

Corporate Policy Committee

Date of Meeting:	1 December 2022
Report Title:	Workforce Strategy 2021-2025 – Progress Update
Report of:	Jane Burns - Executive Director, Corporate Services
Report Reference No:	CP/24/22-23
Ward(s) Affected:	ALL

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1. The purpose of this report is to update members on progress against delivery of Cheshire East Council's Workforce Strategy 2021-2025 up to September 2022. It also includes an update on the Mutually Agreed Resignation Scheme (MARS), and a review of the programme of activities supporting organisational culture.
- 1.2. The Strategy sets out how the Council will develop the capacity and capability of our workforce to support the priorities identified within the Corporate Plan and deliver our Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS).
- 1.3. The Workforce Strategy supports the Council's vision for an open, fairer, greener Cheshire East, as set out in the Corporate Plan. In particular, 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.

2. Executive Summary

- 2.1. The Council's Workforce Strategy was agreed by Corporate Policy Committee in November 2021. Progress is reported below against the Strategy's four agreed strategic themes. Included within this, is a high-level overview of the recent activity in relation to organisational culture.
- 2.2. To note the re-introduction of an application window to the Mutually Agreed Resignation Scheme for staff.

3. Recommendations

- 3.1. It is recommended that Corporate Policy Committee:

- 3.1.1. note progress in delivering the Workforce Strategy, and the programme of activities to support organisational change; and
- 3.1.2. agree to receive further updates every six months to monitor progress.

4. Reasons for Recommendations

- 4.1. 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.

5. Other Options Considered

- 5.1. Not applicable.

6. Background

- 6.1. Our four-year strategy was adopted in November 2021 and builds on the previous workforce strategy, its achievements, and our organisational cultural change programme. The Strategy was developed, using our workforce profile to identify key issues and in consideration of the feedback provided through Service Workforce Plans. It is built around four strategic priorities; Delivering Our Future, Living Our Values and Delivering Our Employee Deal, Inclusive Workforce – Ensuring Everyone has a Voice and Empowering Our Workforce. An update against each of these priorities is set out in the next section of this report.
- 6.2. Following the Local Government Association's independent culture review in 2018 and acceptance of the report recommendations, the Council's Brighter Future Together (Culture) Programme was created. Since 2020, there has been a slight shift in emphasis to continue working towards the agreed vision for the Council's organisational culture, whilst paying a particular focus on supporting staff and promoting their wellbeing throughout the Covid-19 pandemic and the transition to a new way of working. More recently, the focus has been on supporting recruitment and retention initiatives and from a wellbeing perspective for staff, the increases to the cost of living.
- 6.3. The Council developed the Mutually Agreed Resignation Scheme (MARS) in 2018 to achieve savings identified in the Medium-Term Financial Strategy. Flexibility to offer MARS is included within Council's Pay Policy Statement (PPS) each year and delegated authority is given to the Chief Executive. There have been two MARS cycles, in 2018 and 2019. It has not been used during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic. The decision to run the scheme is delegated to the Chief Executive.
- 6.4. MARS provides an opportunity for employees, in agreement with the Council, to choose to leave their employment voluntarily in return for a discretionary severance payment. This is not the same as voluntary redundancy as the post itself is not deleted. MARS is non contractual and has no pension liabilities. For the Council, it provides an opportunity to create job vacancies

that may be filled by the redeployment of staff from other jobs or for those seeking career developments.

7. Progress to Date – Delivering Our Future

- 7.1.** Strategic workforce planning is critical to our longer-term success, using the insight and data that is available to us. Work has continued at pace on understanding how we can use the HR metrics, available through Unit 4 ERP to better inform workforce planning. In the interim, HR has been working closely with senior managers across the Council to develop a manual monthly ‘dashboard’ of workforce data, focusing initially on vacancy rates to identify priority areas for recruitment and retention support. This data reports a 9.69% vacancy rate across the Council for October 2022. This report will be developed to incorporate additional workforce information to provide further insight and inform future workforce planning.
- 7.2.** Recruitment and retention are a priority nationally and for the Council. To address this, a programme of work is underway, supported by the data identified in paragraph 7.1. A Steering Group has been established to oversee this work programme, chaired by the Executive Director for Corporate Services, with senior service user representation from each Directorate. Activity includes:
- the launch of a new ‘employee benefits’ brochure;
 - updated recruitment web pages, a review of the Council’s recruitment process to understand if it is possible to make this a faster process;
 - piloting sub-regional recruitment fairs, with applications for roles being taken on the day;
 - recruitment via a wider range of social media platforms;
 - and a review of our employee offer to ensure Cheshire East Council remains attractive in an increasingly competitive employment market.
- 7.3.** Due to the current budgetary challenges, consideration has also been given to a range of actions by which we can address the financial pressures whilst minimising the impact on services to residents and staff. On this basis, it has been decided to run another cycle of MARS. Initial and informal discussions with the trade unions indicated that they are supportive of using MARS as an alternative to reducing terms and conditions. The trade unions have now been advised that the decision has been taken to run the scheme again. The intention is to approve as many applications as possible. However, due to business requirements some applications may not be approved. This will take into account those who are employed in an area or role where is currently difficult to recruit and where budgeted staffing levels need to be maintained in a particular area. It is envisaged that successful applicants will leave their employment with Cheshire East Council between late January and April 2023.
- 7.4.** 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. These sessions are aligned to our

corporate priorities and designed as an opportunity to promote a 'one team' approach. Manager Share and Support sessions continue to run each week for all line managers across the Council as a mechanism for cascading initiatives, sharing best practice and to allow remote networking. Formal management development at all levels is also provided via the apprenticeship levy, with staff accessing programmes through a range of training providers.

7.5. Work has been continuing to achieve the actions set out in the Council's Apprenticeship Action Plan. Apprenticeship training continues to be commissioned using the approved YPO procurement framework wherever possible.

7.6. The take-up of new apprenticeships has begun to recover post pandemic. Overall figures up to the end of quarter 2 are set out below. In addition to the 41 new starts below, there are also an additional 33 planned starts over the coming weeks, including a cohort of 7 onto the social work degree apprenticeship programme. With these anticipated new starts in place already for quarters three and four, the Council should come close to reaching its target. Schools and ASDVs remain behind the target at this point in time.

2022-2023 (Q2)	CEC	AH&I	Children's	Corporate	Place	Schools	ASDVs	Total
Headcount	3590	991	1049	773	770	2525	492	
Target	83	23	24	18	18	58	11	152
Uptake								
New		0	2	2	1	3	0	8
Staff		6	5	9	4	9	0	33
Total	29	6	7	11	5	12	0	41

7.7. The range of apprenticeships offered at the Council is constantly under review, specifically in line with workforce skills gaps to support recruitment and retention. Relevant new apprenticeship standards are put into place as soon as they become available. Annual cohorts of social work degree apprentices have increased as one of the measures to address recruitment and retention in social work. For the first time, Children's Services has opened their social work degree apprenticeship scheme to external applicants, alongside its internal programme and has attracted five candidates, who will start their programme with Staffordshire University alongside an additional two candidates from Adults, Health & Integration.

7.8. Feedback from schools indicates that apprenticeship uptake would be improved by the introduction of more relevant apprenticeship standards by the Institute of Apprenticeships. Schools have confirmed that there is a

priority need for a SEND qualification through the apprenticeship route. A SENCO level 7 is still at the development stage.

- 7.9.** In addition to this and as part of the workforce planning cycle and development of training plans for each service area, discussions are held with each team to identify apprenticeship opportunities that might be appropriate, paying close attention to skills gaps and succession planning, career pathways and building future resilience. The CPD process is also monitored to ensure apprenticeships are maximised for any training and development needs identified for staff.
- 7.10.** A spotlight on care leaver apprentices continues with HR supporting the Care Leaver Apprenticeship Review Action Plan, led by colleagues in Children's Services. All care leaver apprentices receive additional financial support through the Government's financial incentives and will also receive additional practical support through their apprenticeship from colleagues in Children's Services and the Workforce and Organisational Development Team. One care leaver has very recently started an apprenticeship within the Youth Support Service at Cheshire East Council.
- 7.11.** Cheshire East Council's Apprenticeship Levy Transfer Fund scheme continues successfully. Since February 2021, £244,000, of apprenticeship levy funding has been transferred to other businesses in Cheshire East to support them in upskilling staff and taking on new apprentices. An additional £23,133 of levy funding is also currently pending transfer. This scheme has prevented this funding from reverting to the Government.
- 7.12.** The HR Operations team continues to work closely with maintained schools and academies to support them to meet their workforce needs in terms of employment relation issues and longer-term needs through restructures and academisation. This has been a challenging period, given the introduction of a new HR and Payroll system, as part of Best for Business. The team has provided support during the implementation of the Unit 4 ERP system to ensure accurate and timely processing of salary and HR records for the workforce.

8. Progress to Date – Living Our Values and Delivering Our Employee Deal

- 8.1** Our cultural transformation journey began in 2018 following a review by the LGA review and significant progress has been made since then, supporting Cheshire East Council to become the place where people want to work. Workplace culture has a significant impact on recruitment and retention and forms a key part of the recruitment and retention work set out above in paragraph 7.2.
- 8.2** Work continues on a fundamental review of the way in which we work, moving towards a hybrid model of working. This is constantly under review to ensure it is fit for purpose, whilst also allowing our staff to maintain an improved work life balance. The model is balanced alongside customer need, recruitment and retention challenges, service delivery but also supporting our priority as a council to be carbon neutral by 2025.

- 8.3** The Council has made a clear commitment to every member of staff, through the Employee Deal, to care for their health and wellbeing. More recently, the cost-of-living crisis has been a focus of much of this wellbeing work. To help support staff, wellbeing messages have been increased, including financial wellbeing tips and links. This includes the launch of a fortnightly 'Autumn Wellbeing' e-newsletter. Following feedback from our Brighter Future Champions, dedicated cost of living support information pages on Centranet have been created with a purely staff focus to ensure all the information is easily accessible. New 'Cost of Living: In It Together', weekly staff support calls have been introduced as an opportunity for colleagues from around the Council to share tips they may have that could help others or share how they are feeling with others in a safe space. Work has been undertaken to engage with staff, Brighter Future Champions, managers and senior managers to understand what else the Council can do to help and support staff through this challenging time. This is linked into the Council's wider cost of living programme.
- 8.4** HR has been providing support to managers in relation to managing absence and a comprehensive action plan is in place to continue to undertake focussed activity to proactively manage and reduce absence.
- 8.5** Engagement with the Made My Day has remained steady, with approximately 200 still sent each month, a slight increase on the figures from last year which averaged at approximately 170 per month. There has also been an increase in team recognition through the Made my Day, following improvements to the online submission form and nominators now also have the option to include manager details in their submission to increase visibility. Made my Day figures are promoted within Team Voice on a regular basis and examples of why some Made my Days have been sent shared, again to help promote the scheme.

9. Progress to Date – Inclusive Workforce – Ensuring Everyone has a Voice

- 9.1** New joint trade union and management consultative arrangements were implemented from January 2022 and work is on-going to embed these to ensure efficient and effective processes, with decisions being made at the appropriate level to support business delivery and good employment relations throughout the organisation. The arrangements will be reviewed in early 2023 to ensure that they continue to meet these aims.
- 9.2** The programme for staff engagement has aligned to hybrid working and HR continues to support weekly themed 'Manager Share & Support' sessions. Attendance and feedback on these sessions continues to be excellent. 'Conversation With' events have re-started with our Executive Directors, with two being held in November. These sessions provide staff with the opportunity to meet and speak with Executive Directors, to share their experiences and find out what's happening across the Council. 'Coffee and Chat with Lorraine' sessions have also been put in place 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.

- 9.3** 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. The Brighter Future Champions have provided feedback on different initiatives, raised concerns and have shared information with their teams when required. A review of this group of dedicated and enthusiastic staff has been completed to ensure it is as fully representative as possible of our workforce. This has resulted in new staff champions coming forward.

10. Progress to Date – Empowering Our Workforce

- 10.1** The Council's e-learning platform, Learning Lounge, was significantly redeveloped at the end of 2021, with additional functionality to book onto all training courses being switched from the Oracle system to Learning Lounge. The system is now operated by single sign-on and the electronic recording of PDRs through Learning Lounge recommenced in April 2022. This provides a platform to record PDR conversations and allows managers to track completion rates of both PDRs and training for their staff.
- 10.2** The new system has been demonstrated through all the staff engagement routes and HR continue to offer support and demonstrations to ensure functionality is maximised.
- 10.3** Training programmes have been commissioned across all directorates in line with identified skills gaps. Continuing Professional Development (CPD) requests continue to fund individual development needs not available via the apprenticeship levy.

11. Implications

11.1. Legal

- 11.1.1. 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.
- 11.1.2. The MARS scheme is not contractual and does not form part of staff terms and conditions. All applications will be monitored to ensure that decisions taken are not directly or indirectly linked to a protected characteristic, for example age, sex or disability. The Equality Impact Assessment has been updated for this exercise.

11.2. Finance

- 11.2.1. The delivery of the actions set out in the Workforce Strategy is within existing budgets and approved business cases.
- 11.2.2. Those actions contained within the strategy that relate to the delivery of apprenticeship will be funded through the Council's existing apprenticeship levy funding.
- 11.2.3. Given the prevailing economic and industrial relations conditions, it is anticipated that savings from MARS could be realised in 2022/23, but it is very difficult to quantify the level of savings that MARS could generate as the level of saving depends on the number, and grade, of posts that are deleted as a result of MARS.

- 11.2.4. It should be noted that the first £30,000 of any MARS payment will be classed as a severance payment and would be paid free of income tax and national insurance. As Settlement Agreements will be required there will be costs incurred in respect of this legal process.
- 11.2.5. Cheshire Pension Fund have previously confirmed that early payment of an unreduced pension to anyone over 55 years of age would not apply as the scheme does not constitute Voluntary Redundancy or Early Retirement. Staff who accept the offer of MARS who are over 55 would have the choice to take an actuarially reduced pension or to defer their pension benefits to a later date.

11.3. Policy

- 11.3.1 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.

11.4 Equality

- 11.4.1 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 to all 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.

11.5 Human Resources

- 11.5.1 The Workforce Strategy covers the breadth of services with HR and sets the priorities for Human Resources to work towards for the next four years.
- 11.5.2 An Equality Impact Assessment for MARS has been updated taking into account any exclusions of staff/services who may be undergoing restructuring. The Council is also able to control the numbers and areas in which staff can leave and if a genuine business case for this is not justified any applications can be rejected. Effective communication with the workforce will be required in relation to this offer.
- 11.5.3 The Trade Unions are supportive of using MARS as an alternative to reducing terms and conditions including mileage rates.

11.6 Risk Management

- 11.6.1 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.

11.7 Rural Communities

11.7.1 There are no specific implications for rural communities.

11.8 Children and Young People/Cared for Children

11.8.1 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.

11.9 Public Health

11.9.1 There are no public health implications.

11.10 Climate Change

11.10.1 The delivery of the priorities within the Workforce Strategy that are focussed on new ways of working and 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	
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Appendices:	None
Background Papers:	None