



STAFF SHORTAGES



Hosted by 

Exclusive Roundtable 8 June 2023

The workforce crisis facing local government

PPMA, APSE and CSG

Commercial Services Group ran a second roundtable after our successful inaugural event in London. We were joined in Manchester by leaders and senior executives from across councils in the north of England.

APSE kindly hosted the event, where **Mo Baines**, the Chief Executive, presented their research on skills in Local Government, which served as the starting point for discussions. The event was facilitated by PPMA President **Gordon McFarlane** and our very own **Steve Wilson**, Commercial Director.

The room was full and the debate engaging. Many of the issues were familiar from our first roundtable but there was a strong desire to move forward, learning where councils were having success and exploring new opportunities to work together.

Key themes discussed

- Agility
- Communicating the benefits of local government
- Equality, Inclusion, and diversity
- Working closer together





Agility

There was a broad agreement that councils need to find ways to be more agile. This was particularly relevant for the recruitment process but also for offering career development and work design flexibility. People want to be able to apply as soon as they see a job on their mobile. If recruitment processes take too long, then talent is lost as candidates take up other offers. As an illustration, one director commented, “According to a study, 40% of individuals under 30 years old engage with chatbots on a daily basis.”¹ Processes need to allow quick decision-making. Covid showed that councils can be agile, and roles need to embrace technology and the post-pandemic world better; many people can work remotely so help them to do it even if work redesign is needed.

One Head of HR and OD shared, “We’ve had success taking recruitment to the community, interviewing candidates there and then and then following up with checks post-event. We’d like to do more of this, but it is time-consuming.”

Linked to this was a discussion on people’s wellbeing and a recognition that many in local government are suffering fatigue and burnout at all levels. Are councils still wedded to time? One CE challenged whether local government is adapting to the future of work by being more output driven. Councils seem able to offer flexibility to contractors why not their own staff? Does local government need to ‘give ourselves permission to break some of these rules?’

Flexibility could mean anything from allowing staff to take time off for short-term caring responsibilities or going part-time through to supporting sabbaticals either for travel or

working in another sector where new skills gained could be beneficial. This approach could also help retain more of the ageing workforce which instead of being viewed as a negative could be turned on its head as a benefit allowing councils to retain experience.

Communicating the benefits of local government

Echoing discussions from our London roundtable the group felt that there were missed opportunities to promote the many benefits of working in local government. There is undoubtedly a local government image problem, one Head of HR noted, “This presents issues when the press is full of the public message of how bad it is in local government, running out of money etc. yet we’re saying come work for us.”

Steve Wilson commented, “Working closely with our partner councils we have been struck by how Employer Value Proposition has been critical in the success of joint venture’s businesses. The JV’s only work for that council and are therefore much better placed to attract talent into work in local government.”

People have a perceived value of national government that isn’t the same locally and particularly after covid the NHS is seen as more valuable, yet local government is so closely tied with many of the NHS deliverables such as social care. But the local government doesn’t have a voice like the NHS – what can we do to change this? One HR Director noted, however, they had noticed an interesting trend where councils are in some instances attracting people back from the NHS for reasons such as the levels of bureaucracy.

¹ 3Cinteractive research, 2023.



There appears to still be a general lack of understanding of what local government does. One CE noted, **“There is a great story in local government – we need to get that out there. This is particularly for the next generation where social values are so important.”**

Another noted that local government is a social value by default. This point was particularly relevant when considering that it will remain hard for councils to compete purely on pay, increasing the importance of social values and other benefits.

One of those benefits is promoting career paths but it was acknowledged the commercial sector is generally much better at communicating these. Local government offers many different career opportunities and in fact, for people who don't know what they want to do, councils are great for moving between different services and departments. Linked to this councils could also get better at taking people on with transferable skills and then training where specific skills are required. The culture was highlighted as important in this respect and one HR Director asked if HR is held back by recruiting managers insisting on advertising for specific experience or office based only. Do we ask the question enough – what do you actually need? Can we do things differently?

Equality, Inclusion, and diversity

Councils still struggle to represent their local area – why is this? On Director of HR asked, **“Do we engage with our communities well; do we advertise in the right place? To create the talent, we need to listen to those we wish to engage with, and we talk of hard-to-reach audiences – but often they are not heard.”**

There are other related issues that impact the availability of staff such as affordable/suitable housing the lack of which clearly has a knock-on effect. One asked, **“Isn't it about time local government was given key worker status?”**

The role of members to help promote council careers was also raised. This seems like a missed opportunity and by working closer together this could help improve diversity and inclusion within the community.

Working closer together

Collaboration was a key theme discussed that the group felt presented opportunities for local government. This event had representation from several members of the Greater Manchester group of councils who shared their experience of closer working particularly on workforce planning. The London Pledge was also mentioned as an example. Whilst recognising that there will still be a need for hyper-local recruitment it was acknowledged that reducing competition creates opportunities for closer working at a regional level. Examples mentioned were opportunities to share scarce skills such as planners and ways to attract graduates and apprentices. Through sharing several opportunities and by working as a group a region could guarantee there are always available.



Could workforce planning work better across a region than for individual councils where some of the new skills in areas such as climate change and net zero are gaps that need to be filled? Councils could borrow/purchase skills from each other as part of cross-local authority collaboration. And does the local government use coaching and mentoring enough – losing the skilled people who can support development? This point also links back to the loss of older/experienced staff; skills are literally walking out the door. One Director commented, **“This discussion has challenged what I thought I knew. We aren't dealing with linear pathways. Local Government can provide true flexibility just some of our existing ways of working are getting in the way.”**



Gaps in leadership skills were also raised. Commercial Services Group's own Local Government Leadership Development programme stemmed from APSE research² which identified new skills that local government leaders needed. Resilience, collaboration, and insightful thinking were found to be key for future leaders but were not addressed in the typical development courses on offer. It's interesting that collaboration and new ways of thinking have been key themes brought to the fore.

It was clear that the councils at this event see clear opportunities for them to improve their recruitment and retention even in these challenging times. Whether that be to improve reach across local communities or looking to retain older members of the workforce rather than lose service experience, local government can take positive action.

● APSE Commission 2030 Local by Default, July 2021

About Commercial Services Group

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We are about profit with a purpose and have contributed over £50m back to frontline public services.

If you are interested in hearing more about Commercial Services Group – Local Government Leadership Development programme please contact stephen.wilson@csltd.org.uk

www.commercialservices.org.uk

Thank you

Thank you to all the councils that attended and to APSE for hosting, in particular to Mo Baines, CE for presenting their Local Government Skills research findings and to our facilitators for making sure everyone had their chance to contribute.

