roles.

We don't allocate zero hour workers to shifts, instead any uncovered hours are displayed at the Pool and shared on a group chat for staff to sign up for any shifts they want to cover. Occasionally we do contact staff at short notice, for example to cover illness, however there is no obligation on these workers to accept work when it's offered.

Permanent full and part time roles are available for zero hours workers to transfer to should they wish and we have also had staff move from permanent roles to being a zero hour worker at their own request as it suits their circumstances at the time. There are some staff who prefer the zero hours option as they can choose the hours and shifts that suit them rather than committing to a rota which will include

early mornings, late evenings and weekends. Many of the zero hours workers have roles elsewhere or are students who pick up shifts around their other job, studies or personal commitments.

Having reviewed these contracts at the council, there remains no concern from an HR perspective about how we are using zero hour contracts.

## **6. ORGANISATIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

- 6.1 The focus of our OD and Engagement Team is to enhance organisational effectiveness. This is achieved through several areas of our People Strategy, with the primary focus being: Learning and Development, Workforce Engagement and the recognition element of Reward and Recognition. Each of these areas will be taken in turn.

## **7. LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT**

- 7.1 Our Learning and Development offer is comprised of general skills development (we develop managers, deliver training, and support colleagues to do apprenticeships to help ensure staff perform well and reach their potential) and technical skills development (we make sure the Council is compliant, appropriately skilled and that the professional skills training budget for the whole organisation is well-managed).

- 7.2 Our Management Development Programme has, as usual, been updated to reflect the development needs of people managers. The majority of sessions are an hour long, with some longer, as needed. Topics covered have included:

- 15 May 2025: Performance Management
- 5 June 2025: Political Insight Q&A
- 19 June 2025: HR Updates re: People Management
- 1 October 2025: Absence Management
- 16 October 2025: Equality, Diversity and Inclusion
- 6 November 2025: Performance Management (Appraisal specific)
- 4 December 2025: Recruitment and selection
- 15 January 2026: Appraisal Q&A
- 5 February 2026: Contract Standing Orders and Contract Management
- 5 March 2026: HR Updates re: People Management
- 17 March 2026: Risk Management

Considering Local Government Reform, we have enhanced and expanded our development offer for 2026/27 with a new Leadership for the Future programme. Please see **Appendix B** for a list of modules for the programme.

OD & Engagement also offer managers ad hoc support and coaching with specific people management-related issues. This year we have partnered with Medway Council and two Kent-based Housing Associations to pilot a Housing Coaching Programme involving 40+ staff from across the organisations in 1:1 and group coaching to support their careers and networking in Housing. The pilot will be evaluated in April 2026, and it is hoped that this will be expanded to other Kent local authorities.

7.3 Over the course of the 2025/26 year, we have offered a variety of general development opportunities for staff at all levels. The OD & Engagement team, as well as external specialist providers, have run 60-minute to full-day sessions on:

- 1 July 2025: Practicing Difficult Conversations (with OD and an actor)
- 5 August 2025: Professional Boundaries (Shelter)
- 18 & 24 September 2025: Resolving telephone conflict (Ikon Training)
- 13 October 2025: Asbestos Awareness
- 3 November: Helping Hands Scheme & Digital Inclusion (for customer-facing teams) (KCC)
- 4 & 5 November 2025: Mental Capacity (Shelter)
- 1 December 2025: Working with Homeless customers (The Rainbow Centre)
- 3, 4, & 5 December 2025: Manual Handling for 52 staff in Grounds Maintenance (St Johns Ambulance)
- 21 January 2026: Domestic Abuse Awareness for Housing Income and Lifeline
- 9 February 2026: Supporting customers with brain injuries (Headway)
- 11 March 2026: Identifying Domestic Abuse over the phone for Contact Centre (DAHA)
- Across the year: First Aid training: 12 new First Aiders trained, and several others undertook refresher training
- Across the year: 11 sessions on Using AI (Co-pilot) to be more efficient at work

In addition to these sessions, we have had several areas of particular focus this year:

#### Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

As part of our commitment to inclusivity, two staff members undertook the Level 1 British Sign Language qualification over a 7-month period last year. They are now working towards Level 2. To support our understanding of neurodiversity staff have been undertaking Autism Awareness, ADHA Awareness and Learning Disabilities Awareness e-learning, provided by the Kent Safeguarding Children Multi-Agency Partnership.

#### Emergency Planning

To help us deliver on our obligations to support the district in the event of a major incident, all staff have been issued specific roles that they will take up in an emergency. These range from Rest Centre Managers to Loggists. This year we have carried out a comprehensive training programme with e-learning and 1-hour targeted face-to-face training for each member of staff. This happened during May and June 2025. In October, staff in specific roles (Information Officers/ Managers and Loggists) were involved in exercises that allowed them to put their training into practice through looking at how they would respond to specific scenarios. In November, thirty-five Operational Managers undertook a Cyber Security emergency planning exercise to consider how they would run services should our systems go down. Places on in-person training course have been and are being offered to all staff allocated as Rest Centre Staff and Managers through our Kent and Medway Resilience Forum (KMRF) membership and three staff have done a Train the Trainer course so that they can train other Loggists. One of our directors has also attended a 4-day KMRF Multi Agency Gold Incident Command training course to

enable us to work effectively with our partners at a strategic level during an emergency.

#### Safeguarding and Prevent

All staff do their Safeguarding and Prevent e-learning every two years but last year we started a training programme for all customer-facing staff and relevant managers, including a half-day module on Safeguarding Children, Young People & Vulnerable Adults (delivered in-house) and a 2-hour module on Prevent (delivered by KCC). These face-to-face, interactive sessions have continued on a bi-monthly basis this year. In addition, we have re-written the Designated Safeguarding Officer training and delivered training to new recruits (ad hoc) and refresher training to our Designated Officers (November & December 2025).

#### Domestic Abuse

As part of the continuing effort to become accredited by the Domestic Abuse Housing Alliance (DAHA), following extensive training for Housing and other staff last financial year, this year we have had 8 Domestic Abuse Champions trained (June & July 2025). Training in Domestic Abuse Awareness has also been expanded to further customer-facing teams, including Housing Income and Lifeline. We are now delivering ongoing Domestic Abuse training through e-learning and our Domestic Abuse Champions have delivered their first training session to Housing Income colleagues. This session was recorded to enable colleagues in Lifeline to watch the session during their shifts.

Following each development session, a review is undertaken to evaluate the success of the topic. Workshops are evaluated based on the extent to which participants felt that they have increased their competence and confidence in the topic area of the workshop. The majority of participants reported that the workshops have increased their competence and, to a lesser extent, their confidence which develops as they begin to put into practice what has been learnt during the sessions.

- 7.4 Role-specific professional development enables us to deliver the Corporate Plan and this year we have invested in the following courses for staff:

<b>Name of Team</b>	<b>Courses undertaken</b>
Council Tax & Benefits	Subsidy Audit Updates MALG updates Social Welfare training Council Tax Pro IRRV Social Welfare benefit training - Social Welfare Training Exempt Accommodation
Human Resources	CIPD qualifications in HR
Communication and Engagement	LinkedIn Learning
Planning Policy & Strategy	Urban Design Learning Online subscription Bywater - Carbon Footprinting and Reporting Training C RTPI - Innovation and Consultation in Planning Conferer

	RTPI - Infrastructure in Planning RTPI - Heritage and Conservation Online Seminar RTPI - Planning and Good Design Seminar RTPI - Effective Leadership Skills for Planners RTPI - Planning and Design Hybrid Seminar RTPI - Planning Law Update Hybrid Seminar
Estates and Assets	HI-AB NPORS certification Property Issues - Autumn and Spring Updates Commercial Property Law Update
Communities	MCA - Safeguarding
Environmental Health	12-month subscription with ABC Food Law Online Plus CIEH training updates - various topics including enforcer notices, electrical safety, asbestos, Border Target Opera Model, Legionella, sous vide, and Imported foods Licensing of Cosmetic Interventions LPG Workshop provided by NCASS Food, Water, Environmental Microbiology Laboratory
Licensing	Institute of Licensing Taxi Training - Update on new legis requirements Institute of Licensing Gambling Conference - Update on gambling regime BIIAB Level 2 Award for Licensing Practitioner (Alcohol) Canine Encounter training course Reptiles & Amphibian training course Small mammals in retail training course Hands on Canine First Aid Bird Keeping / Birds of Prey Course Animal Enforcement Training
Democratic Services	ADSO Certificate in Democratic Services Knowledge
Finance	Cert II (Insurance)
Parking/ Transportation	Off- Street Map Based TRO
Planning & Development	Site health and safety Building Regulations legislation Drafting formal notices/legal enforcement training Viability in planning decisions Planning Law and Practice Update
Procurement	Procurement New Regulation
Grounds Maintenance	Tractor Level 1 Tractor One Day Combi Mini Digger & Dumper Chainsaw in tree Chainsaw Tree Climbing IOSH for supervisors IOSH for head gardeners PA1 & PA6 refreshers COSHH ICCM diploma NVQ level 2 in Horticultural

	City & Guilds NPTC Level 2 Award in Safe Use of a Pow Pole Pruner Rat/wasp eradication refresher LANTRA Professional Tree Inspection Refresher PASMA Mobile Access Towers for users Electrical Safety
Private Sector Housing	Renters' rights bill
Hythe Pool	Lifeguard NPLQ CPD
ICT & Digital	Infrastructure support training
Housing Strategy	Updates on Homelessness Legislation
Customer Support	Caravan Licensing Parking Representations & Appeals

7.5 Chief Officers and Directors are also offered coaching and bespoke training courses provided by respected organisations.

7.6 E-Learning modules have been promoted to all staff in order to comply with our duties for providing relevant Health & Safety and statutory training. This year we have designed and launched new modules: Business Compliance (updated with new fraud prevention duties); Bully and Harassment to meet our obligations to protect colleagues; Driver Awareness to keep our staff safe on the road. At the end of March 2026, 97% of colleagues were up to date with this e-learning.

7.7 We are continuing to utilise the government-backed apprenticeship scheme to upskill our people. As a levy-paying employer, we must pay 0.5% of our annual pay bill into an apprenticeship levy account that can only be used on government approved apprenticeship courses. Apprenticeships are an economical way of funding training as they are funded from our apprenticeship levy account and when this is used up, 95% of the course fees are funded by Central Government.

7.8 We continue to access a number of external training providers who deliver apprenticeship qualifications; over the course of this financial year, we have had officers undertaking the following apprenticeships:

- Level 3 Team Leader/ Supervisor
- Level 4 Associate Project Manager
- Level 4 Senior Housing and Property Management (with CIH qualification)
- Level 6 Digital and Technology Solutions (with Bachelors' degree)
- Level 6 Building Control Surveyor (with Bachelors' degree)
- Level 7 Chartered Town Planner (with Masters' degree)
- Level 7 Solicitor (with Masters' degree)
- Level 7 Ecologist Apprenticeship (with MSc Land and Ecological Restoration)
- Level 7 Senior People Professional Apprenticeship

We have previously had staff undertaking other professional apprenticeships, including:

- Level 2 Customer Services
- Level 3 Business Administrator
- Level 3 Junior Content Producer

- Level 3 Learning & Development Practitioner
- Level 4 Revenues and Welfare Benefits Practitioner
- Level 5 Coaching Professional
- Level 7 Accountancy or Taxation Professional

7.9 We are also engaged in developing future local talent. This is done through engagement with schools/education facilities.

Our work with schools/ education establishments has included:

- 25 April 2025: Careers Talk at Brockhill
- 30 April 2025: Interview skills practice with SEND pupils from The Marsh Academy and The Lighthouse
- 16 June 2025: Visit to The Marsh Academy to be a 'dragon' at their Social Action Projects presentations.
- 17 July 2025: Community day to talk about careers with Year 7 at The Turner Free School.
- 3 September 2025: Post 16 Careers event at The Marsh Academy
- 25 September 2025: Youth Forum (Cohort 1, second session)
- 14 October 2025: Romney Marsh Inspires (careers fair for The Marsh Academy and The Lighthouse)
- 6th November 2025: Employer Advisory Group at Folkestone College
- 2 December 2025: Youth Forum (Cohort 2, first session)
- 25 February 2026: A Career in Local Government (open to all schools, attended by The Marsh Academy, The Lighthouse and The Beacon)
- 13 March 2026: Folkestone School for Girls Careers fair
- 25 March 2026: Youth Forum (Cohort 2, second session)

We also host and support work experience students with an interest in local government:

- May 2025: 3 x students from Folkestone Academy: 1 in Finance, 2 in Customer Contact
- June/July 2025: 2 x Kent University students in Organisational Development
- June 2025: student from Brockhill in Environmental Health & Enforcement
- July 2025: student from Folkestone School for Girls in Elections
- July 2025 : 3 x students from Harvey Grammar School: 1 with Finance, 1 with Planning and 1 with Grounds Maintenance
- November 2025: Student from Folkestone School for Girls in Regeneration

## 8. WORKFORCE ENGAGEMENT

8.1 A key part of our role in OD & Engagement is to drive employee engagement, which has been proven by numerous studies to drive organisational performance.

In 2021, we were ranked as number 4 in the Best Companies category for 'not for profit bodies' in the UK, with outstanding levels of employee engagement. We continually work to maintain this level of engagement.

- 8.2 Our Internal Communications and Engagement strategy translates insights from our employees into a series of actions. Activity is delivered via various, online and in-person, channels:
- Fortnightly staff newsletter emails: The Round Up.
  - Staff briefing (every 1-2 months).
  - New Starters' Forum and New Managers' Forum (quarterly).
  - MS Teams comms channels (ONE TEAM, Foodies, Menopause, LGBTQ+, Book Club, Eco Chat, Lift sharing).
  - Other events (ad hoc) e.g. Staff Summer Social (9 July 2025), Photo competition (October), Quiz (13 November 2025 & 26 February 2026); Christmas Quiz (10 December 2025).

8.3 This year there has been a particular emphasis on updating managers about Local Government Reform and their role in supporting this. This has involved regular information/ Q&A sessions as well as a visit from a former Chief Executive of a local authority in Cumbria that has transitioned to become a Unitary Council which received very positive feedback both from staff and members.

8.4 Our engagement with staff is in-depth and purposeful. The 2025 annual employee engagement survey ran from 12 May – 6 June 2025. Our response rate was 55% and our Employee Net Promoter Score increased to +38 (up from +29 in 2024) which puts us on a par with some large well-known organisations, such as Google and Netflix. Our highest scoring question was staff understanding the positive impact we have on our residents and the community and the lowest scoring question was optimism about Local Government Reform, with 36% of respondents optimistic, 41% neutral, and 23% pessimistic.

An action plan was developed and delivered to address areas of improvement raised in the survey. This included activity such as Susan visiting GM depots, Hythe Pool, and Customer Services, improved recycling facilities in the office, a significant increase in training budget available, a chill out space on the 1st floor for staff to relax at lunchtime or after difficult calls, a staff quiz night and the featuring of different teams at staff briefing events to aid cross-organisational understanding. Team results packs were also shared with managers to enable them to tailor their leadership to meet the needs of their teams.

We have undertaken some bespoke surveys related to LGR. These have included: questions in November regarding optimism about LGR and asking staff how they want to be updated about it and a further survey in January 2026 after a visit from a former Chief Executive of a local authority in Cumbria to gauge optimism levels, feelings and support required. We use insights from these surveys to adapt and tailor our communication to staff.

- 8.5 This year, in line with our Wellbeing Strategy and acknowledging colleagues' concerns about LGR, we have delivered a range of internally and externally run sessions focused on employee wellbeing:
- 2 April 2025: Planning for Retirement (Affinity Connect)
  - 12 – 16 May 2025: Lunchtimes: Meditation sessions; Mindful Painting, jigsaws and Eurovision engagement as part of Mental Health Awareness Week

- 13 May 2025: Resilience in Change (Dr Tony Parker – Clinical Psychologist)
- 14 May 2025: Vicarious Trauma (Lighthouse)
- 21 May 2025: Getting the most out of your local govt pension (our HR team)
- 3rd July 2025: Planning for Retirement (Affinity Connect)
- 10th September 2025: Your Financial Wellbeing (Affinity Connect)
- 8th October 2025: Effective Tax Planning (Affinity Connect)
- 30 October 2025 & 12 February 2026: Menopause Cafe
- 26 November 2025: Planning for Retirement (Affinity Connect)

8.6 We still have **45** staff members trained as Mental Health First Aiders in order to support staff and customers. This year they have visited team meetings (Winter 2025) to share information about health action plans and remind staff how to access mental health support.

8.7 Staff are able to access 360 feedback, facilitated by the OD & Engagement team. This year colleagues from Housing and Customer Support have used this tool to help them develop their leadership and management skills.

8.8 The OD & Engagement team have also run meetings and Away Days for teams to help them review progress and plan for the future. These have included:

- Throughout the year Corporate Debt Cross-training
- 25 November 2025: Systems & Transactions team
- 10 February 2026: Planning Management team
- 27 February 2026: Finance team
- 30 March 2026: Planning team (whole team)

We also run bi-monthly Operational Management Team meetings which engage Middle Managers in the organisation's strategic thinking and planning.

## **9. RECOGNITION**

9.1 We have continued with the delivery of our Employee of the Year scheme. The peer-nominated scheme recognises those who have noticeably displayed behaviours aligned to our core values and is in its fourth year. In December 2025, the annual winner was Jerrie Horne, Information Governance Officer. Jerrie has gone above and beyond in her role by delivering empathetic, tailored, and efficient information services, building strong cross council relationships, and consistently anticipating challenges to keep the organisation performing at its best. Her proactive problem solving, exceptional productivity, and unwavering positive mindset have directly improved customer experience, strengthened team capability, and ensured resilient service delivery even during peak periods. The runners up were: Sandra Bryant (Estates Management Officer), Tara Liam (Community Safety Officer), Shaun Staveley (Environmental Crime Officer) and Francis Smith & Rikki Neil (Housing Caretakers).

9.2 We also focus on embedding our core values through quarterly corporate inductions for new starters and our behaviour framework. We continue to promote our E-cards service, making it easier for staff to recognise one another for displaying our values at any time of year. In addition to this, we recognise those

who have dedicated significant years of service to the organisation with small tokens of appreciation.

## 10. F&H REWARDS

10.1



F&H Rewards via Reward Gateway was launched to staff in 2018 and continues to be extremely successful and popular with staff.

10.2 By way of an update, the Tusker car lease scheme which was launched to staff on 25<sup>th</sup> April 2022 has seen steady interest and we now have 20 employees who have ordered a car through this scheme, with some now being on their second car lease. Whilst this take up may sound on the low side it represents 4.5% of our headcount whereas other councils who have introduced the scheme have reported a 1% average take up of the scheme.

Tusker have now launched a pre-loved scheme for used lease cars that have been returned to them. This is still in its early days and only 2 staff have utilised this option which we believe could be due to the minimal difference in lease cost compared to ordering a brand new car.

10.3 The top 10 retailers within the 'Smart Spending' element of the platform remain the big supermarkets (Sainsburys, Tesco & Asda) with Currys PC World and holiday companies also proving popular.

## 11. PEOPLE STRATEGY

11.1 Since 2019, the People Strategy has become embedded within the council framework and underpinned not just the transformation programme but all of our people related activities.

The current People Strategy is now due for a review to ensure it continues to support the Council's overall objectives and underpin the development of our staff.

11.2 As a reminder, the 6 main themes of the people strategy are:



### 11.3 Behavioural Competency Framework

The framework continues to support our recruitment and selection process and our performance management framework with Performance & Development Review (PDR) documentation really focussing staff on how they have displayed these behaviours during their everyday work and achievements during the previous 12 months followed by an agreed development plan with objectives for the forthcoming year. This approach enables managers to continually refer to the PDR during their 1-2-1's with staff throughout the year and should it be necessary to use the formal Capability process the development plan automatically feeds into this process removing the need for different documentation.

As a reminder we have 9 behaviours linked to our 4 core values:



## 12. EMPLOYMENT LAW / POLICY WORK

- 12.1 The Employment Rights Act 2025 (ERA) brings into force a number of significant upgrades to UK workers rights.
- 12.2 The timeline for implementation of the ERA stretches over more than a year with key dates as follows:

February 2026 saw the first wave of rights removing restrictions on trade union activities and streamlined processes for industrial action.

As we move into the 2026/27 year:

April 2026 sees changes including Statutory Sick pay rights from day 1 and parental leave rights from day 1 with October 2026 bringing protections around any potential abuse of zero hour contracts.

The changes continue into 2027 with the reduction of the unfair dismissal qualifying period to 6 months (currently 2 years) from January 2027 and making 'fire and rehire' practices automatically unfair in most circumstances, particularly where the rehire is on worse terms.

Alongside the ERA the government are also considering other initiatives including:

- Supporting terminally ill employees with a Dying to Work Charter
- Modernising health & safety guidance

- Extending pay gap reporting to also include ethnicity and disability alongside the current gender pay gap reporting which has been extended to include mandatory action plans
- Developing menopause guidance with employers required to have an action plan in place
- Reviewing the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) legislation (TUPE)
- Continued trade union reform

The HR team remain alive to employment law changes and recommended best practice meaning that policies remain under review.

### **13. PAY UPDATE**

13.1 In February 2025 the pay negotiations were successfully concluded ahead of the 2025/26 financial year following meetings of the Joint Staff Consultative Panel and the subsequent staff ballot.

The pay award agreed was as follows:

#### 2025/26

- £1,500 added to every grade and salary point or 4.5% whichever is the greater amount.

#### 2026/27

- £1,500 added to every grade and salary point or 3.5% whichever is the greater amount.

In addition, the civic centre remained closed on Friday 2<sup>nd</sup> January 2026 enabling staff to finish for the Christmas break on 24<sup>th</sup> December 2025 at which point the civic centre closed until Monday 5<sup>th</sup> January 2026 with no requirement for any annual leave to be used during that period. It is worth noting again that the closure over the Christmas period is extremely well received by staff at all levels across the council.

Consideration will now turn to preparations for pay negotiations covering the 2027/2028 year.

### **14. LOCAL GOVERNMENT REFORM (LGR)**

14.1 The HR team have started early preparatory work to ensure that we are in the best position possible once a decision is communicated by central government in July 2026.

14.2 Ongoing work includes the following:

- Ensuring every role on our structure charts has an up to date job description
- Ensuring all employees have a signed contract on file along with any subsequent contractual variations
- Ensuring our payroll system (iTrent) has a 100% accurate establishment hierarchy, meaning any data required for future review and TUPE transfer to a new unitary authority is absolutely reliable

- Reviewing retention of data across computerised files (individual personnel files, single central DBS record etc)
- Compiling a central list of every policy, procedure, framework and guidance across the range of HR services
- Regularly updating a central record of redundancy calculations for all staff and pension strain costs for those aged 55 and over
- Reviewing working patterns for part time staff and those that have requested flexible working to ensure that exact hours of work are known

14.3 As well as our internal Programme Board which has been in place since mid 2025, the Chief HR Officer also attends the Kent LGR HR workstream fortnightly which is led by 2 Chief Executives (Thanet & Maidstone) and attended by the HR lead for each of the Kent councils. This is in line with work addressing Priority Action Groups identified by the Kent Chiefs who have been meeting regularly to oversee the LGR programme across Kent.

## **15. HR SERVICES IN 2026/27**

15.1 As well as continuing much of the work already highlighted throughout this report, some of the work already identified for the team during the 2026/27 year includes:

- Further development of guidance and system developments that will enable managers to be more self sufficient and work monitored via the Salesforce system
- Training for managers on the Job Evaluation process to enable them to sit on evaluation panels
- Comprehensive refresh of the People Strategy
- Continued review of policies and procedures in light of the Employment Rights Act 2025 coming into force
- Preparation for LGR – whilst decisions are awaited in July 2026 from central government, the work to prepare for the transition to vesting day in April 2026 will continue plus there will be ongoing attendance at relevant network meetings led by South East Employers and the LGA to learn from others experiences who have either been through LGR already or who are on the priority programmes. It should be noted that there is likely to be a need to increase the capacity of the HR team through 2026/2027 in order to be able to address the LGR work alongside maintaining the ‘business as usual’ work.

## **16. LEGAL / FINANCIAL AND OTHER CONTROLS / POLICY MATTERS**

### **16.1 Legal Officers Comments (KP)**

The continued development of the HR Business Partner model supports proactive engagement with services and early identification of workforce and employment issues to assist in reducing legal risk and promotion of consistent application of policies and procedures.

The Councils focus on absence management and employee wellbeing initiatives assists with service resilience and supporting compliance with duties relating to employee health and wellbeing including obligations under the Equality Act 2010 such as those relating to disabilities and reasonable adjustments.

The Council will need to continue to monitor legislative developments and associated regulations and guidance to ensure timely implementation of required policy and procedure arising under the Employment Rights Act 2025. Ongoing monitoring of the use of zero hours contracts to ensure that arrangements remain appropriate, proportionate and complaint will be necessary in addition to potential changes to flexible working and employment protections.

#### **16.2 Finance Officers Comments (JS)**

There are no direct financial implications arising as a direct result of this report.

#### **16.3 Diversities and Equalities Implications (ASm)**

There are no specific Diversities and Equalities Implications arising from this report.

### **17. CONTACT OFFICER AND BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS**

Councillors with any questions arising out of this report should contact the following officer prior to the meeting:

Andrina Smith – Chief HR Officer  
Tel: 01303 853405  
Email: [andrina.smith@folkestone-hythe.gov.uk](mailto:andrina.smith@folkestone-hythe.gov.uk)

The following background documents have been relied upon in the preparation of this report:

None

#### **APPENDICES:**

Appendix A – HR & OD Team Structure Chart  
Appendix B – Leadership for the Future modules