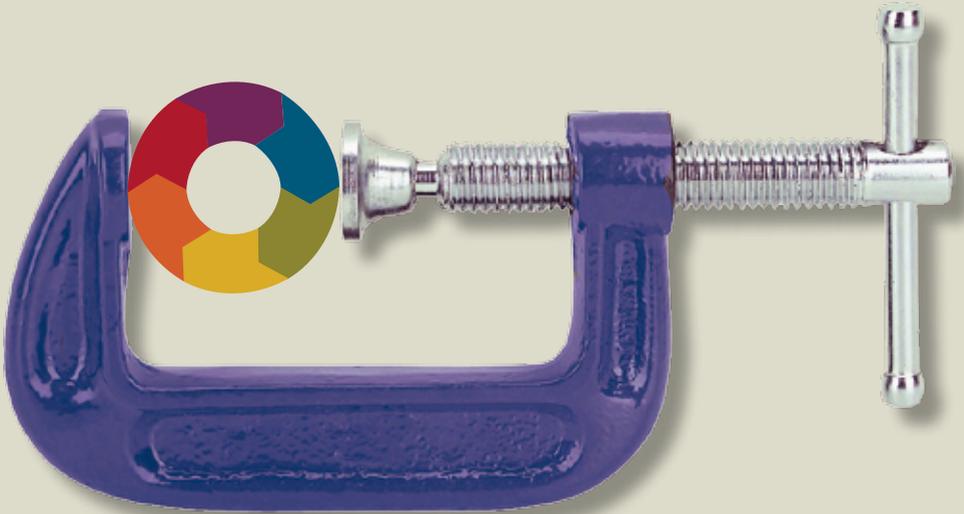




Working at the frontline of austerity

The Ensuring Council and
Workforce Planning





Association for Public Service Excellence (APSE) is a not-for-profit local government body working with over 300 councils throughout the UK promoting excellence in public services. APSE is the foremost specialist in local council front-line service provision in areas such as waste and refuse collection, parks and environmental services, leisure, school meals, cleaning, housing and building maintenance and energy services. This research was commissioned by APSE Northern.

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Foreword

It has been a time of tumultuous change for local government. The reshaping of the economy, post the 2008 global economic collapse, led to severe reductions in the public sector with the coalition government presiding over reductions in local government expenditure more severe, and much deeper, than any other area of the public sector.

Local government, having already delivered on efficiency programmes from 'Best Value' through to 'Gershon' in the preceding decades appeared to be well placed to dig deep and once again deliver eye-watering savings. However the speed and scale of job losses within local government has raised many questions.

Councils have already shed the 'fat' from services. Many have delayed their management teams and multi-skilling has become a by-word for covering the work of others as people are not replaced in recruitment freezes.

In the context of workforce planning we wanted to explore the impact of the changing dynamics of local government on our APSE member councils in the north of England.

APSE's Ensuring Council model is built upon principles that embed good stewardship of local economies, retaining core capacity, collaboration and social justice; we feel these are also guiding principles to the role of local authorities as employers. So working with our member local councils we have set out on a journey to explore the issues that impact upon and influence how local authorities strategically plan for the workforce needs of the future.

Whilst we have found an often complex picture of workforce planning, which is frequently frustrated by the need to make rapid savings in expenditure, we have also been encouraged by the recognition amongst local councils that they fully understand that the workforce of the yesteryears, and indeed of today, will look very different to that needed in the future.

Local government faces on-going challenges. Grasping the context of workforce planning, as a strategic tool to deliver on outcomes for local people is essential. Effective workforce planning can enshrine the principles of the APSE Ensuring Council model, embedding a culture of stewarding our local economies, taking a collaborative approach to services and building and retaining a workforce with core capacity, as well delivering on the principles of social justice. It ought not to be consigned to the 'too hard to do' pile. Workforce planning should be integral to how we plan and deliver our services. It is more than a numbers game it is making sure our services are fit for the future needs and demands of communities.

Whilst this report does not profess to provide encyclopaedia answers to the dilemmas that individual authorities will face it is nevertheless a useful starting point for local councils to consider as part of the toolkit in meeting the ever changing demands upon local councils. I commend this report to you.

Cllr John Kerr-Brown, APSE Northern Region, Chair

Introduction and research methodology

For many elected members, officers and frontline employees working in local government, the last five years have been unlike any others in their political or professional careers. They have entered what has been labelled an era of permanent austerity¹, from which it is difficult to escape that for much of their careers they will have to work with 'less money and that means a smaller workforce'. Indeed, reductions in public spending have hit local councils faster than most other areas of government spending.² Local councils in England have experienced an overall average cut of 27 per cent in real terms.³ Scottish local authorities have seen an 11 per cent fall in their spending power⁴, similar to real term reductions of around 10 per cent in the revenue or central funding of Welsh local authorities.⁵ But, the extent and impact of the cuts vary from authority to authority. It is those authorities with the most concentrated populations of disadvantaged groups that have experienced the deepest cuts.⁶

Faced with such pressures, local authorities have shown resilience, and the organizational capacity to adapt to new funding regimes.⁷ But, this has not come without cuts in the support offered to local communities, despite attempts by councils to protect frontline services. And, it is increasingly questioned how far local authorities will be able to sustain services in the future. The National Audit Office has stressed that local authorities, particularly metropolitan districts, are demonstrating 'persistent signs of financial stress', concluding that 'there is increased uncertainty about how local authorities can manage further possible falls in income.'⁸

Workforce planning sits at the heart of these uncertainties and difficult decisions. Workforce reductions have often been one of the immediate responses of local authorities to spending cuts, in part due to savings on back office functions. There was a 16.6 per cent reduction in full-time equivalent posts in local authorities between 2010 and 2013 (not including the total school workforce). Indeed, across local authorities, staffing costs have fallen more than running costs.⁹ Some authorities have even sought to embark upon radical transformations towards commissioning authorities, whereby the bulk of local authority employees are transferred into private companies or cooperative enterprises, reducing the council to merely a narrow core of staff to manage its contracts.

But, as well as the trials of austerity, local government faces a set of embedded challenges in relation to the gender imbalance, diversity and equality of its workforce. First, whilst over three quarters of local government employees are

women, they make up only 42 per cent of the top 5 per cent of earners in local government. They are also disproportionately represented in part-time posts and in particular occupations (for example, residential social work). Secondly, only 4 per cent of the top 5 per cent of earners in local government are black, Asian or from other minority ethnic groups, whilst only 3 per cent have a disability.¹⁰ Finally, like other employers, local councils face the opportunities and challenges of planning for an ageing workforce and population. Retaining the skills and experience of older workers offers strategic advantages in any workforce. Yet, it also poses challenges for local authority workforce planning, not least the potential blocking of opportunities for younger workers to enter the market or gain promotion, the management of changes to state pension ages and entitlements, and countering forms of age discrimination.¹¹

Against this background of shifting and persistent challenges, the narrative of managed decline can too easily become the mantra of workforce planning in local government. Such narratives frame the challenges facing councils as one of cutback management and efficiencies, ultimately translating workforce planning into a set of managerial tasks. But, at the same time, it offers for some in local government a moment of transformation, in which it is possible to see it as opening up a number of new paths in which to transform the delivery of local public services. Some authorities have already tried one such alternative path, the commissioning authority. What other alternatives are there for local councils? How might we begin to understand the future skills and capabilities that local authorities require from its workforce? And how might we begin to engage with local council employees in ways that maximise their strategic contribution to the stewardship of local places?

Drawing upon the ethos of the ensuring council, this policy briefing seeks to answer such questions. In so doing, it examines the challenges facing local authorities in planning for the workforce of the future in an era of austerity governance. It aims to contribute to on-going dialogues on the future skills and shape of the local authority workforce, setting out a number of dialogues to be had by politicians, officers and communities across local authorities.

The briefing draws upon the 'lived experience' of elected members, officers, and frontline staff, seeking to articulate their collective voice as to the challenges and opportunities facing local authorities. This collective voice is constructed from the views expressed at a one-day workshop, and in a series of interviews and focus groups held in a single case study authority. The workshop brought together 15 officers and elected members from local authorities in the North West of England. Part of its discussion was organised around a problem-tree activity, which was designed to surface competing understandings of the chal-

allenges of workforce management, as well as setting out an agenda for how to address these challenges. This exercise then informed a series of semi-structured interviews with senior management team executives and two one-hour focus groups with senior managers and business managers, which brought together a total of 22 local government officers.

Lessons from the frontline: workforce planning in an era of austerity

Salami-slicing efficiencies have had their day

Despite the high profile transformations of some local authorities towards new models of service delivery, interviewees, both elected members and officers, expressed their frustrations at what they described as the strategy of incremental 'salami-slicing', which imposed across the board staffing reductions. Such practices may have the advantage of 'spreading the pain' as each department bears its own share of the cuts, but they had, it was felt, delivered no, or at best only limited, strategic gains. On the contrary, across the board reductions ran the risk, it was argued, of reinforcing silo working and the defensive protection of particular service areas or territories.

In addition, local officers suggested that the 'salami-slicing' of budgets often followed a path of least resistance, with unintended consequences on the core capacities of the authority. Such concerns alluded in practice to growing concerns over incremental and minor adjustments to the status quo in which generating agreement between those involved in decision-making was more important than the actual validity of the decision itself.

But, most importantly, interviewees broadly acknowledged that the possibilities of 'salami-slicing' efficiencies have been exhausted across all services. In other words, officers and elected members accepted that a different, transformational approach was now not only required, but was in many ways inevitable. One senior executive officer thus saw 'austerity [as] a double edged sword', remarking that change under conditions of austerity 'is more difficult, but also even more important to do so.' Another senior officer saw austerity as a 'torch' to light up necessary changes to the council, voicing a positive narrative in which cuts became the driver of organisational change, and in which organisational redesign and staff turnover became an opportunity to bring 'new eyes' to traditional ways of working.

Overall, however, there was recognition of the increased uncertainty facing the workforce across local government. Whilst there was an acceptance that the efficiencies had been exhausted and that it was time for 'radical change', the particular direction and form of such change was not always evident. Strategic visions will of course differ from authority to authority, but no single narrative of

the shape or skills of the future workforce dominated across the actors engaged in workshops, focus groups and interviews.

New pressures are mounting up

Cuts to the workforce over the last five years have put new pressures and stresses onto existing staff. One officer spoke of 'reaching the tipping point.' Another spoke of the pressures on staff from the inability to manage demand effectively and relocate staff. Rising demands on councils could not necessarily be addressed by reallocating staff as there are 'not a lot of interchangeable people and in those areas where I can interchange the workload is going up phenomenally for those areas.' Indeed, workplace stress has added to the emotional labour of local government employees as spending cuts have hit councils. The 2013/14 local government workforce survey found that the largest single cause of days lost to sickness was 'stress, depression, anxiety, mental health and fatigue' (22.8 per cent of days lost).¹²

Strikingly in focus groups and interviews, business managers and senior officers commonly expressed concerns over new workload pressures and risks. Many local authorities have protected frontline services by concentrating cuts on 'back office' functions and managerial ranks, with one research participant making reference to the 'thinning out of managers'.¹³ Such staff reductions, it was argued, have diminished the leadership capabilities of many local authorities. Indeed, senior officers reported being increasingly split between the pressures of leadership and the delivery of tasks, with staff reductions meaning that there was 'now less time to manage, more time to provide cover' for staff in service delivery teams.

Dealing with the loss of organisational craft

Heightened concerns over weakening strategic capabilities were equally recognised by research participants in terms of the loss of staff networks and the organisational experience of 'getting things done'. The work of local authorities, like all organisations, rests on the tacit knowledge and craft of its workforce in leading organisational practices and in developing over time local networks and opportunities for collaboration. With the departure of staff, this organisational craft has been lost, weakening the place-shaping capabilities of local authorities. As one officer commented: it is not just the numbers [leaving], it is the level of experience going that is worrying.'

In fact, the instability of people changing post was felt to be particularly salient in community-facing posts, where it takes time to build relationships and trust between community groups and local authority officers. Too often, interviewee

argued, decisions on staff reductions did not take sufficient account of the shape of the skills set left after staff reductions: 'it is not just about getting rid of people; we need to think ahead [about the consequences]'. Alternatively, one officer commented that the 'landscape is in ferment... people to join things up have disappeared.'

At the same time, the core capacities of local authorities have come under increasing pressure, particularly what might be labelled the policy and performance technostucture of local councils. The core capabilities of evaluation and policy development have, it was pointed out repeatedly, been severely hit. In practice, officers believed that the capacity to generate the necessary assessments upon which to base future needs or the skills or capacity to generate alternative visions could no longer be taken for granted. Indeed, one senior officer spoke of frustrations that whilst under austerity there was an increasing demand for horizon scanning, there were no longer the officers in place to support these roles; in his words, these posts 'are often the first to go.'

Interviewees tied such concerns to a growing set of organisational risks as councils did not have the capacity to undertake sufficient studies of impact assessment and the evaluation of the outcomes of services and policy interventions. Increasingly, these tasks, it was widely reported, are falling upon service teams, which due to staff reductions no longer have the capacity to generate such assessments or evidence bases. In fact, the National Audit Office has expressed its concern that councils are about to embark upon a set of 'untested' service transformations and restructures.¹⁴

What role for elected members?

Political leadership of workforce planning was considered by research participants to be facing numerous tensions and contradictions. Elected members face growing challenges as they undertake what might be deemed to be the emotional dirty work of making cuts to the workforce.¹⁵ And within this context, short-term political interests could not be divorced from decisions over staff reductions. One interviewee thus foregrounded how political interests shaped decision-making, arguing for example that 'we got rid of the staff that the public did not see [...] the members were happy.' Another typically summed up concerns that decision-making was driven by a logic of 'looking after your mates', although it has to be noted that for such concerns might be tied to the desire to frame workforce planning as a managerial rather than political task. In fact, a number of research participants suggested that elected members were not best placed to engage in what were deemed to be managerial concerns. One senior officer questioned how far elected members are equipped to be engaged

in the everyday practicalities and decision-making of workforce planning, suggesting that any engagement beyond the determination of priorities, risked the managerialisation of local councillors.

But, at the same time, many councillors who were not portfolio holders were said by research participants to be too far removed or disconnected from workforce planning. One officer mentioned their concern that decisions on staff reductions had simply been 'rubber-stamped' by backbench councillors. Reinforcing such claims, another officer commented that non-portfolio holders 'follow the path that has been trodden for them by portfolio holders.'

Getting the balance right between generic and technical or specialist skills

One of the key themes of recent debates over workforce planning is the balance across an organisation of the range of appropriate generic or specialist skills. Indeed, recent studies have argued that future public servants will require a new set of relational skills and that generic leadership or managerial skills will become as significant as technical skills related to particular service domains.¹⁶

Some participants accepted such arguments. They framed their support for generic skills within the general demand to move away from management to leadership, with claims that managers remained primarily technocratic or specialist managers with 'the other stuff bolted on.' As suggested above, this particular relegation of leadership function was seen to emerge in part from providing cover for day-to-day running of services. In fact, it was repeatedly argued that there was a need for managers to become more generic if councils were going to be transformational and more efficiency-oriented.

Yet, other participants rejected outright or downplayed such claims to the appropriateness of generic skills over technical skills and to the need for new skills or types of managers. As one chief executive commented: 'these things are overstated. I have worked in local government for more than forty years now and I recognise each of those [relational and generic] roles [...] as being in place during that time. We might not have given them those names, we might only have had only a few of any one to those at any particular time, and they might only have been in some parts of local government at any particular time... But those skills have been there.' As such, the challenge for local leaderships becomes the persistent challenge of achieving the appropriate balance of skills across local councils; austerity simply changes the context within which these challenges have to be worked out.

Another senior officer argued that specialist knowledge of service areas could

be a necessary component of effective leadership and visioning. The officer suggested that 'let's have generic managers... well, it all depends on what you are managing, there isn't one size fits all. I think that if you're managing an area that is largely administrative, you can do that, but managing an area that is highly technical, professional, [...] somebody has to lead. [...] I have deliberately resisted becoming too generic over the years. [...] when they [managers] are just interested in running a service, running a business, they lose that level of leadership, of vision.' Indeed, the officer continued that if 'people become generic managers, they forget the planner behind them, the engineer behind them [...] and they don't realise that actually you need some of both.'

Such interventions raised further questions of how far strategies of workforce planning should seek to deliver change across the whole workforce or focus on certain sections of the workforce in strategic positions. One senior officer summed up such positions, arguing that 'we will always need some people who just do the job. I don't mean that in a derogatory way, but how much discretion does a refuse collector really have, how much innovation can there be.' For this officer, the local council had everyday to deliver essential services such that 'our workforce ethos needs to accommodate that there are some things that need doing in almost exactly the same way every day every where.'

Driving forward a sense of place

Workforce planning for the local authority was widely interpreted as taking place as part of a complex assemblage of interdependent public and private organisations, district and county councils, shared services, health and social partnerships and so on. Each organisation was seen as being intrinsically tied to the workforce strategy of local councils. For some participants, the workforce strategy of the council had thus to move beyond its own organisational boundaries, formulated through a collaborative engagement with other networks of organisations in its locality. But, at the same time, it was recognised that these organisations were themselves hit by public spending cuts, such that 'there are multiple changes... all has got to resettle.' Failure to collaborate with these organisations, to take into account their workforce reductions, risked scuppering any plans by councils to deliver workforce change.

In fact, officer and elected members expressed repeatedly the mobilising narrative of place and local knowledge in relation to workforce planning. The local knowledge possessed by the council's workforce was determined to be a strategic advantage that had to be better used by the council. Frontline staff, it was acknowledged, possess a commitment to the locality, not least because for the most part they live in the area. It thus followed that workforce planning should

connect directly to the creation of a collective sense of place, which if successful improves in the medium to long-term the capacity of all local employers to attract into the area the required skills mix.

Equally, research participants were concerned that the strategic knowledge of the locality possessed by council employees was often being lost to other organisations. Whilst participants broadly agreed that councils have to engage in service transformation, there was nonetheless a concern that local knowledge and its sense of place, could not be diluted by any programme of restructuring.

Protecting staff development and providing new forms of reflective practice

Training budgets, it was broadly accepted, are often the first thing to go as councils move to counter austerity. Business managers spoke of their difficulties of maintaining staff development given the reductions in training budgets, and the increased pressures on teams simply to do the 'day job.' Training budgets for service teams had in some instances been reduced to as little as two to three hundred pounds.

But, at the same time, officers raised concerns that the context of perma-austerity has transformed the challenges for local authority employees without the necessary shift in training priorities. One senior officer with over 20 years of experience working in local authorities thus commented that many councils were 'training people to be like us' when the world of local government was being transformed in front of them. What was needed, in the eyes of this officer was more investment in engaging staff in coaching and mentoring relationships. Indeed, participants suggested that local councils required spaces of critical reflective practice in which staff could challenge established ways of working, as well as develop the emotional intelligence which was specifically required for delivering change under conditions of austerity.

But, as with so many other suggestions, there was, they widely acknowledged, simply not the time to do it given the increasing pressures on staff. Such pressures and budget limits on training were not divorced from concerns over a looming crisis of recruitment and retention.

Crisis of recruitment and retention

The politics of austerity had for research participants transformed recruitment and retention into a major challenge facing local authorities. Recruitment pressures are expected to worsen as the private sector job market improves, leaving councils unable to compete in terms of wages and working conditions. In fact, focus group participants collectively accepted that recruitment from the private

sector has become more difficult given the perceived differences in the rewards and the cultural standing of the public sector in the political context of austerity governance. However, participants recognised that local employment markets have their own specific economic dynamics, with geography also playing a role in the capacity of authorities to recruit from outside the locality.

Importantly, officers also raised fears of retention in the current climate. One officer bemoaned the departure of staff, commenting that 'we train them up and they leave to other posts'. In many ways, restructuring and the collapse of posts has taken away as many opportunities for career progression, particularly with the reduction in managerial posts. One interviewee thus remarked that some officers seeking promotion found opportunities so limited that 'it was like waiting to fill dead man's shoes'. At the same time, it was feared that councils risked through restructuring narrowing down the range and number of posts available to staff. One senior officer thus commented that 'the grading structure for jobs is beginning to get more compartmentalised.'

Of course, once again, research participants could not separate such issues over retention from the impact of spending cuts on constraining the ambitions and capabilities of authorities to undertake effective succession planning.

Yet staff reductions were not necessarily a problem for all participants. Some recognised that staff turnover was an opportunity to inject some movement into what was seen as a relatively 'stagnant' senior management pool. In such a scenario, staff reductions and challenges of retention were themselves transformed into opportunities to attract new people: there was little problem with losing people as long as authorities were able to attract the 'right people' into the organisation.

However, such narratives were challenged by the difficulties of ensuring new recruitment. In this context, therefore, research interviewees voiced concerns that whilst cutback management had led to voluntary severance schemes, early retirements and redundancies, the accompanying recruitment freezes and the layering of management teams has left the overall demographic profile of local government employees little changed – in other words, austerity has prevented a re-profiling of the local government workforce.

Wide differences in the perceptions of the role of trade unions

Across local authorities, trade unions have exercised a sizeable role in working with councils to mediate the impact of the inevitable staff reductions as a result of austerity, negotiating for example no-compulsory redundancy policies or collaborating on redeployment strategies. Yet, in interviews and focus groups, it was

striking how far trade unions were often perceived as being outside strategic debates across councils over workforce planning. This is not to argue that their role and organisational contribution were not widely recognised and indeed valued. Trade unions were seen as offering valuable support and guidance to individual workers. But, the loss of jobs across local government and the wider public sector had, it was argued, weakened the role, or perhaps the visibility, of trade unions. A number of research participants suggested that trade unions were not engaged consistently in strategic discussions over the future of the authority and its workforce. They did not, however, offer any consistent reason for what they deemed to be a constrained role for trade unions (apart from perceptions of a drop in membership levels). Significantly, how far council leaderships looked to build such strategic relationships with trade unions was not commented upon.

Harvesting skills from the private sector and the public

Recruiting staff from the private sector is commonly advanced as a means of shifting the culture of local authorities, bringing into councils a more commercial and risk-taking organisational culture. Indeed, one common scenario is that of managers shifting from working in local authorities to the private sector, and back again, a number of times during their careers.

Focus group participants and interviewees recognised that recruitment from outside local authorities can bring in new skills and logics to councils. However, such capacities to bring about change very much depend on the individuals recruited and their position within organisational structures. At the same time, officers were keen to point out that the culture of the public sector stands in marked contrast with that of the private sector such that the two are not necessarily compatible. One officer commented that comparison of the public and private sector was like 'comparing apples with oranges', not least because the public sector ethos of a needs-led approach rubs up against the private sector bias towards profit-maximisation.

More forcefully, one senior executive argued that any movement from the private sector into local authorities was best interpreted as a 'temporary situation' rather than a long-term trend. The departure of officers from local authorities to work in private companies was in part due to the reductions in local authority workforces and the transfer of posts into the private sector through, for example, outsourcing of service delivery. Importantly, the officer predicted that over time posts, and indeed services, transferred to the private sector would become more and more commercially driven and 'public sector values will be lost to those areas of activity'. Importantly, these comments did not undermine collective agreement among research participants that councils should seek to engage in new

forms of income generation and commercialisation within the local authorities themselves.

Where more support was evidenced for harvesting skills from other sectors was in terms of working with local communities and volunteers. Austerity had led to calls among research participants for new understandings of the relationship with communities. In short, there was a renewed openness to working with communities, with one officer pointing out that ‘volunteers are better than us at times [at delivering services].’ Another senior officer argued that ‘traditionally, we defended what we did, now we are asking communities.’

Overall, therefore, the experience of working at the frontline of austerity has amplified the uncertainties facing the local workforce and workforce planning. Spending reductions under conditions of perma-austerity have led to council employees at all levels experiencing the pressures of overloaded responsibilities and demands. These demands have in particular constrained the capabilities of business managers and senior officers to undertake the developmental and/or strategic duties associated with their roles. At the same time, workforce reductions have weakened the strategic capabilities of local councils, with increasing recognition of the loss of experienced and often specialist practitioners, as well as potential crises of recruitment and retention, competition from other sectors for local workers, and fears over the impact of reduced training budgets on staff development.

However, there was equally among participants broad buy-in for organisational change and transformation. Councils, it was recognised, had to shift embedded thinking and practices in workforce planning. Research participants repeatedly drew attention to the need to put in place new processes to manage change, to generate new forms of distributed leadership across authorities, and to shift the focus of debate onto the future skills needed by councils.

In fact, one senior officer saw local authorities as ‘playing catch up’ in terms of the shifting political, economic and social context. But, as the officer pointed out, this was always the case for local authorities. Indeed, there were voices among participants that suggested that the challenges of workforce planning were long established, even if spending reductions had radically shifted the context within which such challenges had to be addressed. In other words, workforce planning has always led authorities to predict future skills needs and to up-skill their workforce in the required areas. Proponents of such arguments expressed reservations towards narratives that promoted the need for new skillsets or for public servants of the future to focus on new practices and behaviours. As the senior officer remarked: ‘there isn’t anything new in this. It is a question of emphasis, it is a question of balance, it is a question of having the right skills sets at

the right times in the right point of the organisation. But, then I would say that it has always been like that.'

However, within the current context of austerity governance, increased pressures on the local authority workforce and with forces for change and stability at play, how might we arrive at such a balance? It is to this question that we now turn, taking the ethos of the ensuring council as the frame within which we inform the way forward for local councils.

The ethos of the Ensuring Council

The Ensuring Council¹⁷ acts as a steward of local communities and place. It promotes the democratic legitimacy of local authorities, and grounds decision-making in politics and collective dialogue over public value. It endorses and supports collaboration with citizens and external stakeholders. And, it acknowledges the responsibilities of local government for advancing social justice through its strategic mobilisation of public employment and civic entrepreneurship.

As an active steward, the Ensuring Council works to deliver the convergence of economic, social and environmental well-being of local communities. In the language of Anthony Giddens, it takes a holistic view which breaks down silos and organisational fragmentation to reap the benefits of the 'positive overlaps' between issues.¹⁸ For example, it will tackle issues in the round such that its interventions to address climate change will be linked inextricably to positive outcomes for social justice and business competitiveness.

This ethos of the Ensuring Council marries with what we name a pragmatic adversarial approach to public leadership. Fundamentally, this perspective builds from the recognition that the art of leadership rests on generating spaces for practitioners and stakeholders to come together to explore their different positions and construct in the process alternative rules, values and spaces in, and through which, they can collaborate locally. In other words, this perspective recognises the existence of conflicts between different local actors, but seeks to create spaces in which stakeholders come together as honest and open adversaries with legitimate rights, grievances and demands. In this way, it recognises politics by seeking to work with conflict to deliver temporary policy settlements that are open to renegotiation and contestation.¹⁹

Recommendations: ensuring the local workforce

Map workforce planning against the strategic vision for the authority

Workforce planning should not take place in a vacuum or become mired in short-term incremental adjustments to the status quo. It has to be driven by the strategic vision for the authority and the 'real world' pressing problems facing local communities. This requires consistent political and professional leadership, which communicates workforce planning across the authority and scrutinises how decisions and changes over the local workforce impact on the core principles of the political vision for the authority.

This may require new forms of engagement between officers and elected members, both frontbench and backbench. Indeed, the role of elected members in relation to workforce planning may have to be clarified in some authorities. In these instances, councils should assess how far there are organisational spaces, which facilitate the development of a critical dialogue and challenge to the strategic objectives of workforce planning.

Adopt a holistic approach to workforce planning as part of an ethos of stewardship

Workforce planning should be seen as an essential policy instrument for local authorities. Employees are one of the key organisational resources at the disposal of local authorities.²⁰ Workforce planning should thus be guided by, or intrinsically linked to, the council's ethos of stewardship, such that workforce planning considers how the impact of employment patterns advances local economic growth, social justice within local communities, as well as advancing local employability, jobs and skills and a sustainable environment.

For example, local apprenticeship schemes can meet local skills need but can also drive forward social change, whilst investment in the municipalisation of energy can deliver employment and broader community and environmental benefits.

View the authority as a 'network orchestrator'²¹ bringing resources together as part of the stewardship of place

Workforce strategy cannot be determined in isolation from other local actors, be it other local authorities, -the NHS, police, local employers or voluntary and community groups. Indeed, the authority is best placed to act as a 'network

orchestrator' bringing together different resources from other organisations to forge a collective and local response to the demands of local workforces. As one officer noted, a local authority cannot 'do it on its own and neither can anyone else do it on its own. It requires a similar way of looking at things from the CCG, from the rest of the NHS, from the County Council, from the police, from the DWP, from everyone...' In fact, workforce planning for local government is increasingly a misnomer and might be better seen as joint workforce planning for communities of place and the public sector. Attempts to move towards such joint workforce planning have taken place in the past, and whilst spending reductions might add to the complications of such an exercise, collaborative workforce planning has arguably to be reconsidered. To some extent this is evidenced by the approaches taken to integrate health and social care, working over the organisational boundaries between the NHS and local government.

Recognise the value of public employment and the limits of outsourcing

Outsourcing of public services to private or third sector organisations has become the dominant narrative of the organisation of hard-pressed public services in search of efficiencies. However, it is increasingly seen as a 'socially wasteful and administratively inefficient', allowing profit-taking without risk to the cost of the workforce and taxpayer, and exposing service delivery to financialised practices.²² Indeed, outsourcing challenges the core capacities of the authority; it puts workforce planning at arms-length from the council and removes a key policy instrument from the armoury of local councils; and, not only that, it does not necessarily lead to productivity gains. In a recent study of increasing productivity in the public sector, outsourcing is characterised as a 'bad' strategy, as opposed to a 'good' or 'useless' strategy, as it actively harms over time the productivity of the public sector.²³ Among other things, outsourcing breaks up collaborative efforts to produce innovations as it 'freezes' services over long periods of time through contract specifications, and can therefore leave contractors able to focus on reducing workforce costs to drive up margins and ultimately profits rather than gaining from service innovations. Retaining the workforce in-house, as part of a holistic view to workforce planning, offers opportunities to mobilise further the organisational resources of the council to deliver change; ultimately, therefore, this approach can maximise the opportunities for the local authority to gain from service innovation, reduced costs and a reskilled or more agile workforce.

Use workforce planning to drive forward cultural change

Many of the challenges facing workforce reductions in local government were framed as issues of change management and leadership. Whilst workforce plan-

ning should rightly focus on people and services it should be integrated to service innovations and transformation, for example the skills needed if new equipment or processes are brought into play. More importantly, the strategic direction of travel in workforce planning has to be communicated to managers and frontline workers, from the strategic apex of the organisation down to the operating core delivering everyday services to the community. In part, this requires new forms of leadership as storytelling, which communicate strategic objectives and visions for the authority down through the organisation, although such stories have to be seen as authentic and thus accompanied with appropriate changes to organisational practices.

More broadly, this can demand a cultural change in workforce planning which rests on developing the skills of reflective practice and bring the strategic into everyday practices, in ways that create spaces for frontline staff to question the effectiveness of existing policies and to communicate upwards (in line with the engagement of elected members).

Facilitate frontline innovation and commercialisation strategies

All council workforces will ultimately demand a multiplicity of roles to be undertaken. Pragmatically, not all local government employees will necessarily have the spaces or opportunities to engage in innovation such as upstream prevention or commercialisation strategies. However, in an age of austerity, the conditions to enable the workforce to lead innovation and income generation opportunities have to be in place. In part this may require the cultural shifts discussed above, but it also requires councils to grapple with how they can seek to incentivise and reward such behaviours. Safeguards to ensure the public sector ethos of activities can be put in place, for example through social pricing on charging policies. But the elephant in the room remains the issue of how far services can invest or reinvest part of the savings from innovation or of the monies from new forms of income generation activities. If a service delivers on an efficiency agenda, is it able to reinvest these resources?

Move towards collaborative teams centred on 'grand problems'

Pressures on the workforce should drive the rethinking of organisational structures. There have been numerous recommendations over the years to breakdown local authority departmental silos and functional roles. Such structures, one officer commented, end up 'leading the game [decision-making]' as they produce vested interests. With this in mind, authorities should consider re-assessing their organisational structures and re-consider the development of

project teams, sharing resources targeted at particular policy priorities. Such re-organisation can go hand-in-hand with moves away from hierarchical leadership, suggesting a challenge to the ‘presumption that senior is best, rather than the best set of competences.’ It also responds to the ethos of the Ensuring Council in terms of seeking to develop convergence across the policy challenges facing local authorities.

These initiatives can lead to shared services or to shared appointments, as well as new balances between generic and technical skills across teams. For example, authorities have already recognised that where there are multiple agencies working with the same individuals then bringing these teams together under a ‘lead worker’ with generic leadership skills in an interdisciplinary team can improve outcomes. Equally, public realm teams can deliver more joined-up working between street cleansing, grounds maintenance and green spaces, although it is recognised that many councils, whilst engaging in whole area approaches through collaborative measures, have also been at pains to retain core or specialist skills sets in these areas.

Recognise the limits of planning and foresight

Workforce planning has to be grounded ultimately in politics and managed risk. Of course, futureproofing and skills audits offer a way of contesting decisions and informing new ways of learning. But, workforce planning is an exercise in the art of ‘puzzling’ and political learning. Narrow comparisons of authority staffing levels for example should trigger discussion across authorities, but their relevance ultimately rests on the political vision of the future of the authority. In other words, evidence has to be in place, but it also has to be put in its place. Evidence cannot replace political leadership and the willingness to manage risks.

Forge strategic partnerships with trade unions

It was evident from interviews and focus groups that there are wide differences in the level of engagement with trade unions on workforce planning at a more strategic level; in other words workforce planning that goes beyond the important but narrower focus of staffing changes/reductions and ‘case work’ support for employees.

However, engaging with trade unions in an Ensuring Council context provides scope to explore the future skills needed by the local authority, how the workforce can act as a catalyst for change and work collaboratively as a platform for innovation in service delivery.

Take for example the delivery of service transformation and the alleged productivity gains and cost reductions of digitalisation. This innovation, like many others,

calls for collaborative working on how new service demands can be aligned with the necessary human resources, not least the skills set of the workforce, the potential for retraining and development opportunities, and the assessment of where resources could be better deployed in a changing environment. Under such conditions, it is imperative that engaging frontline employees on the vision, direction and delivery of the Ensuring Council should be matched against the commitment to work collaboratively with trade unions at a strategic level.

Continue to invest in training and skills development

Having an effective training and skills development programme for employees is an integral component of workforce planning. Local authorities should therefore resist the temptation to reduce funding for learning and development opportunities, which can too often be seen as ‘low-hanging fruit’ that can be easily withdrawn in times of austerity budgeting. In fact, cutting budgets for training and skills development can be demoralising for the workforce and a false economy, undermining the very delivery of the wider objectives of the Ensuring Council. Continuing to invest in apprenticeships, both by directly employing apprentices and encouraging other local services and businesses to do so, should thus be seen as part of a broader strategy of local councils to address youth unemployment, local skills shortages and trigger economic growth and resilience.²⁴

Equally, having set ‘gold standards’ for training and career paths, often through specialist services such as highways engineering, arboriculture and construction services it is important that these features are not lost through austerity budgeting. Being able to ‘grow your own’ in terms of the workforce of the future can be both cost effective and transformational as skills can be geared towards future needs.

Conclusions

This exploratory study has sought to marshal the views of frontline staff on the opportunities and challenges of workforce planning under austerity. It calls for elected members and officers to continue to recognise workforce planning as one of the key strategic tools in the armoury of the Ensuring Council, its stewardship of place and reshaping of public services.

Effective workforce planning can help to future-proof public service delivery by opening up a collective dialogue about the future shape and scope of public service, and the role of local employees and communities. It can improve the flexibility and resilience of local authority responses to the changing demands of communities and local businesses, as well as ensuring that support is provided at times of crisis or emergency, be it flooding or the closure of a leading local employer.

At the same time, workforce planning underpins the delivery of staff training, and the skills building and capacity development that are essential to deliver effective public services. Indeed, the Ensuring Council should embrace its role in setting sector-leading standards in employment practices, training and staff development. It should reinvigorate where appropriate trade union and employee engagement in workforce planning, ensuring trade union involvement in the strategic dialogue over the future of the council. In leading such dialogues, the Ensuring Council will recognise and reflect in workforce planning the strategic advantages of retaining local capacity within the workforce to make positive interventions as stewards of local areas. After all, its employees are its 'eyes and ears' and its ambassadors for change.

Endnotes

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