

Divisions Affected – All

CABINET

19 September 2023

Draft Workforce Strategy

Report of Performance and Corporate Services Overview & Scrutiny Committee

RECOMMENDATION

1. The Cabinet is **RECOMMENDED** to —
 - a) Agree to respond to the recommendation contained in the body of this report, 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 recommendation, or until they it is 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 its recommendation.

INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

3. The Performance Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered a report on the Council's draft Workforce Strategy at its meeting on 21 July 2023.
4. The Committee would like to thank Cllr Glynis Phillips, Cabinet portfolio holder for Corporate Services, Lorna Baxter, Director of Finance, and Michael Fletcher, Head of HR Partnering and Advisory for preparing and introducing the report, and for attending to answer questions.

SUMMARY

5. In introducing the report, Councillor Phillips advised the Committee that the document in front of them was an early draft rather than a near-final version. Whilst it had been available for discussion within the organisation a new HR director would be joining the Council in September and it would be necessary to get agreement on it with the new post-holder before progressing to Cabinet, likely for consideration in November. The overall aim of the strategy was to ensure the Council had talented, committed and creative staff to enable it to be an efficient, high-performing organisation. The draft strategy sought to put forward how this might be achieved, focusing on four key areas: i) Attract, recruit and retain talented people, ii) Promote a positive and inclusive working environment, iii) Enable growth and development, iv) Develop leadership capability and high performance. The success of the strategy would be monitored through a set of key performance indicators, including ones over the Committee's concerns in previous items around agency spend and staff absence. An annual review of progress would be taking place, and it was offered to bring that back to the Committee.
6. In response to the presentation the Committee raised few issues, given the overlap with other items on the meeting's agenda. Items which were raised which were specific to this topic focused on internal promotion and development, the health of the Council's corporate culture and support for military families. The Committee makes one recommendation relating to this last issue.

RECOMMENDATION

7. In 2011 the Council became a signatory to the Armed Forces Covenant and renewed that commitment in 2019. Under the Covenant the Council agrees to recognise the particular sacrifices made by service personnel and their families, and to take steps to ensure that they are not disadvantaged. Oxfordshire hosts a significant contingent of armed forces personnel and military families – there are over 11,000.
8. Whilst military mobilisation, which makes two-parent families operate as one-parent families for a period, is clearly the most significant source of disruption for military spouses and partners when seeking employment it is not the only one. Regularly being uprooted owing to redeployment, either within the UK or overseas, makes it very challenging for military spouses and partners to set down roots, with an attendant impact on career development and earnings. Military spouses are motivated to work; their labour market participation rate at 82% exceeds that of the general population (76%).¹ However, this group faces significant churn. Three in eight military spouses looked for work over the last year but, despite being in a period of labour scarcity, 63% experienced

¹ [UK Tri-Service Families Continuous Attitude Survey Results 2023 \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk) p.22

difficulties in finding suitable employment.² This suggests a difficulty accessing the right jobs.

9. To its credit, the Council has multiple systems in place which do seek to support military personnel and their families. For military families this includes:
 - “A flexible working policy and leave policy to support with leave around deployments/mobilisations. Our Flexible Working Scheme offers every employee the opportunity to formally request permanent or temporary changes to their contracted hours or patterns or working. This may mean altering days and/or times they work to achieve a desired work-life balance or to fulfil caring responsibilities; it might also be a request to work from home on specific days.
 - Management support in preparation for, during and after mobilisation
 - A Buddy system with an option to buddy with a member of staff with armed forces experience
 - Informal staff network of armed forces
 - Armed Forces Service Champions to represent the views of armed forces employees”
10. The Committee welcomes these steps, particularly the focus on flexibility; approximately half reference issues relating to care as the reason for finding work difficult to access. However, in researching for this report, the follow-through of some of the other steps was limited, particularly for military spouses as opposed to veterans.
11. The buddy system in place, for example, was last updated in 2021 suggesting either a degree of neglect or stagnation. Of the 12 buddies available, only two are military spouses. The system was described by one buddy as having ‘never really got off the ground’. Equally, the presence of an informal staff network of armed forces may be available, but it is not linked to or referenced on the Council’s intranet page which details the Council’s networks.³ Likewise, it is not listed in the staff induction, nor is there any reference to the Council’s commitment to the Armed Forces Covenant.
12. Most concerningly, whilst management support is promised prior, during and after mobilisation there is minimal if any reference to supporting military personnel or their families as part of the 50 hours essential training for the Council’s managers. If the term ‘military’ is put into the Council’s training database one result comes up, an e-learning course for front-line workers on the Armed Forces Covenant. If one inputs ‘armed forces’ a second training result is returned, a 12 minute e learning course on Support for the Armed Forces Community. The needs faced by this group are recognised as being specific in light of their particular circumstance; Council managers cannot be expected to provide the level of support required in the absence of suitable training.

² Ibid, p.23

³ [Colleague inclusion networks | Oxfordshire County Council Intranet](#)

13. The Committee's view is that military spouses are motivated to find employment, but that they face specific disadvantages from their situations as military spouses which make this challenging. The Council has signed the Armed Forces Covenant which commits the Council to addressing those disadvantages, which has led to good aspirations but that they have 'never really got off the ground.' The loss of follow-through from policy to on-the-ground change for military spouses is reason for the Committee to recommend that a specific work stream is developed within the Workforce Strategy, with targets, to provide fresh impetus in this area and ensure that the good ideas for support it already has are re-energised.

Recommendation 1: That the Council develops specific workstreams within its Workforce Strategy, backed by targets, around attracting and supporting spouses and partners of military personnel to work for the Council, including steps taken to reinvigorate its existing commitments.

14. The Committee would like to highlight that the Council has a policy of guaranteed interviews for ex-service personnel when transitioning back into civilian life. Specifically, '*We are committed to helping and supporting those transitioning from HM Armed Forces to civilian life and guarantee an interview for those demonstrating the essential criteria for the role, within three years of leaving the service.*' There are too many important legal issues to consider around whether, in light of the disadvantages they face, this scheme might be extended to military spouses in order for Scrutiny to wish to make a recommendation to that effect. It is, nevertheless, an issue to highlight for further thought.

FURTHER CONSIDERATION

15. The Committee does not intend to consider the Workforce Strategy again in the current civic year. However, it is likely that it will wish to consider the 12 month review of progress next year.

LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

16. 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.'
17. Under Part 4.2 of the Constitution, the Cabinet Procedure Rules, s 2 (3) iv) the Cabinet will consider any reports from Scrutiny Committees.

Annex: Pro-forma Response Template

Background papers: None

Other Documents: None

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