

Employment & Appeals Committee – Meeting held on Thursday, 21st January, 2021.

Present:- Councillors Ali (Chair), Gahir (Vice-Chair), Ajaib, Bains, Hulme, Sabah and Smith

Apologies for Absence:- Councillor A Sandhu

PART 1

21. Declarations of Interest

None were declared.

22. Minutes of the Meeting held on 20th October 2020

Resolved – That the minutes of the meeting held on 20th October 2020 be approved as a correct record.

23. The Slough Academy - Update

The Slough Academy Manager provided the Committee with an update on the number of apprenticeships and progress made since June 2020. Another 8 apprentices had successfully achieved their qualifications taking the total to 11 overall, with a further 19 apprenticeships awaiting a start date. 75% of apprentices were Slough residents. It was noted that the level of uncertainty created by the Our Futures Transformation programme had slowed down development of new apprenticeships. An overview of apprentice statistics relating to gender, age and disability were outlined.

Members discussed a range of issues including whether the scheme represented value for money. It was explained that significant returns had been realised on investment. Whilst the most costly apprentice programme related to social work, Members were informed that the benefits included retaining staff and encouraging career progression within the organisation; especially in areas which were typically difficult to recruit to such as social workers.

Referring to whether the scheme could only be made available to Slough residents, it was noted that this would not be possible from a legal perspective but that it was predominantly promoted within the Borough. A Member asked about the drop out rate of those who had started the scheme and was informed that there had been a 100% retention rate.

The Committee were informed that external partner organisations to the Council were encouraged to take on apprentices and this was, if appropriate, explored via service level agreements with those bodies.

Resolved – That the report be noted.

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24. Temporary Agency Staff

The Organisational Development / HR Business Partner introduced a report that updated the Committee on the latest position regarding temporary agency staffing at the Council.

The key points noted by the Committee were as follows:

- A performance review meeting had been held with the temporary agency staff provider, Matrix, on 9th December 2020. All of the key performance indicators in the contract were being achieved with the exception of the percentage of appointed workers completing their assignment. This had fallen 2% and was attributed to the Phase 2 staffing restructure consultation which led to some placements coming to an end.
- At its last meeting the Committee had asked for further information on the number of agency workers earning over £75,000. Appendix 3 to the report set out the number of such agency workers and their job titles. There were 31 agency workers earning above this level, usually in hard to recruit posts.
- There had been a 0.8% reduction in agency spend since the previous quarter and one of the key aims of the Our Futures transformation was to further reduce this figure by converting to permanent roles where appropriate or ending current placements.
- A relatively high percentage of workers (47%) had chosen not to state their ethnicity on monitoring forms. This issue had been discussed with Matrix and steps had been put in place to improve diversity data collection and include in future reports to the Committee.
- Appendix 1 showed that total agency spend during the quarter was £3.6m which was a slight increase of £0.17m. Savings had been made in a number of areas but it was noted that there had been an increase in agency spend in other such areas including the Covid-19 response for example on the community testing programme and contact tracing. Internal staff had been temporarily redeployed into a number of roles in the Covid-19 response but as they were increasingly required to return full time to their substantive roles it was sometimes necessary to engage temporary workers.

The Committee asked a number of questions about the report including the work being undertaken to reduce the reliance on agency workers through phase 1 of the Matrix project-efficiency savings work. Members were informed of the benefits of working through Client Direct Services Limited to which 11 staff had recently transferred. It was noted that it resulted in lower agency fees and more control for the Council in managing agency spend for certain roles.

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Members highlighted the long standing issues in recruiting permanently to highly skilled jobs such as in social care and planning and asked about the future strategy to address the problem. The Officer explained the work being done, particularly through the transformation programme and there was a discussion about the different issues experienced in various roles across the Council. It was noted for example that for certain positions in the DSO it was more cost effective for the Council to use agency staff, whilst in social work it was often a professional choice to be agency workers which made permanent recruitment by the Council challenging.

A question was asked about the number of agency staff earning over £75,000 that had been in post for more than a year. This information was provided during the meeting by the Executive Director of Corporate Services and the Committee asked that this information be added to future reports.

At the conclusion of the discussion the report was noted.

Resolved – That the report be noted.

25. Members Development Programme 2020/21 Update

The Organisational Development Officer introduced a report that updated the Committee on the 2020/21 Members' Development Programme and plans for the next year.

The content and approach to Members' Development sessions had been refreshed and the schedule was noted in the Appendix to the report. Briefings on local government finance, Prevent and data & information security had been held and attendance rates were higher than for similar sessions held previously which was very positive. The aim was to make the training more engaging and feedback was important. Members attending training were therefore encouraged to submit feedback forms as response rates had been low.

A busy programme was planned for the next few months and preparations would be put in place to refine and repeat the programme in 2021/22 for new members and as refresher training for existing councillors. The Committee welcomed the refreshed programme and emphasised the importance of an engaging and informative series of training events. Virtual training had helped to increased attendance and this would be considered in making future arrangements. Members emphasised that in future training dates should be built into the corporate calendar and the induction for newly elected councillors was particularly important.

The Committee thanked Officers for the work they had done to refresh the programme and the update report was noted.

Resolved – That details of programme scheduling, as outlined in Appendix A to the report, be noted.

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26. Our Futures Programme - Workforce Update

The Associate Director - Customer introduced a report that provided an update on the progress of the Council's 'Our Futures Programme.' The Committee were reminded that the original delivery plan entailed creating a new operating model for the Council, with a view to reflecting the Council's ambition to be a 'world class' organisation, with a sustainable cost base and a 'one council' staff team.

In relation to Phase 1 (senior leadership team) recruitment had begun, with internal recruitment during August 2020, which had resulted in 8 internal appointments being made to Associate Director positions. It was noted that a permanent recruitment had been made to the position for Associate Director, Social Care.

The Phase 2 consultation, launched on 4th November 2020, closed on 21st December 2020 and 130 counter proposals had been received. Following consideration of the responses by the Senior Management Team, a formal consultation response was due to be sent to all staff on 22nd January 2021. It was noted that the new operating model would be embedded and reviewed during the financial year 2021/22.

A Member asked about the types of responses received during the consultation period, The responses varied in nature from basic queries regarding job titles to more detailed counter proposals. Clarification was sought relating to posts that had been made redundant and individuals that had not been job matched elsewhere within the organisation. It was explained that staff who were at risk of redundancy had the opportunity to apply for a maximum of five vacant roles within the Council. A range of support measures had been introduced for staff to support them through the process which included workshops, CV writing sessions and access to a confidential counselling service via the Council's occupational health provider.

Following discussion regarding the use of agency workers, it was explained that a reduction in the number of agency workers was a critical part of the implementation plan. It was highlighted however, that whilst reliance on agency workers was key, there would remain an element of using agency staff especially in critical service areas to cover staff sickness.

Referring to the projected costs and savings and whether it was anticipated that these would be achieved, Members were informed that the cost savings were required to deliver £5.2M in the period 1st April 2021 to 30 September 2022 for both phases. Phase 1 was on course to deliver recurrent savings of £987,352 year-on-year and costs for implementation of Phase 2 would be provided at the next meeting.

The Chair placed on record recognition of the work that had been carried out to date.

Resolved – That the report be noted.

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27. Members' Attendance Record 2020/21

Resolved – That the details of the Members' Attendance Record be noted.

28. Date of Next Meeting - 6th April 2021

The date of the next meeting was confirmed as 6 April 2021.

Chair

(Note: The Meeting opened at 6.30 pm and closed at 7.49 pm)