

Retention – a top priority for the sector

Steve Wilson looks at the capacity issues facing the local government workforce, and says focusing on personal wellbeing and resilience – as well as promoting creative thinking – is the key to retaining key staff



At a recent roundtable hosted by Commercial Services Group (CSG) and the Public Services People Managers' Association (PPMA), five priorities were identified to enable local government to overcome the most pressing workforce issues facing the sector. It will come as no surprise that retention was high on the list.

Now more than ever, retention is critical. With some local authorities facing the reality of between half to 70% of their workforce potentially retiring soon, there is a significant and immediate risk to capacity.

An ageing workforce is not the only challenge. There is also the much publicised draw from other sectors to contend with and it is not just the private sector that has lured officers, with their competitive deals. The NHS and central government have also become a tempting alternative, with many in a position to offer more money.

While money is an important factor in the war on retaining talent, it is not the only challenge the sector faces. Mo Baines, chief executive of the Association for Public Service Excellence (APSE), who also attended the roundtable event, presented a number of key areas, including the

fact that, during the years of austerity, it is estimated councils lost around 27% of their spending power and approximately 35% of their workforce. This has put significant pressure on those who remain.

This challenge appears to become the perfect storm when coupled with the high vacancy rates within the sector and it is not just in social care, albeit it with between 17% and 20% vacancy rates there is a significant struggle, which has an immediate impact on caseloads for those that remain. A recent APSE survey found that 66% of councils reported moderate or severe shortages in parks and grounds maintenance services, while 50% of councils reported moderate or severe shortages of HGV drivers.

This burden is felt across all levels but when time and space for strategic thinking is needed more than ever it has a limiting effect on today's leaders and the leaders of the future.

Last week CSG concluded the last module of our first Local Government Executive Leadership programme (LGEL). The programme was established following research conducted by the group, in collaboration with Professor Steven

Griggs at Staffordshire University, and included 10 local government leaders in the first cohort.

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The main finding of this research was that lack of capacity was one of the greatest challenges facing sector leaders today. There is no lack of evidence that burnout is one of the reasons so many current leaders choose early retirement. It also means the potential leaders of tomorrow could step up, without having the opportunity to hone their skills, having spent years putting out fires or even leaving the sector to become leaders elsewhere.

In the current climate it appears firefighting is here to stay. It is therefore critical people are given the tools to cope while being given the opportunity to think creatively and

strategically. It is the reason why the LGEL programme was created around three core pillars; resilience, collaboration and creative thinking.

By elevating the importance of personal wellbeing and resilience, leaders are better equipped to deal with the significant challenges within their organisation and the wider system. Without this focus, things can become very tough, very quickly.

Collaboration is also key. This was evidenced through the group action learning, with every single cohort member successfully overcoming a specific challenge, with the input and coaching of their peers many of whom were facing or had faced similar scenarios.

What also became evident is that the sector cannot deal with the challenges it faces by thinking how it has always previously thought. New and creative thinking is needed and the sector has a wealth of talent to do this, if they are given the opportunity. And it's opportunities like the LGEL programme that are critical in developing and retaining our future leaders. Kirston Nelson, acting chief executive at Coventry City Council, participated in the nine-month programme: 'It's clear

we have an abundance of talent in local government but to unlock it we need to invest in our future. While technical skills are important, new leadership skills will help us navigate the complex system we work in and enable us to collaborate more effectively to provide modern public services.'

To grasp this opportunity there has to be the creation of time and space, in the right environment. More alpha thinking, less beta thinking. Whether it is a brief moment or planned time, all leaders need space to think about problems differently.

What is evident is that retention must not be an isolated focus. As Gordon McFarlane, president of the PPMA, shared in a recent article for *The MJ*, retention is a key priority alongside the development of new skills and attracting new blood into the sector through national and local collaboration and strategies. ■

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