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## Report to Cabinet Briefing

27 June 2023

### West Sussex County Council Careers and Skills Executive Task & Finish Group – Recommendations

Director of HR and Organisational Development

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#### Summary

At its meeting on 28 March 2023, Cabinet Briefing considered a report from the Director of Children, Young People and Learning on a `West Sussex County Council Employment and Skills Reset`. Cabinet Briefing endorsed the work being taken forward through four priority themes, including to `Attract, retain, and develop a high-quality council workforce. Cabinet Briefing also endorsed the proposed first step in the employment and skills reset, to organise an employment and skills Executive Task and Finish Group (TFG), as agreed at Full Council in December 2022. This report sets out the recommendations from the Executive TFG. The terms of reference for the TFG are attached as Appendix B.

#### Recommendations

##### 1. Maximising the Apprenticeship Levy to address workforce challenges

**a) Increase apprenticeship levy spend through an "Apprenticeship First" approach** to learning, development, skills enhancement, and recruitment  
The Council currently has 350 apprentices. 79% of these are existing staff undertaking apprenticeships for their continuous professional development. The remaining 21% have been recruited externally. Currently, the Council advertises very few jobs as apprenticeship opportunities, and this results in the Council returning unspent Apprenticeship Levy to the government (approximately £40K) each month. In terms of recruitment, most hiring managers are seeking candidates who can 'hit the ground running' – that is, who already have all the skills, knowledge, and experience to do the job. There is an opportunity to make even better use of the Apprenticeship Levy by changing the Council's recruitment culture and increasing the number of candidates recruited in and onto apprenticeships in areas with workforce challenges such as hard to recruit to posts. This would increase candidate pools, create career and skills enhancement opportunities not only for existing staff but also for external candidates looking for career change/progression. As an example, it is hard for anyone to secure a management role if they have no management experience, yet there is a range of excellent management apprenticeships which could be used to develop existing staff and new recruits into those roles.

From a recruitment perspective, the Apprenticeship Team would need to work with other colleagues in HR and Organisational Development (OD) to scope this. Different approaches are used by different councils. For example, Southampton advertise all vacancies from grades 1-5 as apprenticeship opportunities first (i.e., as 'jobs with training') unless there is a service specific reason not to. At East Sussex County Council (ESCC), all full-time administrative roles have an

apprenticeship automatically attached to them as an option. Any potential candidate can ask a recruiting manager about the possibility of doing an apprenticeship alongside the role. These roles are paid at the normal rate for the role and not an apprenticeship salary. An ESCC manager must opt out of having the apprenticeship attached to the role at the stage of adding the job to their recruitment system if they are not amenable to staff undertaking an apprenticeship.

In summary, the benefits would be:

- Expansion of the potential recruitment pool to assist in addressing workforce capacity and capability challenges.
- Reduction in unspent Apprenticeship Levy returned to government each month
- Increased skills enhancement opportunities for existing staff and external candidates.
- Improved age diversity in our workforce by bringing in more people at career entry level on to apprenticeships.

There is already good practice taking place in the Highways, Transport and Planning Service where there is a successful talent pipeline, through apprenticeships to grow our own Civil Engineers – a hard to recruit to role.

#### **Proposed actions:**

- Map all roles grade 6 and below to apprenticeship standards.
- All roles at grade 6 and below to be advertised as jobs 'with training' unless there is a clear rationale not to.
- All management roles to be advertised as jobs with the appropriate management apprenticeship embedded to demonstrate the opportunity for development.
- Develop career change opportunities via apprenticeships. By advertising more jobs as 'jobs with training' there is the potential to broaden the talent pool to include those seeking a career change. Once in post, individuals could be trained up via an apprenticeship programme.
- Identify which of our hard to recruit to roles could present opportunities for degree level apprenticeships (emulating the current approach to Social Worker in Children Young People & Learning and Civil Engineering apprenticeships in Highways, Transport and Planning) and seek to work with apprenticeship providers to progress.

#### **b) Develop clear career pathways to "grow our own"**

Career pathways exist in some hard to recruit areas already – e.g., Social Worker apprenticeships and Civil Engineer apprenticeships.

#### **Proposed actions:**

- To shine a light on good practice – e.g., in Highways, Transport and Planning where they are successfully growing their own civil engineers and consider how the approach could be mirrored in other parts of the organisation.
- Develop career pathways for social care roles in the first instance and look to expand from there.

## **2. Raising awareness and interest in the Council as an 'Employer of Choice' and enhance promotion of equal opportunity**

**a) Develop approaches to attract candidates with the widest spectrum of protected characteristics** (who may require reasonable adjustments)

In terms of reasonable adjustments, there is County Council guidance which sets out Hiring Managers' responsibilities:

- During recruitment, managers can only ask candidates about adjustments that they might need to the recruitment process. They must not ask about adjustments needed to the job itself until an offer of employment has been made.
- Applicants must not be referred to occupational health or be asked to complete a medical questionnaire before the offer of a job is made.
- Candidates must be assessed on their ability to perform the role without any assumptions about their disability or health condition. Managers must not ask any questions about medical history or past sickness absence until an offer of employment has been made.
- Changes to the current process might include (other types of adjustment may be required dependent on specific circumstances):
  - o Providing information about the job and/or the application form in an alternative format.
  - o Extra time to complete an assessment, or, in some cases, the format of the assessment may need to be adapted or changed.
  - o Providing an interpreter or other support as required.

**Proposed actions:**

- Increase active and engaging promotion via social media of the Council's guaranteed interview scheme to support people with disabilities, veterans, and care leavers.
- Consider developing approaches for other priority groups and cohorts (e.g., refugees) and engaging colleagues in Communities
- Review job boards used for advertising to target those with protected characteristics who could take up jobs with training (e.g., through apprenticeships)
- Develop and refresh the Council's Employee Value Proposition (EVP), highlighting what the Council has to offer as an attractive employer. There is a wealth of job opportunities in the Council, covering a wide range of sectors including Social Care, Libraries, Highways Transport and Planning, HR, Finance, and Legal. This may also involve reviewing the Council's external website pages to ensure they are engaging and attracting as wide a candidate pool as possible.
- Continue to develop the Council's use of digital to promote roles including social media and videos rather than traditional advertising.
- Build on the work that the Council is already undertaking in terms of developing its approach to reasonable adjustments to ensure this covers our arrangements for recruitment and talent attraction
- Work with the Equality Staff Groups to better understand how we might be able to attract hard to reach groups to work for the organisation and to better understand the challenges they might face in securing employment.

**b) Explore a different approach to some areas of recruitment where skills/experience of candidates are matched to available roles with mediation to support through the process**

### **Proposed actions:**

- Identify funding to appoint an Employability Practitioner which would be a two-year apprenticeship role to work with partner agencies (e.g., Department of Work and Pensions (DWP)) to highlight roles which individuals who are finding it hard to secure employment may be appropriate for with relevant (apprenticeship) training, and if required, providing support in the recruitment process.
- Should funding be secured, the Employability Practitioner could look to increase taster and work experience placements to train, upskill and support with CV development and interview training. The Practitioner would also support careers fairs to promote roles and the Council.
- Work with the Talent Attraction Team to scope the feasibility of an open/welcome day with appropriate hiring managers promoting their opportunities.
- As part of the Council's wider employment and skills reset, seek to influence and work more effectively with key players such as the DWP and district and borough councils' Journey to Work Programme to give more focus on County Council opportunities.
- Develop an attraction strategy to engage with more mature candidates highlighting what the Council can offer from a *return-to-work perspective*, focusing on health and wellbeing advantages and flexible working arrangements. This work will include consideration of how we might be able to provide opportunities for volunteers who may not believe they are able to get paid employment due to their personal responsibilities and circumstances.

### **3. Attracting Young People including care leavers**

- a)** There is a range of existing careers information, advice, and guidance for young people in schools and colleges, including through the work of the Careers Hub and Careers Leads. However, traditionally Careers, Information, Advice and Guidance (CIAG) has tended to focus on careers in business, NHS, and those roles with a clear and defined career path. There is much less emphasis on the public sector as a whole; in part because the public sector has not positioned itself strongly in the CIAG arena.

### **Proposed actions:**

- Explore closer relationships with schools and colleges around careers opportunities in the Council initially through the Work of the West Sussex Careers Hub to be hosted by the Council from 1 Sept. In particular, focus on the Chichester College Group and how we can collectively work more closely on this agenda.

### **b) Under-graduate and graduate internships**

Internships are a proven way of introducing potential future employees to employers. Interns need to be able to work on defined projects with clear outcomes and be well supported to ensure they have a `good` experience and there would need to be promotion of the benefits of internships with staff. It is well known that a high level of interns seek longer-term employment with the organisation where they have had an internship.

### **Proposed actions:**

- Develop a package of awareness raising and support for managers on the potential benefits of employing interns targeting our hard to recruit to roles in the first instance.
- Identify universities which offer suitable degrees to scope the potential for a partnership approach to developing a suitable and sustainable programme.

### **c) Develop a specific apprenticeship offering for care leavers**

The number of care leavers who are NEET (not in education, employment, or training) has been increasing. The latest figure (end April 2023) on known NEET young people in West Sussex is 349 of which 63 are children looked after or care leavers.

### **Proposed actions:**

- Engage with the Leaving Care Service and Lead in Education & Skills for careers advice to school leavers to better understand the existing offer.
- Recognise the proposal in the *Independent Review of Children's Social Care* headed by Josh McCallister that the Government should make care experience a protected characteristic and new legislation should be passed which broadens responsibilities across a wider set of public bodies and organisations.
- Identify and utilise job communication channels which target care leavers.
- Promote apprenticeship job opportunities to care leavers alongside promotion of a guaranteed interview scheme.
- Identify if funding is available to support the creation of a work readiness package of support.
- Ensure the Apprenticeship Team maximises opportunity to promote the Government Bursary for care leavers taking up apprenticeships (which rises to £3K in August 2023)

### **d) Sign up to care leaver Covenant**

This would be a long-term aim, and only once the offer for care leavers has been clarified and is in place. The Leaving Care Service could advise on this area. The Care Leaver Covenant is a national inclusion programme that supports care leavers aged 16-25 to live independently. The aim of the Care Leaver Covenant, to which organisations commit, is to provide additional support for those leaving care; making available a different type of support and expertise from that statutorily provided by local authorities.

## **4. Strategic Planning to address challenges**

Consider a 4-year strategic workforce plan in relation to the evolving focus for issues and pressures which would include:

- Segmented talent strategies and improved support to attract a diverse workforce, for example based on age demographics.
- Identify the role T-Levels could play to support the wider agenda. T-Levels offer students practical and knowledge-based learning at a school or college and on-the-job experience through an industry placement of at least 315 hours –

approximately 45 days. The Council could provide the industry placements and there has been some interest from our schools in T-Levels.

- Work with district and borough councils, and other public sector organisations as appropriate to develop joint approaches to collective recruitment challenges and employee benefits.

## **5. Requests of Cabinet Members/Next steps**

### **Next Steps**

Cabinet is asked to approve the draft recommendations as detailed in the report, following which, these will be incorporated into the workplan for HR & OD.

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