

To: City Executive Board

Date: 16 June 2016

Report of: Scrutiny Committee

Title of Report: Apprentices

Summary and Recommendations

Purpose of report: To present a recommendation of the Scrutiny Committee on apprentices

Scrutiny Lead Member: Councillor Andrew Gant

Executive lead member: Councillor Pat Kennedy, Board Member for Young People, Schools and Skills

Recommendation of the Scrutiny Committee to the City Executive Board:

That the City Executive Board states whether it agrees or disagrees with the nine recommendations set out in the body of this report.

Introduction

1. The Scrutiny Committee requested a report on apprentices employed by the Council and considered this item at its meeting on 7 June 2016. The Committee would like to thank Councillor Pat Kennedy and Jarlath Brine for providing the report and answering questions. The Committee would also like to thank Cllr Jean Fooks for speaking on this item.
2. The Committee agreed several recommendations to submit to the City Executive Board (CEB). Recommendation 1 was submitted to the CEB meeting on 16 June 2016 due to the timing of a recruitment exercise, which would be impacted if the recommendation was agreed, and the need for a quick decision. CEB was advised that a full report would follow.

Summary and recommendations

3. The Committee heard that the Council was in the process of recruiting 21 apprentices as part of a campaign that focused on OX1 to OX4 postcode areas and would close on 30 June 2016. The Committee was advised that some fifty-nine applications had been received (as of 7 June 2016), with approximately half of these applicants resident in the City. The Committee considered whether the policy of recruiting applicants who were resident in the City reflected the realities of the local labour market, given the very high cost of living in Oxford and the high numbers of workers who commute in to the City. The Committee suggest that consideration should be given to extending the eligibility criteria beyond the OX1 to OX4 catchment areas but with a preference for recruiting applicants who are resident within these areas where possible.

Recommendation 1 - That consideration is given to extending the eligibility criteria for apprenticeships beyond the OX1 to OX4 postcode areas but with a preference for appointing applicants with these postcodes.

4. The Committee noted that the majority of Council apprentices were aged 19 or under when recruited. The Committee heard that the eligibility criteria stipulated that applicants were aged 16 to 20. It was suggested that this created a gap in the opportunities available to young people aged 21-24 who are not in education, employment or training (NEET). This group could include, for example, women entering the labour market having started families at a young age. The Committee suggest that there is a case for widening the eligibility criteria to offer apprenticeship opportunities to those aged 20-24.

Recommendation 2 - That consideration is given to making apprenticeship opportunities available to applicants aged 20-24.

5. In response to a question, the Committee heard that a recent event at Rose Hill had resulted in thirty or so meaningful conversations with prospective apprentices. The Council had had to take on something of a careers advisory role as good quality careers advice either seemed to be lacking in schools, or the advice given was counter-productive in terms of promoting vocational opportunities. The Committee heard that the Council had offered week-long placements leading to a qualification but there had been no take up from schools. Similarly, while a majority of parents thought that apprenticeships were a good thing, only 20% of parents thought an apprenticeship was okay for their son or daughter. The Committee suggest that a more co-ordinated approach should be taken in schools to raise awareness of these kinds of opportunities, promote them to pupils and parents and challenge misconceptions.

Recommendation 3 - That a more co-ordinated approach is taken in schools to raise awareness of apprenticeship and work experience opportunities and promote them to pupils and their parents.

6. The Committee noted concern that black and minority ethnic (BME) groups were under-represented among apprentices. The numbers of BME apprentices had decreased year on year to a position where only approximately 6% of apprentices came from BME communities, compared with 22.3% of the Oxford population in the 2011 census. The Committee questioned whether a particular focus was

placed on encouraging BME applicants and heard that three workshops targeting BME groups had had mixed success but a key change had been the Council's work with schools as part of the Business in the Community initiative, whereby BME pupils had been encouraged to attend recruitment evenings and make applications. The Committee suggest that there is a need for more joined up working and engagement with these groups. The Committee also note that elected members could do more to promote Council vacancies and encourage communities to engage with the Council as a potential employer.

Recommendation 4 – That a particular focus is put on encouraging Black and Minority Ethnic pupils to take up work experience placements and apprenticeships.

7. The Committee questioned how the Council engaged with hard to reach groups, such as young people who are disconnected from schools, when promoting apprenticeship opportunities. The Committee suggest that the Council should engage with higher education colleges and social housing providers in order to reach some of these groups. The Committee also suggest that lessons on engaging with hard to reach groups could be learnt from the Change 100 internship programme, which was focused on talented disabled students and utilised social media and targeted advertising campaigns to engage effectively with these groups.

Recommendation 5 – That the Council links in with social housing providers and higher education colleges in order to engage with hard to reach groups.

Recommendation 6 – That the Council considers what can be learnt from the Change 100 internship programme, including their advertising and social media campaigns.

8. The Committee questioned what the Council's distinctive brand and offer was and whether there was a need to simplify access given that the market was crowded and somewhat confused. The Committee heard that no other employer in the City was able to offer the same range of apprenticeship opportunities as the Council. These opportunities included trade and office based apprenticeships and masters-level qualifications. Quality and incentives were built in to apprenticeships at every stage and 70% of Council apprentices had been successfully succession-planned into permanent jobs. The Committee also considered pay levels and whether the Council could pay the Oxford Living Wage to all apprentices. The Committee heard that this would not be appropriate at entry-point but that apprentices could progress quickly in terms of their remuneration if they were successful in their role. The Committee suggest that further thought should be given to how the Council defines and markets itself as an employer and its offer to potential apprentices.

Recommendation 7 – That further consideration is given to defining and promoting the Council's brand and offer to prospective apprentices, including in terms of pay rates and career progression opportunities.

9. The Committee noted that there had been significant cuts to post-16 non-tertiary training at a national level in recent years and that further cuts were expected. Oxford was the lowest ranked city in the UK for apprenticeship starts per 1,000 working population, and although this was explainable and not something the City Council was culpable for, actions were not meeting needs in the City. The Committee suggest that the Council should take these issues up with Oxfordshire Skills Board and ask them to do more to promote apprenticeship opportunities.

Recommendation 8 – That the Council seeks to influence Oxfordshire Skills Board to do more to promote apprenticeship opportunities.

10. The Committee noted that the Government’s Enterprise Bill would introduce apprenticeship starts targets for all public sector organisations which, if set at 2.3% of headcount, would equate to approximately 28 Council apprenticeship starts each year. The Apprenticeship Levy would be introduced at 0.5% of total payroll and would have to be spent on recognised apprenticeships lasting at least one year, although it was unclear how tightly these would be defined. The Council was proposing to Government as part of a devolution bid that all Apprenticeship Levy funding collected in Oxfordshire should be spent on skills within the County. The Committee suggest that the Council should continue to keep the details of this legislation under review and make appropriate plans to mitigate its impacts, including both the levy and the starts targets.

Recommendation 9 – That the Council keeps the details of the Enterprise Bill under review and makes appropriate plans to mitigate its impacts, including the Apprenticeship Levy and the apprenticeship start targets.

Further consideration

11. The Committee requested another update report in 12 months’ time.

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