

OPEN

Corporate Policy Committee

30 November 2023

Workforce Strategy 2021-2025

Report of: Alex Thompson, Director of Finance & Customer Services

Report Reference No: CP/25/23-24

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 October 2023.
- 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.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Corporate Policy Committee is recommended to:

1. note progress in delivering the Workforce Strategy; and
2. agree to receive further updates every six months to monitor progress; and
3. agree with the implementation of the strategy as set out in the paper.

Background

- 5 Our four-year strategy was approved in November 2021 and builds on the previous workforce strategy, its achievements, and our organisational cultural change programme. 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 An update against each of these themes up to 31 October 2023 is covered below, with the corresponding action from the Strategy's plan indicated at the end of each paragraph.
- 7 **Theme One - Delivering Our Future**
 - (a) Strategic workforce planning is critical to our longer-term success, using the insight and data that is available. Work has been completed on the establishment of a monthly workforce dashboard for each of the four directorates, setting out key HR metrics. These metrics will be 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).
 - (b) Another cycle of the Mutually Agreed Resignation Scheme (MARS) has been completed successfully with 90 applications made and 44 approved. The cost of one-off MARS payments was £734,441 and the related annual savings will be £930,601 in a full year, saving nearly £3m over a 4 year MTFS cycle. The scheme is due to be run again in 2023/24 (1.1).
 - (c) An updated programme of face-to-face senior leadership engagement and development has been delivered for both the

Wider Leadership Team and the Wider Leadership Community, with external expert speakers introduced where appropriate (1.4).

- (d) Post Covid, national challenges in the recruitment market, particularly around hard to fill posts in planning, social care and ICT have been exacerbated. As a direct response to this HR set up a recruitment and retention programme to encourage take up of permanent positions as opposed to more expensive agency placements. This programme has delivered:
 - (i) Additional career pathways (1.9);
 - (ii) A reviewed and re-aligned recruitment process for the Council (1.12);
 - (iii) Employee profile videos on social media and on Cheshire East Council's website to enhance the recruitment process (1.11);
 - (iv) A new programme of local and regional recruitment fairs (1.12);
 - (v) The introduction of a social work academy in Children's (1.1).
 - (vi) An improved employee benefits offer including agreement to introduce a green car scheme, a white goods salary sacrifice scheme and an expanded flexi time scheme (1.11).
- (e) There have been 38 new apprenticeship starts at the Council since April 2023 and there are an additional 13 planned starts in place over the coming weeks. 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.
- (f) The social work degree apprenticeship scheme has progressed significantly with additional cohorts each year across two universities. There are 26 currently on programme and a further 10 planned to start in January 2024 (1.8).
- (g) Following the resignation of Dr Lorraine O'Donnell, officers have supported the Appointments Committee with the recruitment and selection process for the post of Interim Chief Executive and permanent Chief Executive position. David Parr was appointed as Interim Chief Executive by Council on 18 October 2023. A review of comparative salaries was undertaken, and a new salary band

was approved by Council increasing the salary range for the Chief Executive to £170,000 - £190,000 to ensure that the recruitment process was competitive and attracted the best calibre candidates. Assessments were undertaken during October and final interviews took place on 27 November 2023 (1.11).

- (h) A new process for recruitment approval for all permanent, temporary and agency positions has been introduced as a mechanism to help address the Council's budget pressures (1.2).
- (i) We are planning to:
 - (i) Implement a range of cost-neutral additional staff benefits over the next six months, including the expansion of the current flexi scheme to senior managers in November 2023, introduction of a green car salary sacrifice lease scheme and white goods scheme in early 2024, and introduction of a new benefits platform in December 2023, subject to procurement processes (1,1, 1.11, 2.7);
 - (ii) Support the Council to address its current financial challenge by working with services to review their establishments and undertake restructures where appropriate (1.2);
 - (iii) Use the new workforce dashboards to support service areas in identifying and delivering initiatives that will reduce their spend on agency staff (1.2);
 - (iv) Develop manager workforce planning toolkits (4.3);
 - (v) Expand social work academies (1.1, 1.5, 1.9);
 - (vi) Support colleagues in Adults, Health & Integration with a bespoke Workforce Strategy (1.5);
 - (vii) Continue to use a programme of local and national recruitment fairs (1.11);
 - (viii) Further streamline recruitment processes within Hireserve in conjunction with Cheshire West and Chester Council (1.11, 1.12).

- (a) The Council has implemented an updated Agile Working Policy, with 87% of staff surveyed in 2022 taking up a revised offer of mobile or hybrid working (2.1).
- (b) The Council has made a clear commitment to every member of staff, through the Employee Deal, to care for their health and wellbeing. Support to staff stepped up during last winter around the cost of living (2.8).
- (c) The Corporate Leadership Team (CLT) has considered approaches to the next phase of our cultural transformation journey and begun to move towards a model of 'high support and high challenge' which closely mirrors the 'Restorative Practice' approach to enable further transformation. The Wider Leadership Team and Wider Leadership Community have both held workshops with experts in this field to explore its introduction at Cheshire East Council (1.4, 2,2).
- (d) Engagement with the Made My Day during 2023-2024 has remained steady, with approximately 163 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 31 January 2023, with members of CLT chairing the event and members of the Wider Leadership Community hosting various categories. All 350 nominations 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).
- (f) We are planning to:
 - (i) Review the current suite of team conversations, to include additional team conversation toolkits to support the Council with its current budget challenge and additional wellbeing conversation toolkits that support staff (2.8);
 - (ii) Continue to use the Brighter Future Champions as a valuable tool to engage with the wider organisation (3.4);
 - (iii) 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);
 - (iv) Explore the introduction of 'stay and grow interviews' as a tool to improve retention (2.7);

- (v) Continue to deliver our wellbeing in work programme, using our Mental Health First Aiders and direction to our Employee Assistance Programme (2.8).

9 **Theme Three - Inclusive Workforce - Ensuring Everyone has a Voice**

- (a) HR has supported the EDI Board with a number of initiatives. The Sunflower lanyard scheme has been introduced and training is now available to support the scheme via Learning Lounge. Work is underway to gain the MoD Armed Forces Gold Award and an application to renew the Council's Disability Confident Employer status is progressing (3.1).
- (b) 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 and the success of the sessions has now been replicated for all staff with the introduction in the Summer of monthly 'In the Know' sessions. These are used to cascade and share information on key projects or initiatives (3.6).
- (c) 'Coffee with the Chief Executive' sessions have run throughout the year for small groups of staff to engage informally and directly with the Chief Executive. These monthly sessions are held face-to-face in different locations across the borough. Again, the sessions have been very well received by those staff that have attended (3.6).
- (d) 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. They have also participated in the selection process of the Council's next Chief Executive (3.4).
- (e) Work has been undertaken on the Council's WorkplaCE programme, supporting the delivery of phase one of the consultation process with staff and developing the WorkplaCE principles (2.1).
- (f) Mandatory e-learning for equality and diversity is now in place, with tracking of completion rates (3.5).
- (g) 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).

10 Theme Four - Empowering Our Workforce

- (a) The Council's updated e-learning platform, Learning Lounge, now provides electronic recording of PDR conversations, with the functionality for managers to track completion rates for both PDRs alongside training. An additional dashboard has been built for Directors and results are published within the Council's Performance Reports. This provides oversight of completion rates for training courses and PDR conversations in their respective areas (4.1, 4.2, 4.10).
- (b) Training programmes have been commissioned across all directorates in line with identified skills requirements. Continuing Professional Development (CPD) requests continue to fund individual development needs not available via the apprenticeship levy (4.5, 4.6).
- (c) Work has been undertaken to explore the development of a skills gap analysis toolkit and a wider workforce planning toolkit for use across the Council (4.6).
- (d) We are planning to:
 - (i) Include an introduction to customer experience in the corporate induction. All new employees, agency staff and contractors will spend time listening to customer calls made to the contact centre as well as completing customer experience e-learning (4.9);
 - (ii) Implement mandatory customer experience e-learning for all staff (4.9);
 - (iii) Roll out customer experience training for managers (4.9);
 - (iv) Review and refine current training plans in line with the Council's current budgetary position (4.5, 4.6);
 - (v) Introduce a Workforce Planning Toolkit, including a skills gap analysis toolkit (4.3);
 - (vi) Refresh the Council's coaching pool and continue to offer internal coaching and mentoring (4.7).

Consultation and Engagement

- 11 The Council consults with the trade unions on an ongoing basis on all work undertaken for the Workforce Strategy. Engagement with staff through staff forums and regular staff surveys is a crucial element of each area of activity.

Reasons for Recommendations

- 12 The Workforce Strategy outlines a clear vision for the development and retention of our workforce, to enable the Council to have in place the resources required to deliver against its commitments as set out in the Council's Corporate Plan 2021-25. Corporate Policy Committee has oversight of progress against the actions contained within the Strategy as part of the Council's commitment to openness and transparency.
- 13 Achievement of the specific actions within the strategy would be reported via the frequent performance reports to Committees as necessary. This approach links the actions to wider Council performance matters and demonstrates the strategic importance of implementing the Strategy. Updates to the Strategy would still require approval from the Committee.

Other Options Considered

- 14 Not applicable.

Implications and Comments

Monitoring Officer/Legal

- 15 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.
- 16 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.
- 17 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.
- 18 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

- 19 The delivery of the actions set out in the Workforce Strategy is within existing budgets and approved business cases.
- 20 The Workforce Strategy will be reviewed to align remaining deliverables with the current financial environment and climate.

Policy

- 21 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

- 22 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

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

Risk Management

- 25 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

- 26 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)

- 27 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

- 28 *There are no public health implications.*

Climate Change

- 29 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.

Access to Information	
Contact Officer:	Sara Barker, Head of HR Sara.barker@cheshireeast.gov.uk
Appendices:	None
Background Papers:	Workforce Strategy