



Potholes, bins and social work – tackling the recruitment and retention crisis in local government

They are the people ensuring our streets remain clean, our children and elderly relatives are cared for and local businesses get access to funding, and yet the services they provide are in jeopardy as councils face unprecedented talent shortages.

by Grace Lewis 28 March 2023, People Management

“We’re more than just bins and potholes,” cry the CEOs and HR leads of local councils at a roundtable event last month. But actually, “there is nothing wrong with us looking after potholes and bins, it’s just we can’t get the staff to do it”, says Mo Baines, chief executive of the Association for Public Service Excellence (APSE).

This was the overarching discussion point as People Management joined Baines and council leads from Cambridgeshire, Coventry, Hampshire and London at a roundtable event last month, hosted by the Public Services People Managers Association (PPMA) and the Commercial Services Group (CSG). The aim was to get to the bottom of workforce challenges in local government and share suggestions on how to tackle the recruitment and retention ‘crisis’ plaguing the sector.

Organisations across all sectors are no strangers to the global skills shortages but, according to APSE stats shared at the event, during the years of austerity, councils lost an estimated 27 per cent of their spending power and around 25 per cent of the overall workforce. And while other public sector organisations benefited from bumper labour growth during the first year of the Covid outbreak – NHS employment grew by 3.5 per cent and civil service by 3.9 per cent – local government workforce grew by just 0.2 per cent.

Fixing the brand

Attendees suggested that there is a misunderstanding as to the role local government plays and the wide-ranging career opportunities available.

Chris Twigg from Inner Circle Consulting is on a mission to break down traditional stereotypes of local government being bureaucratic, slow and often low-skilled work, with his ‘love local government’ campaign. “There’s an overall volume matter, which is that not enough people want to work in local government because the lasting and perennial narrative, nationally, is one of the bins and potholes,” he tells attendees. And when it comes to attracting talent to the sector, “all they’ve got is a national, negative story about those in government”.

Steve Wilson, commercial director at CSG, suggests that “sector brand is a key area” for local government to address, and “if I were to ask friends and family what local government does, they couldn’t necessarily articulate [it]”.

But Jackie Belton, chief executive of London Borough of Bexley, questions whether those outside of local government really need to understand the “wide and general” sector as a whole, suggesting that instead recruitment efforts should focus on the professions themselves. “Isn’t it better to talk about the different jobs you can do?” she asks. “So, if you want to be an accountant or psychologist, there are a range of opportunities” in local government and here are the benefits.

Belton shares her experience of using apprenticeships to plug the more difficult to fill roles, including business support functions. She also allays fears that apprentices may choose to leave local government for jobs elsewhere in the community: “If we can get our population into jobs – they



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either stay in local government or go somewhere else and get promoted – that’s brilliant for our population.” And hopefully their positive training and early career experience will encourage them to come back to local government further down the line.

Joined-up approach

Perhaps the answer lies in learning from sister public sector organisations, but there’s one major difference between local government and, say, the NHS and the civil service, says Stephen Moir, former chief people officer at NHS England and now chief executive of Cambridgeshire County Council. And that is “some form of national training [provision] that is resourced directly by the government. That helps develop future talent, particularly for senior leadership roles.”

“Can we not just pool all of this and have a single unified approach to developing talent for local government?” he asks. “For one, it would be more sensible in terms of our contribution financially, as an individual authority. But two, it might actually sell the sector better because at the moment it feels a bit piecemeal; based on which authorities can afford to put money in or support people.”

However, being rooted in the local community is something the attendees all agree is a major pro of local government working, and Jac Broughton, director of people and organisation at Hampshire County Council, is keen to remind her colleagues of the possible consequences of all local councils joining forces on a national level. “Part of the challenge with joining up across authorities is that it’s a massive [task]... and actually it’s then not local, so we start contradicting ourselves,” she explains.

“On the one hand we’re telling people to ‘love local’ and then we’re inviting workers to join a much bigger region – which is no longer local to them.

“There is a bit of ‘be careful what you wish for’, because you might gain something from having that big joined-up approach across the whole of the sector, for example, but you do also lose something in terms of control and ability to influence.”

Social workers ‘shopping around’



The crisis in recruitment and retention

- 170,000 – 190,000 care workers, with 105,000 in England alone Care workers vacancies running at between **17%** and **20%**
- 100,000 shortage for HGV driver jobs and over **50%** of APSE member councils report moderate or severe shortages in non-HGV driver roles
- Near to a quarter (**24.3%**) report severe shortages in building and construction services and **51%** report moderate shortages
- Over **66%** report moderate or severe shortages in Parks and Grounds Services
- **64%** Highways, near to **74%** in vehicle maintenance **65%** in catering and cleaning (Soft FM) services



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On the flipside, a joined-up approach may go some way to helping tackle some of the sector-wide issues, PPMA president Steve Davies says. According to the APSE's research, local councils are particularly struggling to fill care worker, HGV driver, building and construction, vehicle maintenance and parks and grounds service roles (see figures above) – and the skills gaps are having a direct impact on council services, which might be feeding into the sector's negative stereotype, as Twigg discusses above. But the one profession that roundtable attendees all agreed "dominated the conversation" was social workers, especially children's social workers.

Last year's Local Government Association (LGA) workforce report showed that 83 per cent of councils that run children's services were having difficulties recruiting children's social workers, and 72 per cent were having problems retaining them. Half (48 per cent) were giving market supplement payments in an attempt to attract the profession – which Nicola Monk, corporate director of the inclusive economy department at Luton Borough Council, says is making for some very "clunky" pay structures in her organisation. Combine this with competition from private companies, the influx of agency work and dwindling pay and pensionable benefits in the public sector, and it is perhaps no wonder that councils can't attract and keep social workers.

Susanna Newing, chief people officer at Coventry City Council, says that, as a result of the destabilised market, social workers are "shopping around", often spending a couple of years in one area and then moving on to the next in chase of a higher rate of pay or perhaps easier workload. The recruitment and retention issues in her area have been made more acute by some recent high-profile, complex care cases, she explains. So, even with efforts to encourage more people to qualify as social workers, it would take a good couple of years for these candidates to be able to take on the myriad cases.

In an attempt to encourage social workers to stay, Coventry City Council is introducing market supplements, but as a retention payment, Newing explains, so new recruits will have to work for 12 months before they can receive their supplement. "We are having to be creative about it," she says.

Ageing workforce – benefit or hindrance?

With experience, often comes age – and local councils are not short on 'older' workers. According to LGA figures, two thirds (66.6 per cent) of the local government workforce are between the ages of 40 and 64 years, which many of the roundtable members recognised to be similar to the make up of their own workforces.

Sherene Russell-Alexander, director of people and organisational development at Lewisham Council, says just 10 per cent of her workforce is under the age of 30.

"For us, it's how do we actually make our sector more attractive to younger people? Because that's where the pipeline is."

Monk agrees: "It depresses me because there are only a handful of youngsters under 21 [at Luton Borough Council] and I remember starting in local government when I was 21. My son is 16 and when I asked what he wanted to do as a job, his response was: 'I don't want to go into local government.' That is a real issue for us as senior leaders around what the story is [for younger people]."

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That ‘locality’ and ability to impact and give back to your community is one benefit that should be better communicated with younger talent joining the labour market, says Davies, as this generation increasingly looks for the ‘social value’ of job roles.

What needs to change to plan for the workforce of the future?

- Where are we now?
- Comprehensive assessment of future skills and workforce numbers?
- What do we need for the future? Skills in green technology and the interface with digital platforms
- Workforce planning that spans councils and local areas
- What does the future of work look like?



Looking at APSE’s analysis of the talent needed for the future of local government, skills in green technology and the interface with digital platforms top the list, so there is the opportunity to partner with education and training providers, and tailor apprenticeships so that local government employment is at the forefront of people’s minds when people start their careers, APSE’s Baines says.

Meanwhile, Twigg suggests there is opportunity to capitalise on the thousands of layoffs being seen across major tech companies, such as Meta, Google, Amazon and most recently Accenture, and attract this talent to the public sector and to local government roles in particular.

The roundtable attendees agree that so-called ‘older’ workers are obviously recognising the benefits of working for local government, and many praise the flexibility council employment offers, the commutable distance to work and the increasing number of roles that are able to be done remotely, plus the benefits of giving back to your community.

And Moir says while public sector pensions have taken a hit in recent years, the death in service benefits are still something to communicate to potential candidates: “Especially given the couple of years this country and the rest of the world has had, it’s amazing that we don’t really be upfront about these things, and say, ‘look at the protection your next of kin get if you are no longer there’. These things really matter.”

Monk adds that 70 per cent of her Luton Council employees live within the borough, so she is very much working with a “local workforce”. The key is targeting those people who “want a local job near their friends and family, and want to earn good money with the opportunity to flourish and go up”, she says.

Broughton explains how her team is just starting work on promoting Hampshire County Council’s employee value proposition, using staff stories and experiences to showcase what working for the local council really entails.



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“There is that ‘grass is greener’ thinking when it comes to pay, because that is the bit you see when you are applying for another job,” she says. “For us, it’s been about helping to tell some of the stories and encouraging people to see all of what it means to work somewhere.”

In her experience, having an open workplace policy is “really attractive” to the 16 and 17 year olds her team speaks to at job fairs. Meanwhile, ONS analysis shows that flexible working hours and being able to work from home would help incentivise those ‘older’ workers to return to employment.

With the government seemingly determined to encourage older workers back into work, perhaps now is the time for local government to reach out to their core demographic and use the over-50s market to help plug those gaps in talent. The task is then keeping them.

Belton says: “I think we are a bit ageist on some of this and, actually, I’d really love to do a bit more promotion to the private sector” to attract the so-called ‘older’ workers to council work. “There is also a risk in that people are taking their pension and leaving [local government], but they are not leaving work [all together]; they are becoming associates or non-execs on boards.”

So councils definitely have further work to do to support workers with caring duties to stay in employment, but, in terms of career pathways, the opportunities are there, Belton says. “Where people start [their careers] is not where they end up in life. The great thing about local government is you don’t have to know what you want to do. You can come in and change what you do; you don’t have to be fixed.”

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