

Employment & Appeals Committee – Meeting held on Monday, 12th July, 2021.

Present:- Councillors Ali (Chair), Brooker (Vice-Chair), Basra, Bedi, Carter, Dhaliwal, Gahir, Qaseem and Smith.

PART 1

1. Declarations of Interest

None received.

2. Minutes of the Meeting held on 6th April 2021

Resolved – That the minutes of the meeting held on 6 April 2021 be approved as a correct record.

Referring to minute item 33 – Our Futures Programme - Members asked for an update on whether the savings identified in Phase I and II of the programme had been delivered. The Chair informed the meeting that the matter was due to have been discussed under agenda item 6, however due to the unavailability of relevant senior officers at the meeting, the item was being deferred.

The Chair expressed his disappointment and frustration at having to defer this agenda item and requested that a detailed report be submitted to the next meeting; addressing the matters raised at the previous meeting and that relevant officers, including the Executive Director of Transformation be in attendance at the October meeting.

3. Gender Pay Gap

The Diversity and Inclusion Manager presented a report regarding the Gender Pay Gap, stating that it was a statutory requirement to report on this topic. Key points of the report were highlighted as:

- Slough Borough Council consistently reported a lower than average gender pay gap. As was the case with most local authorities, Slough employed more women than men across all pay quartiles.
- The staff engagement survey from 2020 showed that 70% of staff felt that there was good gender equality at SBC. However, discrepancies remained between the pay of men and women, particularly in the low representation of women in higher paid, senior posts.
- The mean average showed that women earned 10% less than men. This gap had increased since 2020. The median average was a negative value of -3.1%. In real terms, this meant that the mean hourly rate for men was £18.62 and the mean women's hourly rate was £16.75.

The Committee discussed the differentiation between the mean and median data as set out in the report and it was noted that although overall there were

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more women applicants than men, this was less so at a senior level or in specialist roles. Members asked a number of questions, which included what the organisation was doing to address the imbalance. It was explained that a number of strategies had been adopted including the introduction of blind applications and balanced interview panels, measures which would act as good counterbalances to any unconscious bias or indirect discrimination on the part of recruiters.

A Member asked for details of the average hourly pay in comparison to the national average and it was noted that this information would be circulated to the Committee. It was highlighted that a number of factors affected the average pay rate in the UK including sector and bonuses. It was explained that performance related bonuses were not awarded at the Council and the 'bonus payments' referred to in the report related to one off payments to employees for long term service.

Following a general discussion regarding part-time workers and what the authority was doing to support them, it was explained that the pandemic had accelerated the move to agile working which had benefitted many employees in allowing flexible working; especially female employees as there were more female part-time workers than male at the Council. Concern was expressed that working from home could adversely also impact on the work-life balance for individuals and it was explained that it was for employees to discuss workloads with their manager and to ensure clarity around the parameters of their workloads/hours of work.

It was noted that the current senior management at the Council did not reflect Slough's wider community and the Chair asked what measures the Our Futures Transformation Programme had implemented to address this. The Diversity and Inclusion Manager explained that to reflect an accurate representation would take time but ultimately was dependant on applications received for senior posts. Work was on-going to gain an understanding as to the reasons why and measures such as having a Positive Discrimination Policy could seek to improve representation from females and Black and Minority Ethnic Groups. Whilst the Council encouraged applicants to divulge details relating to ethnicity, collating such information was not mandatory.

Resolved – That the independently calculated and verified results of the 2020 gender pay gap for Slough Borough Council employees and proposal to develop an action plan be noted.

4. Temporary Workers

The Employee Relations and Policy Manager presented a report regarding the Council's temporary workers. The Council had awarded a contract to the Matrix Employment Agency in June 2020 and in this quarter, the Council had made savings in excess of £186K and work continued to generate further savings in agency fees. The contract was managed in line with the agreed key performance indicators (KPI's) as set out in Appendix 2 to the report. In this quarter all the KPI's were achieved with the exception of Early Years (65%).

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This was due to the main supplier voluntarily withdrawing from Matrix due to non-compliance of contract.

Referring specifically to the usage of temporary labour the total spend for this quarter was £3.4 million a decrease of £ 84,452, but £10,174 less than the previous quarter. The total hours of 3,011 were 75 hours reduction compared to the last quarter. The key outliners were Finance & Resources; Adults (Operations); Place and Development and Regeneration Directorate who had made combined savings of £160,359.

Members were informed that despite savings in Finance and Housing services, there had been an increase in agency spend since last quarter due to increase in activity related to the current financial position of the council. Overall, the council had achieved £186,337 which equated to a 5.29% saving and increases of 0.39% in total savings, compared to last quarter.

It was anticipated that the savings trend would continue as a number of agency contracts were coming to an end and that this would be reflected in the report for the next quarter. Further work continued with each directorate to provide business cases to engage or renew request for agency workers. The business case requests were subject to scrutiny by Executive Management Board before approval was granted.

Members raised a number of points in the ensuing discussion, including concern relating to the quality of work being performed by temporary workers and frustration that once individuals had left the authority there was no recourse in terms of accountability. In addition, was there a proper handover process when temporary workers left to ensure continuity of service. It was explained that agency workers were subject to the proper checks and balances prior to appointment and work was monitored by service areas to ensure objectives were being met and delivered. Joint monitoring meetings entailed a scrutiny process of overseeing the performance of agency workers and clauses in the Matrix contract allowed any issues to be raised and reported. As the Council moved towards becoming a performance organisation, there would be an expectation of greater accountability and audit trails.

The total net savings in spend on temporary workers were driven by the previous quarter differences and it was agreed that details of total agency spend for the previous two quarters would be circulated to the Committee for information.

Referring specifically to IT related jobs, a member queried why the Council not recruit directly from the open market. It was explained that some staff were sourced for specific long-term projects requiring specialist areas of expertise and that there was a need to keep pace with developments and changes in IT infrastructure.

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Following the issuing of the Section 114 Notice in May 2021, Members stated that they had been informed that specialist additional support would be provided in the finance and governance teams within the Council; and asked for details of costs of additional resources to the finance team including the number of individuals employed, salary costs and duration of contracts. It was agreed that this information would be circulated after the meeting.

The wellbeing of employees was raised and it was outlined that HR had provided wellbeing support to staff to ensure they had the capacity and mental health resilience during and after the transformation programme. In terms of accountability, any learning would be escalated to senior colleagues and focussed and targeted work would be carried out by the Learning and Development team.

In order to achieve additional efficiencies, the Council had transferred some functions to CDL, which was a direct client of Matrix. These included the direct on-costs all of which added up. The CDL process allowed the Council to reduce those fees previously paid to the agency.

Responding to whether further savings could be made by offering permanent contracts to agency workers, it was explained that as part of the transformation programme, vacant posts were reviewed on a monthly basis. It was noted that temporary employees often did not want to be employed on a permanent basis.

It was suggested that the Council recruit from local colleges and universities and the Committee were informed that prior to the pandemic, the Council did partner with colleges, universities and job fairs in the wider market. However, it was important to note that newly qualified candidates were often lacking in experience and were not always the ideal candidate. Upskilling current staff was also proposed as an initiative to develop and retain existing staff and it was outlined that upskilling was a long term process and there was often an immediate need or the work was business-critical.

Members discussed the Matrix contract and were informed that this was reviewed on both a quarterly and monthly basis to ensure value for money and if KPI's were not met then there were penalties built into the contract. The Committee requested that the October report include details of the procurement process undertaken in appointing Matrix SCM as the Council's agency staff provider, duration of the contract and details of performance related clauses within the contract.

Resolved – That the report be noted.

5. The Slough Academy Update

The Workforce Development Manager presented on the transition of the Apprenticeship Programme following the closure of the Slough Academy Team which was now incorporated into the new Workforce Development Team.

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The Committee noted that the changes were part of the new operating model following the Our Futures transformation programme. It was stated that the Slough Academy had met its original objectives and the team was now focused on the wider learning and development agenda, not solely apprenticeships. Members noted some of the key indicators which included:

- SBC had spent 65% of its apprenticeship levy, which amounted to £280,000 used to grow our own talent and save some of the corporate training budget. Very few organisations spent 100% of the available pot due to the restrictions on its use.
- One factor in this was that the number of apprentices had dropped in 2020/21 due to the imminent Our Futures phase 2 restructure.
- Twelve apprentices had completed with a total of 40 apprenticeships started under the Slough Academy.
- 90% of apprentices had been upskilled by at least 50% and 100% of apprentices who had completed their programmes had remained with SBC.
- 75% of apprentices were Slough residents.

The Council had not achieved the Government target for the cumulative average of apprenticeships of 2.3% of the workforce due to the fall in the number of apprenticeships in 2020/21. The cumulative average was 1.27% and the Officer explained the steps the team was taking to work with departments to increase the number in the future. The Workforce Development Team was supporting departments within its current resources, noting that there were some vacancies in team and a reduced training budget due to the financial challenges.

Members asked a number of questions about the way in which the Apprenticeship Levy worked. It was confirmed that SBC had delivered apprenticeships in areas such as children's services and civil engineering. Any unspent monies were returned to the Government. Some concerns were expressed that the twelve apprenticeships was low for an organisation of the size of the Council and asked how the team was working with departments to bring new apprentices on board. The Officer commented that the team engaged on a monthly basis with departments about the opportunities for apprenticeships both to upskill existing staff and for new starters. There had been a number of challenges in 2020/21 which had contributed to the lower number, particularly the uncertainty of the transformation programme. Members discussed the opportunities to attract more talent to SBC and it was noted that Slough faced significant competition from other organisations and areas nearby.

The Committee commented on the importance of senior management buy in to increasing the apprenticeships. Management needed to invest time, support and patience to apprentices and highlighted that a cultural shift was needed as the Council emerged from the transformation programme to promote learning opportunities.

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A question was asked about whether the Council partnered with other local organisations to promote apprenticeships. The Officer commented that for certain contracts, e.g. building contracts, targets for apprenticeships were incorporated. Work was taking place with schools but there were challenges given funding pressures. A further question was asked about providers and it was agreed that details of the providers the Council worked with via the Apprenticeship Reforms and Levy app to be circulated to the Committee.

At the conclusion of the discussion the report was noted.

Resolved – That details of the report be noted.

6. Our Futures Programme - Workforce Update

Resolved – That this item be deferred to the next meeting of the Committee.

7. Date of Next Meeting - 19th October 2021

Resolved – The date of the next meeting was confirmed as 19 October 2021.

Chair

(Note: The Meeting opened at 6.30 pm and closed at 8.49 pm)