

# **PERSONNEL COMMITTEE**

## **MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON WEDNESDAY, 9 DECEMBER 2020**

**Councillors Present:** Adrian Abbs, Peter Argyle, Jeff Brooks (Vice-Chairman), Garth Simpson (Chairman) and Joanne Stewart

**Also Present:** Moira Fraser (Democratic and Electoral Services Manager) and Abi Witting (HR Manager)

### **PART I**

#### **8. Minutes**

The Minutes of the meeting held on 17 July 2020 were approved as a true and correct record and signed by the Chairman.

#### **9. Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest received.

#### **10. Apprenticeship Strategy (PC3968)**

The Committee considered a report (Agenda Item 4) which sought approval of an Apprenticeship Strategy and associated documents for the Council as well as a proposal for additional resource to support delivery of this key project and Council priority.

Abi Witting introduced the report and said that it had been put together as a strategy centred on the apprenticeship work that the Council had already put in place.

The apprenticeship levy had been introduced in April 2017, at that time the Council had focused the funds on upscaling the existing staff. Abi Witting stated that they now had a well-established scheme in progress but it now needed to become more ambitious as set out in the strategy document presented.

In particular, it was necessary to broaden the remit to support for vulnerable children and adults, along with local businesses in West Berkshire. The purpose of the report presented was to seek approval of the apprenticeship strategy and the associated documents (which captured both the current practice that was in place and the future ambitions of supporting the vulnerable in West Berkshire). The document also looked to provide additional support for staff, managers, schools and businesses on how they could access the apprenticeship levy easily.

In addition, Abi Witting stated that she was looking for support from the Committee to approve additional resources. Both Corporate Board and Operations Board had had sight of the report and they both were supportive of the additional resources. The support required included increasing the current Assistant HR post that supported apprenticeships from 0.6 FTE to 1.0 FTE (full time). The actual cost of this for 2020/2021 would be £16,060 (including on costs). If the Committee were supportive of this proposal then she would ensure that it was included in the budget papers for Budget Board the following day.

Abi Witting advised the Committee of the seven ambitions of the report (page 11, paragraph 4.4) She further commented that having an ambitious apprenticeship strategy

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made it clear that the Council were an advocate for apprenticeships, valued learning and development and were willing to support the residents of West Berkshire and in particular the vulnerable children and adults.

Councillor Adrian Abbs asked Abi Witting to confirm that the cost of £16,060 for the position going from 0.6 to 1 FTE was just the salary? Abi Witting confirmed that it was salary plus on costs (including pension etc.). Councillor Abbs also asked if the Council was conducting blind type hiring or if they were applying a positive approach to this? Abi Witting responded by saying that the Council did not currently have blind applications but that was something to be considered under the Workforce Strategy and would be reflected within the apprentice strategy process. Currently, the apprenticeship recruitment process broadly followed the general recruitment practices. Councillor Abbs said that he was keen to avoid any kind of bias and that blind hiring tended to guarantee that there was no bias. Abi Witting responded that the equalities data around applications was not shared with recruiting managers as a matter of course. Therefore, HR only had access to that data and when shortlisting had taken place it was reviewed to ensure the Council was meeting, for example, the disability confident requirement etc. This did provide an element of safeguarding.

Councillor Jo Stewart stated that she just wanted to thank Abi Witting and the team involved in pulling all of this strategy together and that nobody should underestimate the amount of additional effort and enthusiasm that had gone into getting the Council to this position. She also mentioned that she liked the fact that the report talked about Kickstart and how the apprenticeship programme could be a next step to this which was important.

Councillor Garth Simpson, concurred with Councillor Stewart and agreed that the documents were very comprehensive. Councillor Simpson asked Abi Witting about the sustainability of the strategy. Abi Witting stated that in terms of sustainability, she was confident that it could be sustained because there was a proven track record over the last three years and HR had not been working only exclusively on apprenticeships as the service had always had to juggle other demands. She also said that there was a plan in place to manage the demands and workloads to fit in with enrolment schedules. Therefore there was a process of putting together an annual plan of work and the lead-in time for them. Abi Witting stated that the objectives in place were challenging but because of the network and the links with local schools it was possible to work together. She mentioned that they also had the backing and support of the Economic Development team, therefore, in terms of talking to local businesses and keeping links going with the Kickstart programme the apprenticeship programme has been a catalyst. Abi Witting concluded that sixty placements had been provided, thirteen of which were in the Council and the rest were in local businesses. Therefore, those links could be utilised and converted from Kickstart placements into actual apprenticeships.

Councillor Abbs asked, in regards to paragraph 4.4 around utilisation of higher level apprenticeships, was this just being applied to internal staff? Abi Witting explained that an apprenticeship could form part of the offer for a new staff member at a higher level for development and that would be something which could be looked at. Councillor Abbs stated that he had misunderstood the use of higher level and therefore, could this be amended to read 'graduate'?

Abi Witting then presented some figures in relation to Councillor Abbs' question around the past three years of recruitment. She stated that there had been thirteen recruitment processes for senior roles (Chief Executive, Service Directors, Executive Directors). There had never been less than five appointments internal/external and three internal only appointments. On average out of fifteen roles the Council had had at least five people shortlisted for interview. For the most recent role of Executive Director (Place) the

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Council had had 46 applicants and had taken six through to shortlisting and only one had not been recruited to for the first time.

*(Councillor Jeff Brooks joined the meeting at 13:29)*

Councillor Jeff Brooks asked if there was an assurance that hiring managers and service heads etc were not reducing their training budgets and using the apprentice levy fund instead. He also commented on the Council's website and how it could be better at advertising for apprenticeships with pictures or videos. Abi Witting responded that the levy had very specific rules and regulations and she was not aware of it being used in place of a training budget as this was an additional budget. Councillor Stewart said that she had a budget meeting tomorrow and she would raise the issue to ensure that this was not happening. Regarding the website, Abi Witting said there were not any apprentice roles being advertised at the moment. However, there was a separate apprenticeship page on the website and she would make sure there was a link to it under the recruitment page. She also noted that the website was being looked at in regards to the Workforce Strategy and ways to improve recruitment through it. In relation to the current Apprenticeship Strategy document, before it was published, she would ensure that there would be some quotes and pictures from apprentices contained within it. Councillor Brooks commented that it was a good idea because good news stories and showcasing happy faces encouraged more involvement.

Abi Witting also discussed the results of an audit of the apprenticeship process in September 2019 where five areas had been reviewed and rated. West Berkshire Council had been rated 'developing plus maturing' or 'maturing plus' in all of those areas and compared to the other 74 Councils, West Berkshire was ahead of the game. West Berkshire had also featured in a Gov.uk bulletin on 23 November as a case study for the Kickstart programme and apprenticeships.

Councillor Stewart commented further on the website and stated that there was work to be done on the website in order to appeal to more audiences and make it more user friendly. This was covered under the Digital Strategy and was being worked on. It was also proposed to hold campaigns during week commencing 8th February 2021 around Apprenticeship Week. Councillor Brooks further commented that websites were about graphic design, marketing and PR and that it could be used to showcase West Berkshire Council to the world. Councillor Simpson commented on upgrading the search engine as well and all agreed.

Councillor Stewart referred to the KPI on page 100 under objective two; the target said nine and she would like to know where the Council sat with meeting that target. She also asked when the Apprenticeship Strategy should be reviewed again. Councillor Stewart suggested that quarterly would be best and if required it could be refreshed periodically, the same as for the Workforce Strategy. In respect of the KPI Abi Witting confirmed that it was hoped to broaden the number of placements by the Summer of 2020 but this had been hampered slightly by the changing work environments (home working, less office working). However, a pilot scheme was currently being run under SEND placements in mainstream schools so work placements could be accessed as well which should help in meeting the target.

Councillor Abbs asked about running apprenticeships, and if this changing work environment (having less office working etc) would have an effect on the programme. Abi Witting stated that although workspaces and homeworking was being reviewed due to the current pandemic, there would always be a mix of people in the office just as there currently was now. More planning around this would be required on behalf of people managing apprentices but she was confident this would be successful and she also discussed establishing support with a possible drop in centres for apprentices.

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Councillor Jeff Brooks proposed the recommendations in the report and Councillor Jo Stewart seconded based on the document circulated on 8 December 2020.

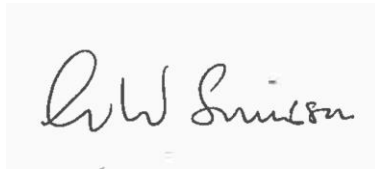
RESOLVED that:

- The Apprenticeship Strategy and associated documents be approved together with the proposal for additional resource to support delivery.

### 11. **Date of Next Meeting**

The Committee agreed to hold the next meeting on 12 February 2021 at 10:30 am.

*(The meeting commenced at 1.00 pm and closed at 1.49 pm)*

A rectangular box containing a handwritten signature in black ink. The signature appears to be 'R. W. Smith'.

**CHAIRMAN**

**Date of Signature**

12 February 2021