

Corporate and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel

Thursday, 11 March 2021, Online - 10.00 am

		Minutes
Present:		Mr A D Kent (Chairman), Mrs E B Tucker (Vice Chairman), Mr G R Brookes, Mrs A T Hingley, Mr R J Morris, Prof J W Raine and Mr A Stafford
Also attended:		Ms K J May, Cabinet Member with responsibility for Transformation and Commissioning Andrew Spice (Strategic Director of Commercial and Change), Richard Taylor (Assistant Director for Human Resources), Sandra Taylor (Assistant Director for IT and Digital), Peter Little (Strategic HR and OD Business Partner), Sarah-Jayne Foster (Learning and Development Manager), Annette Stock (Complaints Manager), Samantha Morris (Scrutiny Co-ordinator) and Alyson Grice (Overview and Scrutiny Officer)
Available Papers		The members had before them: A. The Agenda papers (previously circulated); B. The Minutes of the Meeting held on 2 February 2021 (previously circulated). (A copy of document A will be attached to the signed Minutes).
304	Apologies and Welcome	Apologies were received from Mr K D Daisley.
305	Declarations of Interest and of any Party Whip	Prof J W Raine declared a disclosable interest in that, as part of his role at the University of Birmingham, he was a tutor for Worcestershire County Council and Worcestershire Children First apprentices.
306	Public Participation	None.
307	Confirmation of the Minutes of the Previous Meeting	The Minutes of the Meeting held on 2 February 2021 were agreed as a correct record and would be signed by the Chairman.

The Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Transformation and Commissioning, the Strategic Director of Commercial and Change and the Assistant Director for Human Resources, Organisational Development and Engagement had been invited to update the Panel on the detail and implementation of the Council's Apprenticeship Strategy.

By way of introduction, the Cabinet Member welcomed the Panel's consideration of the topic. The Apprenticeship Strategy helped to foster a culture for apprentices to develop their skills and knowledge in their chosen pathway with the aim of nurturing talent.

The Panel received a presentation from the Assistant Director for Human Resources, Organisational Development and Engagement. In the ensuing discussion, the following main points were made:

- The new Apprenticeship Strategy had been agreed in February 2020. It was an ambitious strategy which was broadly on track. The Council was taking a strategic approach as it recognised that having this infrastructure in place was critical for the future talent pipeline. The Council's workforce had an aging demographic and it was essential to target the younger members of the workforce.
- It was confirmed that, for employers with an annual pay bill in excess of £3 million, the Apprenticeship Levy was charged at a rate of 0.5% of the pay bill. The Council was allowed to transfer up to 25% of this levy to smaller businesses in the local economy.
- Apprenticeships were not simply a means of obtaining a qualification but should also be seen as a clear talent and career pathway.
- Employer Provider status meant that, as well as training, supporting and assessing apprentices, the County Council had the ability to tailor the programme and course content to make it more relevant to the Council and Worcestershire Children First (WCF).
- It was confirmed that there was no age limit to becoming an apprentice. Apprenticeships were open to both new entrants and members of the existing workforce, and they were available at all levels, including Director. It was important to look beyond the benefit to the individual and also consider the benefit to the organisation.
- The Chairman noted the age profile of the work

force and highlighted the importance of encouraging recruitment and promotion from within to create entry level opportunities. Members were reminded that career progression had been linked to the Council's system of staff performance and review.

- The Panel was reminded that an apprentice would spend 80% of their time in the work setting and 20% in 'off the job' learning. A question was asked about the impact of Covid on this and how the 'off the job' learning could be ring-fenced as an apprentice became more skilled at the job and the time in the work setting became more important. Members were informed that assessors from the Learning and Development Team were in ongoing contact with apprentices to oversee their development throughout the course. It was confirmed that any new learning would count towards the 'off the job' element.
- Members were informed that there were 7 levels of apprenticeships ranging from Level 2 (GCSE/entry level) through to Level 7 (MBA).
- A recent publicity campaign had resulted in more than 50 applications which were assessed against the need to add value and benefit both the individual and the organisation. The biggest challenge was not internal recruitment but encouraging external applicants to join the organisation as apprentices.
- The Team worked with the 16-19 NEET (Not in Employment, Education or Training) Prevention Team to create and embed traineeships as an entry point to an apprenticeship for young people aged 16 to 24 who lacked skills and experience. In response to a question from the Chairman, it was confirmed that aspects of the traineeship programme had proved problematic during Covid restrictions, as the majority of County Council staff were working remotely.
- A question was asked about how young people would find out about traineeship opportunities. Members were informed that the 16-19 team had very close links and good communication channels with schools and colleges. A traineeship would last approximately 6 months and aimed to improve a young person's employability skills as well as maths and English. It was not a paid opportunity and 80% of the time would be spent in a learning environment and 20% on placement at a local business. As it was an educational programme, traineeships had been able to

continue under the current lockdown rules.

- The Chairman highlighted the importance of raising awareness of traineeships including amongst Councillors who could, in turn, promote this important area of work further to local residents.
- In response to a question about how young people might find out about traineeships if they were not in the school system, Members were informed that the 16-19 team was relatively new and had initially distributed information through social media, schools and youth centres. This would grow as officers further understood the local need. The team was currently looking to identify suitable placements and learning environments. It was confirmed that there were funding streams to help with transport costs.
- It was suggested that a promotional/information pack covering apprenticeships and traineeships could be developed for Councillors to share with local businesses.
- Members were informed that the County Council was one of only three local authorities to achieve employer provider status. This involved additional scrutiny and required registration with Ofsted.
- Concern was expressed about the possibility of external course providers going into liquidation, something that had happened locally in the recent past. It was confirmed that the Learning and Development Team included Quality Assurance roles which would assess the effectiveness of courses and audit the quality of external providers. All apprenticeships included an independent end point assessment to ensure that the apprentice had received appropriate teaching and development as well as ensuring application in the work role.
- Officers were actively looking to reduce the amount of apprenticeship levy underspend which had to be returned to central government if not spent within 2 years. To date, there had been a 65% reduction in the amount of levy returned. Further apprenticeship applications were in the system and there was likely to be a further reduction in underspend.
- Identifying opportunities for care leavers was one of the biggest challenges and was a key focus of activity including with those providers who were awarded County Council contracts. Every vacant role within the Council and WCF was considered to assess whether it would be suitable for a care

leaver and any care leaver who applied and met the criteria would be offered an interview. However, identifying sufficient opportunities in the right areas remained a challenge.

- The Apprenticeship Team had been regular attendees at the Skills Show and hoped to do so again once Covid restrictions allowed. It was suggested that an alternative approach should be developed in case it was not possible for the Skills Show to go ahead this year.
- In response to a question about the appetite within the County Council for apprenticeships, the Panel was informed that, although some 'old school' attitudes had been seen, the Apprenticeship Strategy was now being actively pursued within the Senior Leadership Team. It was recognised that this was the future of the Council and had been subject to full discussion and buy-in at the most senior level.
- It was noted that 28 work experience placements for care leavers had been identified although only two of these had led to an apprenticeship. It was suggested that there were a number of reasons for this, including not enough suitable opportunities being available and not all care leavers wanting to work for their corporate parent depending on their experiences while in the care of the local authority. Where the County Council did not have a suitable opportunity, Officers would signpost a young person to other possibilities.
- It was suggested that more could be done to prepare care leavers for apprenticeships and other work and training opportunities, such as developing skills to make them more attractive to employers. It was confirmed that there would be further discussions with the Care Leavers Team in coming weeks on how best to provide support for young people leaving the care system. Advice on how to support care leavers in identifying opportunities should be included in the briefing pack for Councillors.
- It was pointed out that most Councillors had extensive business contacts and these could be made use of in relation to apprenticeships and traineeships. Members were reminded about the apprenticeship role portal which listed current vacancies.
- It was hoped that the apprenticeship programme would help meet the challenge of succession planning given the worrying age profile of County Council employees, something that was common

to many local authorities.

- In response to a question from the Chairman, it was confirmed that the average length of time in post for a Council employee was 5 years, a figure that was quite healthy from a recruitment and retention perspective. Staff turnover had dropped during the pandemic from 7-10% to 4.6%. The highest level of turnover was seen in the 30 to 45 age range.
- For many jobs, the only way to progress was to move into a managerial role, although it was acknowledged that technical competence did not always mean managerial competence. It was suggested that, as well as pay, pension and the opportunity to make a difference, local government offered a chance to build an understanding of the 'human' aspects of life, something that was often overlooked.
- The Panel was told about the New Hire Incentive which was launched on 1 August 2020 and provided additional Government funding to encourage businesses to hire new apprentices. Although the scheme was currently due to run until 31 March 2021, it was hoped that it would be extended.
- There were currently 146 apprenticeships on programme throughout the Council and WCF, 98 in the core business and 48 within schools. The figure for schools would normally be higher but there had been an understandable focus on the response to Covid in recent months.
- It was suggested that Key Performance Indicators on apprenticeships could be added to the Panel's quarterly monitoring, including the number recruited, the levy fund balance and the amount of expired levy returned to central government.
- It was confirmed that the cost of an apprenticeship would differ depending on the level, reflecting the complexity and different requirements for teaching and formal input. For example, a Level 2 Customer Service apprenticeship would cost £3k, whereas a Level 6 Social Work degree would cost £23k over three years. On average, apprenticeships cost the Council £42k per month. It was confirmed that interest in degree apprenticeships was high.
- The levy transfer policy allowed the County Council to transfer 25% of its levy to businesses in the local economy. To date, in this financial year, the Council had transferred £204k to 18 local businesses to fund 65 apprenticeships. The

importance of maintaining quality of provision as well as ensuring funds were spent was acknowledged. The Council worked closely with the Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) to identify suitable businesses.

- It was suggested that the self-imposed criteria for receiving employers (as included in the presentation slides) were quite limiting and should be reviewed. For example, it was suggested that few small businesses would be aware of the LEP's Strategic Economic Plan. The Assistant Director explained that these criteria had been developed at the start of the levy transfer scheme and he acknowledged that it may be time to reconsider them. However, he pointed out that, even with these criteria, the Council had a good level of interest from businesses. Although it was clarified that the criteria were principles to be used as a guide rather than strict rules, it was suggested that some businesses may see the list and rule themselves out. Members were reminded that, when the levy transfer was launched, the Council had no idea of the potential uptake and the criteria were developed as a way to manage the flow and prioritise Worcestershire businesses.
- Future action would include continuing to remove barriers to apprenticeships, linking with the wider Workforce Strategy which was due to launch in April 2021. In response to a Member question, it was confirmed that those areas of the Council not currently contributing to the Apprenticeship Strategy would be encouraged to play their part. All requests to recruit would be considered in the light of the Apprenticeship Strategy.
- It was suggested that further engagement with the District Councils would be beneficial, particularly in relation to planning recruitment.

In the light of the discussion, it was agreed that:

- Officers would produce a briefing pack for councillors to use to promote the Apprenticeship Strategy both with employers and potential apprentices/trainees, including opportunities for care leavers and key contacts within the County Council.
- Officers would develop an alternative approach to promotion of apprenticeships and traineeships should the Skills Show not take place this year.
- Key PIs should be included in the Panel's

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quarterly performance monitoring, such as number of apprentices recruited and the monthly apprenticeship levy balance.

- The criteria for local employers to receive funding as part of the local levy transfer policy (slide 20) should be reconsidered and made less prescriptive to encourage greater participation.
- Following the May elections, the Apprenticeship Strategy should be promoted with new councillors (induction) with all councillors encouraged to become apprenticeship champions.

In conclusion, the Cabinet Member thanked members of the Learning and Development Team for their hard work.

The Panel had requested a detailed report on the declining performance of Stage 2 Children's Social Care complaints completed within 65 days and Stage 2 Corporate complaints completed within 25 days. The Panel had also requested an explanation of the concerns raised in the 2019/20 Annual Letter from the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGO).

By way of introduction, the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Transformation and Commissioning reminded the Panel that the work of the Comments, Compliments and Complaints Team was the result of input from local residents. She welcomed the interest of the Panel in this work.

The Chairman recognised the balance between the number of complaints received and the complexity of those complaints. He was conscious that a small number of very complex complaints could distort the figures.

The Complaints Manager introduced the report and made the following main points:

- The Consumer Relations Unit took the Panel's concerns very seriously as the performance indicators offered a key insight into the perception of the service.
- As Members were aware, the complaints process overall was very complex. Individual complaints could also be very complex.
- The figures showed that the number of complaints received was on the whole declining. For both Children's Social Care and Corporate, there had been an improvement in the resolution of complaints at Stage 1.
- Difficulties remained at Stage 2 where recruitment

had been a challenge, both for Consumer Relations Officers, and Independent Investigators and Independent Persons. The pool of Independent Investigators and Independent Persons was currently insufficient and a further recruitment campaign was planned for 2021.

- Anonymised extracts from compliments received were included in the agenda report. The Complaints Manager was proud of the volume and variety of compliments received and found them humbling.
- The concerns of the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman were taken very seriously. The largest issue raised was compliance with LGO recommendations. Of the 12 cases referred to, only one had not complied with recommendations and this was due to the complexity of the case. She acknowledged that there were lessons to learn and a need to make sure that the process was as good as it could be.

The Chairman noted that performance in relation to Statutory Children's Social Care complaints had deteriorated in the last year. He thanked the Complaints Manager for her summary of the report and noted that the detail provided helped to quantify the challenges. He went on to ask about the improvement programme, including what was being done to improve and when improvements would be seen.

The Strategic Director of Commercial and Change suggested that there was a need to look at the overall process including the available resources. There had already been pleasing progress at Stage 1. 65 days for completion of Stage 2 may sound like a long time but these were the most complex complaints. He suggested that there was a need to focus on conflict resolution, staffing and the creation of a complaints database.

The Complaints Manager suggested that the service was already seeing some progress and reminded the Panel that figures for the first half of the current year had improved, with 25% of complaints now being completed within 65 days. Discussions had been held with Independent Investigators and Independent Persons to get their views on why timescales were not being met and they had raised the following points:

- Access to client files had proved difficult during the Covid pandemic. Normally Independent colleagues would have come into County Hall to

look at confidential files. As a result of social distancing requirements, access to County Hall was now restricted and they were reliant on office staff to undertake a file read for them. This was not an efficient way to work.

- Universally, Independent colleagues found it difficult to set up interviews with complainants within the timescales.
- There was often a delay in receiving interview notes from staff.
- Service provision was more complex and often involved multi-organisational working.

Members were given an opportunity to ask questions and the following main points were raised:

- It was noted that the 65 working days to complete a Stage 2 investigation was set nationally by legislation. A question was asked about who were the best performing local authorities, how they were achieving this and whether there was an IT solution to case management. In response, the Strategic Director of Commercial and Change assured the Panel that IT solutions were being looked at. He went on to agree that it would be useful to compare approaches with 'best of breed' authorities and assess whether they had the same issues. Peer review and benchmarking would be helpful.
- Members were reminded that the Consumer Relations Unit was working with other partners and was often reliant on them to provide information in a timely manner. The Complaints Manager suggested that further work could be done with partner organisations to identify areas for improvement. Deadlines were given to partners but it was difficult to instruct and control their response.
- Complaints about highways were part of Corporate complaints and, although this was the largest area of complaints, fewer progressed to Stage 2. Something that the public might see as a complaint was in reality a request for a service, such as a pothole repair or a faulty streetlight.
- It was suggested that the Member Case Management System may also help with intelligence on what was being reported to Councillors. In response the Complaints Manager informed the Panel that she received very few complaints via Councillors and she suggested that, on the whole, elected Members would go

310 Member Case Management System

direct to Highways Officers to resolve issues. Members of the Panel confirmed that, in general, they would approach the Highways Liaison Officer with issues of this kind.

- It was noted that one of the staffing issues related to an officer going on maternity leave. It was suggested that losing a member of staff in this way could have been anticipated and cover arranged. The Panel was informed that interviews for this post would take place in the following week. The post was very difficult to recruit to as it required a very specific skill set.
- Members were reminded that the service had to operate within available resources when considering how much to pay Independent Investigators. The aim was to get as good a service as possible within budget constraints, recognising that other local authorities may be able to pay more.
- The Chairman noted that a clear improvement plan was needed for Stage 2 Children's Social Care complaints. Consideration should also be given as to whether completion within 65 working days was achievable or whether central government should be lobbied to make the statutory timescales more realistic. A Member of the Panel who had experience of Independent Review Panels suggested that the complexity of cases had grown and 65 days for completion was no longer realistic and this was demoralising for staff

It was agreed that:

- further work should be done to compare the Council's performance with other comparable local authorities; and
- the Panel would receive a further update, including progress against relevant performance indicators and a detailed improvement plan for Stage 2 Children's Social Care complaints, at its next meeting in July.

The Chairman thanked the Complaints Manager for all her work in what was a challenging role.

The Panel received an update on the development of the Member Case Management System (Member Portal).

The Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Transformation and Commissioning reminded the Panel

**311 Work
Programme
2020/21**

of the intention to develop a system that would allow Members to manage issues they had raised on behalf of residents and provide an oversight of progress made in resolving those issues.

The Assistant Director of IT and Digital outlined progress to date including consultation with Members and the production of mocked up screens. It was hoped that the system would go live before the County Council elections in May.

The Chairman told the Panel that he was delighted to see the progress made and felt that the system would be of great benefit to the new intake of councillors in tracking the progress of particular cases.

In response to a Member question, the Assistant Director agreed that she would discuss the system's potential to be used across partner organisations, in particular the district councils, at the next meeting of the One Worcestershire ICT Group.

Members were reassured that they would retain the ability to contact individual officers to resolve residents' issues even once the system was up and running. The system would allow Councillors to monitor the progress made in resolving a case. It was noted that, although the technology was important, culture was also key in determining how quickly Members received a response to a query. The system would also be helpful to new Councillors who may not know who to contact with particular issues.

The Assistant Director informed the Panel that, once the system was in operation, it could potentially provide useful data which would identify 'hot spots' and inform policy development.

In conclusion, the Chairman thanked the Cabinet Member and all those involved for the excellent progress made.

The Panel reviewed its work programme and considered whether it would like to make any amendments so that topics would remain as relevant as possible to the new Panel following the County Council elections. It was agreed that:

- An update on Performance Monitoring of Comments, Compliments and Complaints would be added to the agenda for the Panel's next

- meeting (20 July at 10am);
- Member Case Management System and Apprenticeship Strategy should be included in the induction programme for new Members following the May elections.

The meeting ended at 12.34 pm

Chairman