

## **Divisions Affected – All**

### **CABINET**

**16 September 2025**

### **Our People and Culture Strategy Update**

## **Report of Performance and Corporate Services Overview & Scrutiny Committee**

### **RECOMMENDATION**

1. The Cabinet is **RECOMMENDED** to —
  - a) Note the recommendations contained in the body of this report and to consider and determine its response to the Performance and Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee, and
  - b) Agree that relevant officers will continue to update Scrutiny for 12 months on progress made against actions committed to in response to the recommendations, or until they are completed (if earlier).

### **REQUIREMENT TO RESPOND**

2. In accordance with section 9FE of the Local Government Act 2000, the Performance and Corporate Services Overview & Scrutiny Committee requires that, within two months of the consideration of this report, the Cabinet publish a response to this report and any recommendations.

### **INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW**

3. The Performance Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered a report on the Council's Our People and Culture Strategy at its meeting on 18 July 2025.
4. The Committee would like to thank Cllr Neil Fawcett, Deputy Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Resources, Cllr Dan Levy, Cabinet Member for Finance, Property and Transformation, and Cherie Cuthbertson, Director of HR and Cultural Change, for presenting the report at the Committee meeting and answering questions.

## SUMMARY

5. The Deputy Leader introduced the Our People and Culture Strategy, which aimed for fair staff treatment and expand opportunities. He noted progress in reducing voluntary departures, reducing sickness absence, and strengthening apprenticeships. Restructuring top management had also created a leaner organisation and saved costs.
6. The Director of HR and Cultural Change outlined the Our People and Culture Strategy's four pillars: attract, thrive, grow, and lead. She reported on progress such as forming a new recruitment team, implementing updated policies and manager training, investing in apprenticeships, launching a reciprocal mentoring scheme, restructuring top-tier management, and hiring a leadership consultant.
7. In response, the main areas of the Committee's enquiries were focused on the issues around moving towards a more flexible, matrix-style of working, use of the apprenticeship levy, sickness absence, increased rates of internal promotion, agency use and expenditure, and how the Council consults with its employees.
8. The Committee makes five recommendations. These relate to greater granularity of sickness data reporting, realising the potential of our existing relationships with partners, and a suggestion of additional consultation concerning the future of the employee engagement survey.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### Sickness Data

9. One of the achievements since the launch of the People and Culture Strategy is a reduction in sickness absence for 9.1 days on average per employee, to 8.7. This is a positive development for individual employees, their team members, the Council as an employer and for service users, and the Committee hopes the trend will continue to decline.
10. Whilst an overall reduction of sickness absence is an excellent development, the Committee is of the view that the Council would benefit greatly from more granular reporting around this topic. It would, for example, be perfectly possible for there to be a particularly high rate of absence within one directorate or service area but the existence of such could be masked by an overall rate of decline. Knowing this would enable targeted interventions and accelerate improvements. In the same way, knowing who gets ill and how can help develop specific mitigation strategies. Knowing, for example, that managers are more prone to stress-related absences while front-line staff are more susceptible to viral illnesses would inform the Council's strategies for continuing to reduce sickness absence in a more effective manner. At present, this level of granularity is not provided to Cabinet members in the quarterly HR

and Cultural Change report. The Committee considers that this data should be regularly included in future reports to Cabinet.

**Recommendation 1: That the Council reports to Cabinet greater detail of the levels of sickness within different parts of the organisation and at different strata of the organisation.**

#### Working with Partners

11. The Committee notes from the report received that spending of the Council's apprenticeship levy has increased from 68.5% to 89.6%. Using a greater proportion of the levy to invest in the Council's staff rather than forfeiting it is a welcome development. However, policy changes by government mean it is not clear that the increase will be sustained. Particularly, the government is keen that apprenticeship levy funding should be primarily directed towards 16-21 year olds. A consequence of that is that higher level (level 7) apprenticeships will no longer be eligible for the apprenticeship levy. In view of the Council's tendency towards higher levels of education and higher average age of employees, this change is liable to be more impactful for the Council than other organisations. This may mean a reduction in its spending in the future.
12. The Committee is aware that large employers that pay the apprenticeship levy have the option to transfer up to 50% of their annual levy funds to other businesses or organisations to help cover apprenticeship training and assessment costs. The choice of which organisations or apprenticeships to support is at the employer's discretion. Both levy-paying and non-levy-paying organisations can receive transfers. In the event that the Council expects its apprenticeship levy to be under-utilised, the Committee would welcome making apprenticeship levy funds available to the voluntary sector. Whilst it does not know whether the Council anticipates that there will be sufficient underspends of the levy available, it does note that a number of nearby Councils such as Gloucestershire County Council and Milton Keynes Council have made funds of £400k and £250k available respectively (though not only to the voluntary sector). The Committee requests that the Council reviews whether it is possible for the Council to do similarly, and to do so with a presumption in favour of providing support to the voluntary sector.

**Recommendation 2: That the Council commits to reviewing whether to pass on unspent apprenticeship levy funds to local voluntary sector organisations with a presumption it will do so.**

13. Also in relation to the apprenticeship levy, the Committee was gladdened to hear from the Deputy Leader that, through Enterprise Oxfordshire, the Council participates in a project that gathers surplus apprenticeship levy funds from local businesses to create additional apprenticeship opportunities throughout the county, thereby supporting workforce development beyond the Council.
14. This touches on an important point: that despite being one of the largest employers in the county, the potential good the Council can achieve through indirect action, or by enabling others is even greater. The Committee would like

to see greater promotion of this scheme in the expectation that for a small cost the county can reap outsized benefits.

**Recommendation 3: That the Council is more proactive in promoting its work around redirecting unspent apprenticeship levies to create opportunities**

15. Whilst the Council as an employer and the individual employees who work for the Council are clearly the primary stakeholders in outworking the Our People and Culture's strategy's aim of providing fair staff treatment and more opportunities, they are not the only ones. The remit of the trade unions is to support exactly this.
16. At a national level, unions are involved with agreeing pay scales with employers, which is a core part of the Council's employment offer. At a local level, relations with the unions are more cordial and collaborative than in many other authorities, with early and positive involvement with the unions over the Council's current restructure, for instance.
17. It is the view of the Committee that positive relations with the unions are an important element in supporting the aims of the Our People and Culture and Strategy, too important that they should rest purely on good practice applied by specific individuals. The Committee is of the view that the positive ways of working with the unions should be formalised within the strategy, and that it should be updated accordingly to ensure the roots which feed those good relationships remain embedded in the Council's approach.

**Recommendation 4: That the Council recognises formally its good relations with the trade unions, and updates its Our People and Culture Strategy to reflect this.**

Employee Engagement Survey

18. One important area the Committee disagrees with proposed plans is in relation to the Employee Engagement survey. During discussion, the Director of HR and Cultural Change clarified that the Council is considering transitioning from an annual, extensive questionnaire to a quarterly pulse survey with fewer questions to better track trends and respond more promptly to staff feedback.
19. The Committee notes the points made by the Director of HR, but suggests that the conclusions are wrong. The Performance and Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee has previously recommended to Cabinet that it undertake the full survey on an annual basis as it sees significant value in it. It does not agree that fewer questions more regularly will allow the Council to respond more promptly to staff feedback; by changing the method of feedback all the work undertaken in the past two years to establish a baseline will be invalidated and a new baseline will need to be established. This course of action does not correlate with agile decision-making, nor will it give as comprehensive a picture of the workforce.

20. Whilst it does see significant value in the Employee Engagement survey, the Committee does recognise that gathering and learning from a comprehensive survey does come at a cost: paying for the survey itself, the time to promote it, and the time to sift and digest the results. Whilst the Committee recognises the Employee Engagement Survey's value, it also recognises that the Council is under increasing financial pressure and that the level of investment may not be justified. However, it does not have the data to make that judgement in an informed way. Instead, it suggests that the issue is taken to and considered by the Employment Joint Consultative Committee before a final decision is made.

**Recommendation 5: That the Council discusses its plans to replace the existing annual Employee Engagement Survey with the Employment Joint Consultative Committee before making a final decision**

## **FURTHER CONSIDERATION**

21. The Committee does not currently have this item scheduled again on its work programme for the remainder of the current civic year. However, it may choose to schedule a report on specific issues raised by this report at a later point.

## **LEGAL IMPLICATIONS**

22. Under Part 6.2 (13) (a) of the Constitution Scrutiny has the following power: 'Once a Scrutiny Committee has completed its deliberations on any matter a formal report may be prepared on behalf of the Committee and when agreed by them the Proper Officer will normally refer it to the Cabinet for consideration.
23. Under Part 4.2 of the Constitution, the Cabinet Procedure Rules, s 2 (3) iv) the Cabinet will consider any reports from Scrutiny Committees.

Anita Bradley  
Director of Law and Governance and Monitoring Officer

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| Annex:             | Pro-forma Response Template                                                                                                             |
| Background papers: | None                                                                                                                                    |
| Other Documents:   | None                                                                                                                                    |
| Contact Officer:   | Tom Hudson<br>Scrutiny Manager<br><a href="mailto:tom.hudson@oxfordshire.gov.uk">tom.hudson@oxfordshire.gov.uk</a><br>Tel: 07791 494285 |

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