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**BRIEFING REPORT**  
**Corporate Policy Committee**

**Workforce Strategy 2021-2025**

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**Report of: Adele Taylor, Director of Finance & Customer Services**

**Ward(s) Affected: All**

**Purpose of Report**

- 1 The purpose of this report is to update members on progress against delivery of Cheshire East Council's Workforce Strategy 2021-2025 up to May 2024.
- 2 The Strategy sets out how the Council will develop the capacity and capability of its workforce to support the priorities identified within the Corporate Plan and deliver our Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS).
- 3 The Strategy supports the Council's vision for an open, fairer, greener Cheshire East. In particular, it supports the priorities for an open and enabling organisation, by putting in place plans to support and develop our workforce to be confident, motivated, innovative, resilient, and empowered.

**Executive Summary**

- 4 The Workforce Strategy was agreed by Corporate Policy Committee in November 2021. Progress is reported below against the Strategy's four agreed strategic themes.

**Background**

- 5 Our four-year strategy having been approved in November 2021, is nearing completion. It is built around four Workforce Priorities: Delivering Our Future; Living Our Values and Delivering Our Employee Deal; Inclusive Workforce - Ensuring Everyone has a Voice, and; Empowering Our Workforce.
- 6 The completion of the current Workforce Strategy and the work undertaken as part of its action plan provides a solid base for the

development of a new Workforce Strategy, which will form a key strand of the Council's wider Transformation Programme. The new strategy will continue to focus on ensuring there is capacity, capability and a strong workforce culture that supports and fosters a high performing workforce, helping the Council to transform. This will be developed with each Directorate through their DMT meetings and trade union colleagues, paying cognisance to HR metrics and Service Workforce Plans.

## **Briefing Information**

7 An update against each of these themes up to 30<sup>th</sup> May 2024 is covered below, with the corresponding action from the Strategy's plan indicated at the end of each paragraph.

### **8 Theme One - Delivering Our Future**

- (a) Following the resignation of Dr Lorraine O'Donnell, officers have supported the Appointments Committee with the recruitment and selection process for the post of a permanent Chief Executive. Rob Polkinghorne was appointed as Chief Executive by Council on 13 December 2023 (1.11).
- (b) Following the resignation of Alex Thompson, Director of Finance and Customer Services and Section 151 Officer, officers have also supported the Chief Executive with an interim recruitment process. Adele Taylor, was appointed as Interim Director of Finance and Customer Services and Section 151 Officer and took up the post from 29<sup>th</sup> April 2024.
- (c) Strategic workforce planning is critical to our longer-term success, using the insight and data that is available. This also informs service workforce planning along with the data from exit interviews and the most recent Pulse staff survey for each service area. A monthly workforce dashboard for each of the four directorates, setting out key HR metrics is being used by HR Business Partners to support directorates in tighter control and financial management, supporting the Council in addressing its current financial challenge (1.1). This has included supporting service areas with the delivery of initiatives to reduce their agency spend. There has been an overall reduction in the number of agency staff from 234 in quarter 3 to 196 in quarter 4. HR has continued to work with services to review their establishments and undertake restructures where appropriate (1.2).
- (d) The Council is currently working with the LGA who are conducting a review to make sure that we have organisational structures that are effective at taking decisions, with clear accountabilities and

roles. This review will also strengthen and stabilise our management structure so that we have the right management capacity for a council that will need to change quickly to address our financial position, and be robust enough to deal with future challenges. This review will inform the future senior management structure. It is proposed that consultation will take place on these proposals over the summer.

- (e) Another cycle of the Mutually Agreed Resignation Scheme (MARS) has been completed successfully with 92 applications made and 31 approved. The cost of one-off MARS payments was £544,498.89, and the related annual savings will be £658,731 in a full year, saving just over £2,090,000 over a 4-year MTFS cycle (1.1).
- (f) An updated programme of monthly face-to-face senior leadership engagement has been delivered for the Wider Leadership Community (Heads of Service and above), with external expert speakers introduced where appropriate. This programme has been developed further, with support from Solace (The Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers) to ensure the Council's senior managers are well equipped for transformation. (1.4). A programme of ongoing leadership development is also now in place for the Corporate Leadership Team.
- (g) National challenges in the recruitment market, particularly around hard to fill posts in planning, social care and ICT persist. In addition to a series of initiatives that were delivered by HR as part of the Recruitment and Retention Programme that was reported to Corporate Policy Committee in October 2023, a further review of the council's recruitment process has been completed. This has brought further improvements, including enhanced guidance and support for hiring managers and a simplified process for references (1.1, 1.9, 1.11, 1.12).
- (h) There were 78 new apprenticeship starts at the Council in 2023/2024. The first quarter of this year has 20 apprenticeship starts on track. The government withdrew the public sector apprenticeship target in 2022 and there is no longer a statutory requirement for local authorities to report on their apprenticeship take-up.
- (i) The social work degree apprenticeship scheme has progressed significantly, with 36 degree apprentices currently on programme across Adults, Health & Integration and Children's Services and a further cohort due to start in September 2024 (1.8).

- (j) Recruitment approval for all permanent, temporary and agency positions remains in place as a mechanism to help address the Council's budget pressures (1.2).
- (k) As part of a package of cost-neutral additional staff benefits, the current flexi scheme was expanded to senior managers in November 2023 (1.1, 1.11, 2.7).
- (l) We are planning to:
  - (i) Undertake further interim recruitment to the Council's senior management structure to ensure that capacity is in place for the transformation programme until permanent recruitment can take place;
  - (ii) Introduce a further range of cost-neutral additional staff benefits over the next six months via a new benefits platform, including a green car salary sacrifice lease scheme and a white goods scheme by the end of quarter one (1,1, 1.11, 2.7);
  - (iii) Continue to use a programme of local and national recruitment fairs, where appropriate (1.11).
  - (iv) Working with our Transformation Delivery Partner, launch a transformation skills audit to better understand current transformation skills across the Council.

## **9 Theme Two - Living Our Values and Delivering Our Employee Deal**

- (a) The Council has made a clear commitment to every member of staff, through the Employee Deal, to care for their health and wellbeing. Following the additional support provided to staff around the cost of living last winter, a monthly wellbeing newsletter has been relaunched to ensure it is better aligned to wider current corporate communications (2.8).
- (b) Workshops have been held with Brighter Future Champions to explore the development of Team Charters that help embed future ways of working. Team Charters have now been developed across the Council by Heads of Service.
- (c) Plans are in place to hold a series of staff events in September that will explore the culture required to support the Council in its transformation journey. (1.4, 2,2).
- (d) Engagement with the Made My Day during 2023-2024 has remained steady, with approximately 159 sent each month.

Additionally, a Cheshire East Council New Year Honours Event to recognise staff and thank them for their contributions was held virtually on 25<sup>th</sup> January 2024, with members of CLT chairing the event and members of the Wider Leadership Community hosting various categories. All 600 people recognised were invited to attend. The feedback from all those involved whether putting a person forward for recognition or receiving the recognition was very positive (2.4).

- (e) A Pulse staff survey 'Shaping Our Future' was launched in November 2023 to all staff, to understand the views on the new Corporate Plan and the support required from a workforce perspective to deliver this together (3.4). The results from this survey have been shared with staff, members and with the trade unions. Service specific results have also been shared with Heads of Service to inform the development of actions within Service Workforce Plans. A series of action planning workshops have been held with staff groups and a corporate action plan drafted. A link to the Pulse Survey results can be found in the link in the background papers.
- (f) We are planning to:
  - (i) Continue to use the Brighter Future Champions as a valuable tool to engage with the wider organisation (3.4);
  - (ii) Introduce an updated induction process, via the Council's e-learning platform, Learning Lounge, with refreshed communications as part of the on-boarding process (2.3);
  - (iii) Continue to deliver our wellbeing in work programme, using our Mental Health First Aiders and direction to our Employee Assistance Programme (2.8).

## 10 **Theme Three - Inclusive Workforce - Ensuring Everyone has a Voice**

- (a) HR has delivered the Gender Pay Gap Report, which reports a decrease in the mean pay gap from 12.9% to 11.4%, from 2022-2023. This remains below the provisional 2023 ONS national public sector mean pay gap of 12.5% (3.1).
- (b) An application for the MoD Armed Forces Gold award was submitted in March 2024 with an outcome due at the beginning of July 2024. Our Leave and Time Off Policy and our Recruitment Policy & Procedure have been updated to reflect the new Gold standard (3.1)
- (c) Manager Share and Support sessions continue on a weekly basis for all line managers as a mechanism for cascading initiatives.

Each week, an average of 100 managers attend these themed sessions, which also serve as a mechanism for engagement and feedback with over 600 people managers across the Council. Themed 'In the Know' sessions have continued successfully for all staff. These mirror the Manager Share and Support sessions and are used to cascade and share information on key projects or initiatives (3.6).

- (d) A 'Coffee with the Chief Executive' session ran in February for staff to meet and engage informally with the new Chief Executive, Rob Polkinghorne (3.6).
- (e) Since 2018, our Champions Community has continued to play a key role in our culture journey, as an important link between staff and the organisation. They have provided feedback on different initiatives, raised concerns and shared information with their teams when required (3.4).
- (f) Work has continued supporting the Council's WorkplaCE programme, with the delivery of the second phase of the consultation process with those staff directly affected by the closure of Westfields to ensure minimal disruption to staff and services (2.1).
- (g) Mandatory e-learning for equality and diversity is now in place, with tracking of completion rates (3.5).
- (h) We are planning to:
  - (i) Deliver the annual pay gap action plan (3.2);
  - (ii) Deliver further updated recruitment and selection training workshops (1.13, 3.4);
  - (iii) Continue to work with trade union colleagues to maintain effective employee relations (3.8).

## 11 **Theme Four - Empowering Our Workforce**

- (a) The Council's updated e-learning platform, Learning Lounge, provides electronic recording of PDR conversations, with the functionality for managers to track completion rates for both PDRs alongside training. This provides oversight of completion rates for training courses and PDR conversations in their respective areas and has supported the Council with ensuring compliance on mandatory training. (4.1, 4.2, 4.10).

- (b) Training plans have been reviewed and refined in line with the Council's current budgetary position (4.5, 4.6). Continuing Professional Development (CPD) requests continue to fund essential individual development needs that are not available via the apprenticeship levy (4.5, 4.6).
- (c) A Workforce Planning Toolkit, including a skills gap analysis tool was introduced in March 2024 to support managers in setting more long-term strategic direction for their workforce. The toolkit contains tools to help identify and measure any organisational skills gaps (4.6).
- (d) We are planning to:
  - (i) Refresh the Council's coaching pool and continue to offer further opportunities for internal coaching and mentoring (4.7).

## **Implications and Comments**

### *Monitoring Officer/Legal*

- 12 There is no legal requirement to produce a Workforce Strategy. However, it is necessary to provide a clear articulation of our workforce priorities and to ensure alignment with the Corporate Strategy.
- 13 Any proposed changes to Council policies or decisions which impact staff terms and conditions will require consultation and engagement with the trade unions and relevant staff groups before any changes are implemented.
- 14 The requirement for Equality Impact Assessments should be considered to ensure any specific actions do not disproportionately impact any staff member with a protected characteristic.
- 15 The MARS scheme is not contractual and does not form part of staff terms and conditions. All applications are monitored to ensure that decisions taken are not directly or indirectly linked to a protected characteristic, for example age, sex or disability.

### *Section 151 Officer/Finance*

- 16 The delivery of the actions set out in the Workforce Strategy is within existing budgets and approved business cases.

### *Policy*

- 17 The Workforce Strategy supports the Corporate Plan and the Council's vision for an "Open, Fairer, Greener Cheshire East". The Strategy

supports the priorities for an open and enabling organisation, by putting in place plans to support and develop our workforce to be confident, motivated, innovative, resilient, and empowered.

### *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion*

- 18 The Workforce Strategy aims to improve the experience of working for the Council for all members of staff. It also sets out key priorities and actions to ensure our workforce is inclusive and our recruitment and selection processes promote recruitment and selection for all underrepresented groups. It supports the delivery of the Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion Strategy.

### *Human Resources*

- 19 The Workforce Strategy covers the breadth of services with HR and sets the priorities for Human Resources.
- 20 An Equality Impact Assessment for MARS was updated taking into account any exclusions of staff/services who may be undergoing restructuring.

### *Risk Management*

- 21 There are risks to service delivery across the Council if plans are not put in place to address skills gaps and work is not undertaken in relation to recruitment and retention in an increasingly competitive market.

### *Rural Communities*

- 22 There are no specific implications for rural communities.

### *Children and Young People including Cared for Children, care leavers and Children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)*

- 23 The delivery of the Council's Action Plan for Apprenticeships includes work to increase the number of apprenticeships available across the Council for our cared for children.

### *Public Health*

- 24 *There are no public health implications.*

### *Climate Change*

- 25 The delivery of the priorities within the Workforce Strategy that are focussed on the delivery of the agile working policy will contribute towards our workforce becoming more carbon neutral, through reduced

commuting into work and commuting in between buildings to attend meetings in person.

<b>Access to Information</b>	
Contact Officer:	Sara Barker, Head of HR Sara.barker@cheshireeast.gov.uk
Appendices:	N/A
Background Papers:	<a href="#">Workforce Strategy</a> <a href="#">Pulse Survey Results</a>