



Scrutiny Task and Finish Group: Review into Recruitment and Retention of Staff

May 2025

Foreword

As Chair of this Scrutiny Working Group, I would like to thank Lisa Boland, Annette Groark and others who work in the HR Department for providing us with the information and answering our questions. It is clear that Blaby District Council have a conscientious and hard-working HR team who are doing their best to maintain a high standard of service delivery.

Thanks also to the Managers who volunteered their time to give valuable insights and experiences. All members agreed this was important. I would like to see similar insights for other working groups.

It is acknowledged the first part of this report is historical and reflects the start of investigations back in 2022 with data from 2021. Revisiting the subject in 2024 it is noted that changes have been implemented.

We wish to make this report a positive one, and in doing so provide recommendations that help with the recruitment and retention of what we can all agree on is our biggest asset, our staff.



Cllr. Neil Wright
Chairman of the Scrutiny Task and Finish Group 2024/25

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1. Working Group Membership

- Cllr. Neil Wright - Chairman
- Cllr. Nick Brown
- Cllr. Janet Forey
- Cllr. Richard Holdridge
- Cllr. Mark Jackson
- Cllr. Ande Savage
- Cllr. Tracey Shepherd
- Cllr. Mike Shirley
- Cllr. Matt Tomeo

Acknowledgement and thanks go to Sam Maxwell (Scrutiny Commissioner 2020-2023) who chaired this task and finish group and began this review.

Officers

Our thanks and acknowledgement are extended to Lisa Boland (Transformation and ICT Group Manager) and Annette Groark (HR Services Manager) who attended meetings and provided information on recruitment practices, new initiatives and data on staff turnover.

The Scrutiny Task and Finish Group would also like to place on record thanks to the Managers who volunteered their time to attend a meeting to provide their own evidence and experiences in recruitment and retention of their teams. Their names will remain anonymous throughout this report.

2. Scope of Work and Key Areas of Examination

Summary

The Scrutiny task and finish group's interest in examining recruitment and retention practices at the Council developed when a staff update was presented to Scrutiny Commission in October 2022. The following points were of concern to Members:

- Overall sickness absence had increased, so had Mental Health Sickness Absence figures increased. (August 2022 – 2.27%, 0.44% for mental health sickness)
- Workplace Health Needs Assessment –the latest staff survey undertaken was in March/April 2022, where staff had recorded increased levels of stress and decreased wellbeing overall since the last survey. An action plan was being developed to understand this feedback in more detail particularly around:
 - Symptoms and or diagnosis.
 - Causes/factors.
 - Support staff feel they would benefit from. Members requested to view the action plan being developed.
- Increased contact by staff using the Employee Assistance Programme.
- Current mental health support in place and planned initiatives.
- Agile working and the impact of flexible working and remote working on staff.
- Recruitment and retention of staff, Members considered staff turnover and exit surveys, mental health first aiders, models of supervision, staff benefits and team building.

A decision was taken to establish a scrutiny task and finish group to examine the report in more detail. The Scrutiny Vice-Chair at the time, Cllr. Sam Maxwell and members of the task and finish group decided the scope of the work would be considered in two parts:

Part 1: Recruitment and Retention of Staff

Members were concerned at the levels of turnover of staff and losing expertise from the Council. Members were informed of challenges of recruiting to some roles and were keen to find out more. The scope for the meeting was set out as below:

- a) Staff Turnover
 - For 2021/2022 staff turnover was 15.8% (up from 10.21% 2020/21).
 - Similar turnover rates (14%-16%) were reported by other Districts for 2021/22.
 - Exit surveys indicated a variety of reasons for leaving across the Council.
- b) Recruitment
 - The recruitment environment has changed significantly in recent years.
 - During Covid the Council received up to 10x the normal number of applications for vacancies.
 - Since the start of 2022, application numbers and quality of them has generally decreased.

- Some roles have proven more difficult to appoint to.
- c) Actions for Scrutiny:
- Reviewing local, national and sector/specialist trends.
 - Reviewing staff benefits/incentives.
 - Focus on retention (considering key roles).
 - Reviewing attraction/recruitment methods.
- d) Evidence required from HR:
- An update on recruitment trends over the last 6-12 months.
 - Recruitment process.
 - Some sample job adverts.
 - Benchmarking data on pay in Leicestershire.
 - Data on reasons why staff have left.
 - Review of staff benefits.
- e) Evidence required from Service Managers:
- Experiences of recruiting to their teams.
 - Challenges in recruiting to specialist jobs.
 - What could (if anything) have been done to retain staff.

Part 2: Workplace Health Needs Assessment

Scoping of this part is yet to commence with current Members, but from initial discussions this work will examine:

- Current days lost to sickness including a breakdown of how many lost to stress and mental health issues.
- How are managers supported?
- What support is provided to staff?
- A timeline of when the next Workplace Health Needs Assessment or Staff Survey or similar is planned.

Recommendation 1 – That Scrutiny be provided with a date or timeline of when the next Workplace Health Needs Assessment or Staff Survey is planned.

Peer Review 2022

In March 2022 the Local Government Association (LGA) conducted a peer review of the Council. Overall, the results of the peer review were positive, but highlighted some areas for improvement:

Capacity for Improvement		
	Recommended Action	Translated
20	Consider how to re-introduce managerial and leadership development and support to assist proactive and committed employees' progress, as well as enabling existing managers to take more responsibility to address issues in their teams, maybe as part of service planning.	Leadership development plan implemented.
21	Consider how to strengthen 'succession planning' to encourage a 'grow our own' approach to staff development.	Agree an approach to recruitment, retention, and succession planning.
22	Consider how, with Leicestershire council partners, job opportunities can be created to at least share and retain their skills within the county, as well as within the council.	No further context required.
23	Provide clear corporate policy and guidance on 'hybrid' working.	Provide clear corporate policy and guidance on 'Hybrid' Working'.
24	ICT provision and policy needs to be fit for purpose, especially regarding officers and members working as effectively as possible in flexible, hybrid and remote ways as required – both within and outside council buildings.	ICT strategy in place and agreed.
25	Increase focus on internal enablers, such as ICT, HR, OD, and Comms and review its HR and OD provision to ensure sufficient capacity and resilience to deliver what will be required.	Review of our HR function.
26	Increase reminders and encouragement to take up the council's wellbeing offer and consider ways to create space for staff to think about, improve and shape future services.	Review of mental health support.

Members were keen to follow up on both the action plan resulting from the Workplace Health Needs Assessment but also supporting the Council in its review of the HR function.

This project was paused in the run up to the District election taking place in May 2023, to allow new Members capacity to attend induction programme events, including Scrutiny training. There were also significant changes to the membership of this task and finish group, with the Chair of the group, Cllr Sam Maxwell stepping down from her role as Councillor.

Following a scrutiny work programme review in 2024, the new Chairman and Vice-Chairman of Scrutiny Commission prioritised to conclude this work, with Cllr. Neil Wright chairing this project, with new refreshed Members.

Scope and Areas of Examination

At its first meeting, Members reviewed the scope and considered the actions taken by previous Members. Due to the time that had lapsed from previous meetings in 2022-23, it was agreed that scrutiny required current data to consider any changes to trends that had previously been reported.

Members also considered the Corporate Action Plan to ascertain where the focus for 'people' lay. The Peer Review Feedback report had found that the Council had a good reputation as an employer and many staff have worked at the Council for a significant period because it is good place to work. Others joined from other local authorities, in part due to the Council's positive reputation.

Members considered that it was important to interview Service Managers to provide their own views on recruitment and retention, including any remit for positive change.

Areas of Examination:

1. Member to consider current workforce profile, including staff turnover for the previous 3 years.
2. Job Evaluation - examine the job evaluation process and whether managers are given autonomy to set competitive pay.
3. Recruitment:
 - Recruitment processes and methods used to recruit, including headhunting and the use of external agencies.
 - Sample of job adverts/job descriptions.
 - Testing the online job application process.
4. Annual Progress Review (Appraisals) – examining the new process introduced by the HR Service, including how learning and development needs resulting from reviews are managed. Completion rates of the new review form, including feedback from officers.
5. Exit Survey – examine the reasons why staff resign, format of the survey and questions asked, how is the survey carried out, how is the data used, is it fed back to Managers. Who carries out the survey and are all leavers invited to take part in the survey.
6. Benefits:
 - Benefits provided to staff, including flexible working policy and how many requests for flexible working have been received in the last year.
 - Annual Leave – how many days are provided, how is it comparable to neighbouring authorities, does it increase for any employees, e.g. long serving employees, data on how many employees buy/carry over annual leave.
7. Fixed Term Contracts – how many employees are on these contracts including average length of contract. Data on how many contracts ended early as the employee had left before the contract expired – impact on the service.
8. Apprenticeship Scheme – examining the current scheme including any outreach work with schools/colleges.
9. Human Resources Service – current structure of the team including a brief description of each employee's role. When is the next Staff Survey/Workplace Health Assessment due to be issued.

3. Methodology

The Scrutiny Task and Finish Group considered presentations from the HR Service Manager and Transformation Group Manager, who provided most of the data considered by Members. The Task and Finish Group also requested benchmarking data of levels of annual leave provided by all Leicestershire Councils.

A key part of this work, which the task and finish group Members found insightful was considering evidence from Service Managers. All Service Managers were invited to a meeting of the task and finish group to provide their own experiences of:

- Recruitment
- Annual Progress Reviews
- Exit Surveys and Leaver Feedback
- Staff Benefits
- Apprenticeship Scheme
- Fixed Term Contracts

Members were keen to stress that any feedback provided would remain anonymous to ensure that employees felt comfortable in providing evidence to Scrutiny.

Three Service Managers attended the meeting, with two Managers having provided separate verbal and written evidence. Evidence from Service Managers has been summarised in each section of the report.

The Chairman, Cllr. Neil Wright also took this opportunity to complete an online job application to test user experience.

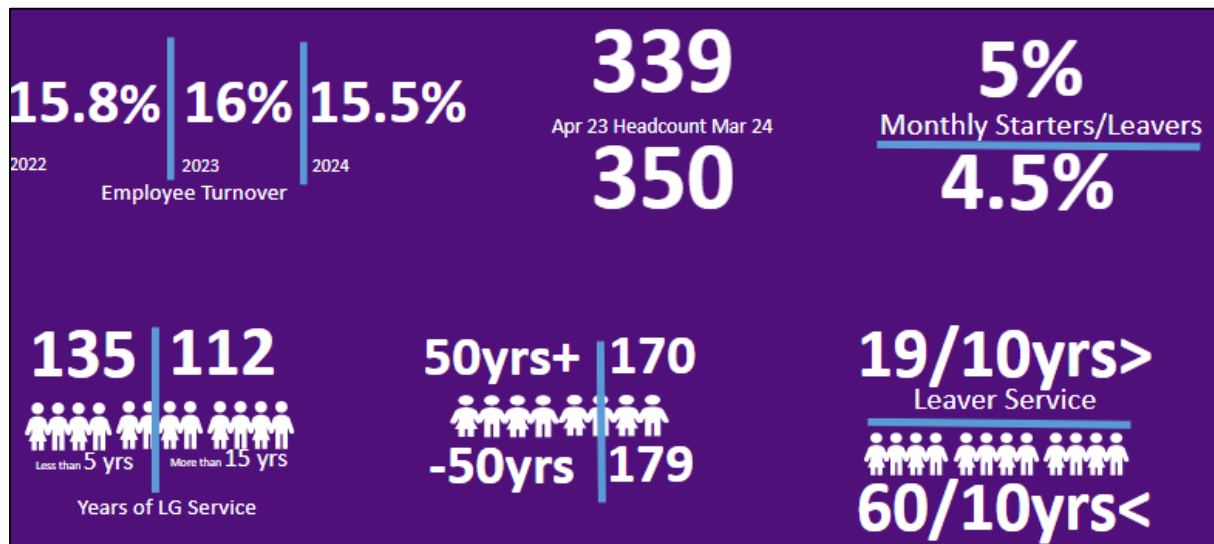
Members also considered a case study from West Berkshire Council who experimented with the use of generative AI to focus on data driven decision-making and automation to improve efficiency.

Throughout 2024/25 the Scrutiny Task and Finish Group has met 5 times to consider and examine the scope, receive presentations from officers in Human Resources, interview Service Managers and conclude this work.

4. Evidence and Findings

1. Workforce Profile

Members considered the workforce profile data on 1 October 2024, they noted that employee turnover, although quite high was steady and in some parts, comparable with other local authorities. There was an increase of staff leaving the authority following Covid, mainly senior, more experienced staff who were in a position to take early retirement.



Source: presentation to members by HR Services Manager and Transformation Group Manager (1 October 2024).

Members noted that at the time of the meeting, 350 employees were employed by the Council; 60 new starters out of 85 were below the age of 50. Millennials and Gen Z

were difficult to retain, it was noted that many did remain in their chosen career/sector when they resigned from the Council.

2. Job Evaluation

Members heard that the job evaluation process is largely carried out on newly created roles in the organisation or when an existing role has significantly changed. The HR team work with line managers to evaluate the post using the Gauge+ system.

Working in collaboration with the Trade Unions had led to developing new job descriptions, which in turn had been through the job evaluation process. Members noted that managers were required to make a case for amending pay.

3. Recruitment

Following the resignation of an employee, the following tasks must be completed by the recruiting line manager and the designated Human Resources Advisor:

	Role:	Task:
1.	Line manager	Line manager sets the employee as a 'leaver' on the Council's iTrent system and sends the resignation letter to HR.
2.	Human Resources	HR will then write to the employee to acknowledge the resignation and inform the line manager of any outstanding or overtaken annual leave
Replacement/new role process		
3.	Recruiting Manager	The manager discusses replacement/new role with HR Advisor and checks whether the job description and job advert is accurate.
4.	Human Resources	HR and recruiting manager carry out a job evaluation of the role if there have been substantial changes to the duties of the role or if it is a new role.
5.	Service Manager	Once a pay scale has been finalised via the Council's Gauge+ system the Service Manager will check the budget and add the vacancy to the SLT spreadsheet for approval.
6.	Group Manager	The Group Manager feeds back the agreed action from SLT to the recruiting manager.
7.	Recruiting Manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ The manager will revisit the job description and person specification to make any minor changes and send to HR Advisor. ○ The manager will complete the Vacancy Approval Form and add to the form whether any specialist advertising publications should be considered in addition to the standard.
8.	Human Resources	HR will review the final job description, person specification and advert for accuracy.

9.	Human Resources	HR will approve the Vacancy Approval Form, which may be escalated to HR Services Manager if there are issues or concerns that cannot be resolved or sit outside of policy and practice. HR Advisor will then send details to the HR Team Assistant for advertising.
<i>Managers should allow 5 working days before the job is advertised.</i>		
10.	Human Resources	Vacancy will be advertised by HR, ideally giving minimum 2 weeks advertising time. iTrent will send notifications to the recruiting manager when the job is LIVE. Completed application forms and necessary paperwork (shortlisting grid) are sent to the recruiting manager once vacancy closes.
11.	Recruiting Manager	Manager decides who will be on their shortlisting panel. Once application forms have been received the panel completes shortlisting exercise. Shortlisting can be carried out together or separately with an aim to come up with a list of candidates to interview. During the shortlisting process, the recruiting manager should check for disabilities/veterans/reservists and any special arrangements on the application form. Completed forms are scanned and sent back to HR. Manager should consider whether an assessment is required and ensure details are sent to HR within a reasonable timeframe if the candidates need to prepare.
12.	Human Resources	HR will email shortlisted candidates with interview details.
13.	Recruiting Manager	Manager should make interview room arrangements and prepare interview paperwork.
14.	Human Resources	HR will confirm attendance prior to the interview with the manager.
15.	Recruiting Manager	Manager completes Right to Work checks during the interview stage. (This change has been implemented to reduce the time it would take to appoint a candidate, and to meet our green agenda. It also provides a better customer experience). Right to Work Checks include obtaining the original documents e.g. passport or full birth certificate at the interview and taking a copy, signing and dating the copy confirming the documents have been seen and a true copy. The verified copy is then sent to HR to be placed on file.

		All interview documents should be scanned and sent to HR for all interviewees. HR retains a central copy so all copies can be destroyed in confidential waste bins.
16.	Recruiting Manager	<p>The recruiting manager informs the successful candidate via phone and advises them of the salary (first scale point of the band, unless exceptional circumstances in which case the manager should liaise with the HR Advisor)</p> <p>Non-successful candidates should be informed via email or phone call. (Templates provided). Managers should complete the Recommendation to Appoint form giving a lead time of 6 weeks (lead time for start date). This gives sufficient time for pre-employment checks to be completed.</p> <p>Managers should request the relevant IT equipment at the earliest stage, to ensure the new employee has equipment when they start their role.</p>
17.	Human Resources	HR will send out the offer letter, health questionnaire, obtain references and arrange for DBS to be completed if required.
18.	Line manager	A start date should be confirmed with the successful candidate and details sent to HR.
19.	Human Resources	<p>Prior to the new employee's start date, the manager should consider what their first day, week and first month should look like. An Induction Checklist should be completed to ensure all relevant information is given to the employee.</p> <p>Probation – managers should ensure that probation review dates are added to the diary to ensure conversations are taking place and ensure any support/training needs are discussed.</p> <p>Corporate Induction – new starters should be encouraged to book onto a corporate induction session.</p>

Source: Recruitment Procedure – 2023

Members questioned the HR Manager and Transformation Group Manager on new recruitment practices and initiatives.

Members were provided with a sample of recent job adverts used to recruit to the new ICT Service. As the ICT Service required specialised, technical roles, different methods of recruitment were explored, and Members were pleased to note that vacancies were recruited to successfully.

Members learned of a new initiative where the HR Service, including other local authorities are working with East Midlands Councils (EMC) to improve recruitment and retention across Leicestershire. Subject to a small fee, each authority will take turns to visit recruitment fairs and receive promotional printing and advertising. The initiative is in its early stages and is too early to realise any successes. One of the key challenges will be ensuring that the Council is not overlooked for any key posts by any other authorities.

Members were also informed of the Jobs Fair, providing attendees with the opportunity to learn about vacancies available at the Council and connect with local employers and organisations who have vacancies or can offer career guidance.

Members heard that the Jobs Fair, to date, had a low-level *success rate for the Council, (*the number of people successfully recruited as a direct result of the fair).

The HR Manager added that a check and review of the language used in social media posts would be carried out. Members encouraged the HR Manager to also review how the Jobs Fair was advertised.

Recommendation 2 – That a review of the Jobs Fair be carried out to ensure that it reaches its full potential.

Feedback from Service Managers

Managers commented on the Blaby Jobs Fair, where HR has requested Service Managers attendance to provide information about vacancies in their service, to attendees. Attendance from staff has been limited, they felt the Jobs Fair hasn't been given enough focus or attention.

Members asked if the Jobs Fair had attended secondary school/college open days to 'sell' Blaby as an employer. Managers responded that in their opinion, there is not enough capacity in the HR team to attend these events. There are several open days/recruitment events at Leicestershire Universities. The Council was in a unique position to be in the vicinity of good universities and Managers felt that opportunities had been lost to promote it.

When questioned about their own experiences of recruitment, Service Managers commented that carrying out the recruitment exercise was quite intensive and required clearing several days from their work calendar to prepare for shortlisting and interview.

Managers also provided feedback on documents provided from HR to support them in the recruitment process, adding that they were difficult to use, examples were provided of various spreadsheets, and shortlisting forms that required re-formatting before use. Scrutiny was provided with plenty of feedback on the application form and the completed application forms managers receive.

The application form is very outdated with some applicants having given feedback on it, adding that it was difficult to use and required several attempts to login and complete various sections. When Managers received completed application forms, the formatting of the document, made it difficult to read, Managers suggested these issues could be overcome by reviewing the IT system used, with options where

forms, once completed by the applicant, are immediately circulated to the line manager and Human Resources.

Recommendation 3 – That the online job application form, including the completed form format be reviewed to ensure it is modernised and fit for purpose.

Recommendation 4 – That shortlisting and interview forms be reviewed to ensure they are user friendly and fit for purpose.

Managers also added that they were responsible for collating proof of education and right to work in the UK when attendees arrived for interview, which added to the burden of preparing for interviews, and required additional support from their teams to manage this aspect of the interviews.

Upon further questioning, Members were concerned to realise that unsuccessful candidates were not informed that they had failed to reach interview stage. It was accepted, that if you have not heard back from the Council, then to consider that you were not successful for interview. Members felt that this did not set a good example of the Council and may put off potential applicants from reapplying to other positions. Members consider that all applicants should receive a response from the Council if they are unsuccessful.

Recommendation 5 – That unsuccessful applicants receive a response from the Council.

Managers also added that they did not have access to key documents which would speed up the recruitment process, examples were given of the SLT Vacancy Management Spreadsheet, accessible only to SLT. The Spreadsheet is considered by SLT at their weekly meetings; however, Members were informed that steps have been taken to increase efficiency by responding back to managers as soon as possible.

Members questioned Service Managers about various recruitment methods they had experienced. The response was varied, with some Managers not being aware that others had trialled options not available or offered to them.

Managers should be given the option and flexibility to recruit to roles through CV's (Curriculum Vitae's) and covering letters, examples were provided of NHS applications forms which are based on personal experiences and essential criteria only. Scrutiny accepts this may not be an option for specific roles. Managers also added, they would prefer the opportunity to have a discussion or conversation with potential candidates.

Scrutiny noted that Managers were keen on having flexibility and options in recruiting to their teams. Most importantly, the Council ought to consider matching the recruitment process to the role.

Recommendation 6 – That Managers be given the opportunity and flexibility to consider which recruitment process suits the role they are recruiting to. Scrutiny considers this to be an increased use of CV's and covering letters

and simpler application forms where appropriate to match the recruitment process to the role.

Scrutiny was pleased to hear from Managers who said that their experiences of working with Human Resources was positive, the team are helpful, and they were agreeable to changes proposed. They felt they could 'own' the recruitment process.

When examples were provided of the ICT recruitment exercise, Managers commented that this was an exception to the norm, and the process should be used as a best practice tool to recruit at the Council.

Scrutiny is pleased to note a dedicated 'Jobs and Careers' webpage on the Council's website. It provides information on current vacancies, employee benefits, and guidance on applying. Scrutiny noted on the 'Guidance on Applying' webpage, that there are three documents which were very similar to each other. In order to avoid confusion for prospective applicants, Scrutiny recommends guidance notes are reviewed and combined into one document.

Recommendation 7 – That the 'Guidance on Applying' webpage be reorganised and guidance notes are combined into one document.

4. Exit Survey and Leavers Feedback

An exit survey is offered to staff who have resigned, it can be carried out face to face with the Chief Executive or Director or completed electronically.

Scrutiny learned that feedback from exit surveys is not provided to the line manager; it remains confidential. The results are anonymised and provided to SLT annually to consider.

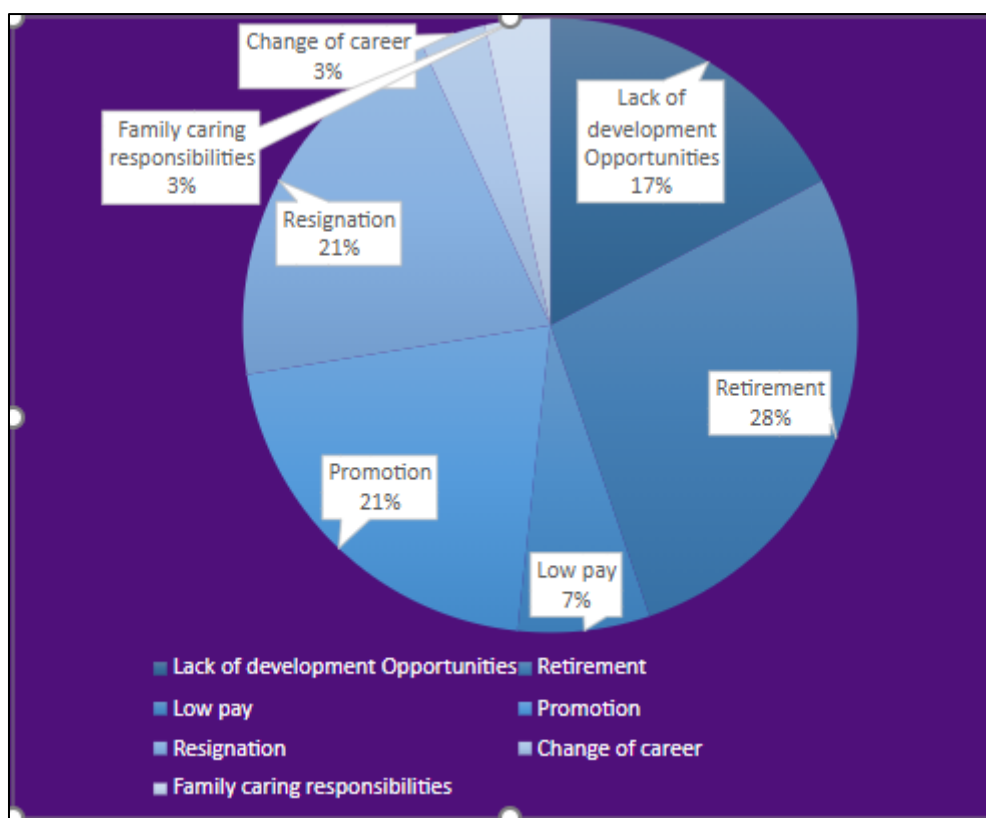
Scrutiny raised concerns that feedback from exit surveys is not provided to Managers. Members reflected on data provided to Scrutiny on the top 'dislikes' and 'likes' of working at the Council. The top dislikes were given as recognition, communication and development opportunities. Scrutiny questioned how managers are able to improve recognition and communication if feedback from exit surveys isn't communicated to them. It was recognised that development opportunities are not always available, but feedback should always be provided.

Members were pleased to note that the top likes for the authority were teamwork, job content and pride and commitment, which corresponded with the Council's 'Blaby Way' ethos.

Recommendation 8 – That exit survey feedback be provided to Group Managers to disseminate to line managers.

Recommendation 9 – That anonymised exit survey feedback be provided to Scrutiny Commission annually for consideration.

Reasons why employees left the authority were provided as below:



Members reflected on the reasons provided on why staff had resigned, the top reason being retirement, and the lowest change of career/family caring responsibilities.

When discussing methods to increase recognition and communication, Scrutiny was pleased to hear of the ‘Come and meet the team’ events and the positive feedback from staff on being able to meet colleagues in person from different services. Recognition will also be provided through quarterly ‘Blaby Matters’ meeting with staff. (Blaby Matters is a monthly organisational team meeting where updates are provided to staff from SLT).

Scrutiny noted only 31 out of 79 employees had completed the exit survey and suggested an incentive to complete it.

Members emphasised the importance of completing the survey and requests that Human Resources reviews how the survey is issued.

Recommendation 10 – That the exit survey process be reviewed, and all leavers be strongly encouraged to complete it.

Feedback from Service Managers

Managers responded that if legitimate feedback is provided to them from the survey, then they have an opportunity to review and reflect upon their service.

5. Pay and Benefits

Remuneration at all levels needs to attract and retain a high performing workforce while ensuring value for money. It is acknowledged by both Members and Officers that the Council is unable to pay or match high salaries due to public funding pressures.

The recently adopted Pay Policy Statement 2024/25 has a provision for the award of market supplements where:

'it can be shown that the salary levels of a job is having an adverse impact on the Council's ability to recruit and retain appropriate candidates/employees to a post. The award of such supplement is subject to the approval of the Directors and Chief Executive. Market supplements are awarded where appropriate and for temporary periods only.'

Members were provided with examples of roles that had been given market supplements to ensure the Council was able to successfully recruit.

Scrutiny noted annual leave levels provided by the Council:

Graded Posts	Annual leave
1-8	170.2 hours (23 days) leave, rising to 207.2 hours (28 days) after five years' continuous service with Local Government.
9 and above	192.4 hours (26 days) leave, rising to 229.4 hours (31 days) after five years' continuous service with Local Government.
Part time	An employee working on a part-time basis will receive a pro-rata annual leave entitlement based on the number of hours worked.

Source: Blaby District Council Leave Procedure 2023

Scrutiny was provided with benchmarking data from Leicestershire local authorities on levels on annual leave provided. The data showed that in comparison with other local authorities, the Council was towards the lower end of average.

Recommendation 11 – Scrutiny welcomes a review of annual leave provided to enhance the quality of the current benefits package.

Scrutiny notes the importance of the Flexible Working Policy, employees responded positively to changes to legislation brought in April 2024. The Council had a flexible working policy in operation prior to the legislation being introduced and many services work creatively where possible and where service needs allow. It is also one of the frequently asked questions at interviews by candidates. A new Hybrid Working Policy is currently being developed.

Current benefits available to employees are listed below:

Generous annual leave Between 24 and 29 days per year depending on your grade and length of service. Nine bank holidays/closure days on top of the annual leave.	Flexible working Including part-time working, job sharing, working from home, annualised or compressed hours. Flexi-time of up to two days per month.	Great location Cycle bays, electric car charging, free parking and electric bikes. Our offices are on bus routes and near Narborough train station.
Leisure centre memberships Free and discounted membership to our local leisure centres.	Staff wellbeing activities Join our monthly wellbeing walk, attend our wellbeing coffee morning or enjoy the peace of our office garden.	Staff support 24/7 access to free and confidential counselling and support for work, or home situations
Learning and development Gain skills, with access to funded post-entry training, apprenticeships and job shadowing.	Discounts Access to a range of local and national discounts on shopping, eating out, bus travel, health clubs and more.	Eye care scheme Contribution towards eye tests and glasses.
Local Government Pension Scheme Access to the Local Government Pension scheme	Family-friendly policies A range of family friendly policies including maternity, adoption, paternity and parental leave.	Volunteering scheme Opportunities to volunteer in the local community.

Source: [Recruitment Pack 2024](#)

Feedback from Service Managers.

Managers commented the Council needs to offer incentives to retain experienced staff. Rewards are weak compared with other Leicestershire authorities; it is generally accepted that the Council may have the lowest pay levels in Leicestershire. However, other local Leicestershire authorities may offer extra incentives such as increased leave.

Current pay scales did not match demand required, especially for high demand services such as planning and environmental health, but managers themselves had offered market supplements to attract the right candidates.

Annual leave levels are based on hierarchy, it is recognised and accepted that SLT will have increased annual leave, however some Managers maintained it should be fair and evenly distributed across the council. Higher levels of leave would offset against low levels of pay and would be an additional incentive for staff.

6. Annual Progress Review and Learning and Development

Annual Progress Reviews are an opportunity to allow the employee and line manager to discuss their contribution to the Council and how the corporate values relate to their role. It also allows employees to consider their goals and interests in the future, and what support and development will enable them to reach their full potential.

The new Annual Progress Review was launched April 2024, when considering the completion rates of the reviews in October 2024, Scrutiny was informed that 76% of reviews had been completed. This figure may have increased since then.

Scrutiny was provided with the Annual Progress Review Procedure and guidance for both the manager and employee.

Scrutiny was concerned to learn that once the review had been completed and uploaded onto the central iTrent system, no wider strategic or corporate review of any learning and development needs is carried out. Development opportunities, whether that is promotions or learning and development is also ranked as one of the three top dislikes given by staff leaving the authority. Reviewing key skills and qualifications corporately enables the authority to examine transferable skills, can improve resilience and provide internal recruiting opportunities, providing enhanced development opportunities to staff.

Recommendation 12 – That learning and development training needs are assessed corporately by the authority to deliver an efficient learning and development programme.

Members discussed training budgets; each service had a local training budget managed by the Service Manager. The training budget will vary by each service. Members questioned whether there was a central budget held by the authority and how much had been allocated to it. It was requested that the central training budget be sent to Scrutiny to consider.

Members questioned whether 360-degree appraisals were carried out. The 360-degree appraisal allows a gathering of views and opinions of colleagues and managers, which is then used to provide the employee with well-rounded, constructive feedback.

Some Members favoured this approach to improve a higher level of self-awareness, communication and workplace relationships.

Scrutiny considered that introducing 360-degree appraisals for managers will be a positive move at the Council to aid staff retention and improve communication.

Recommendation 13 – That 360-degree appraisals be introduced at the Council for Managers.

Feedback from Service Managers

Scrutiny was pleased to note that all Managers questioned by Members had completed the Annual Progress Reviews with their teams. They were all supportive

of the new form since it had been launched. Managers also carried out regular 1-2-1's with their team. The process for 1-2-1's was flexible, so each manager was able to structure them as appropriate.

When Members questioned managers if they would undertake a 360-degree appraisal, they all responded they would be supportive of this approach.

7. Apprenticeship Scheme

Scrutiny learned that four people had been enrolled on the current apprenticeship scheme at the Council. Members heard of some good examples of where this has worked well.

The Council was currently working with Leicester College to deliver the apprenticeship scheme, and applicants were required to have Grade 4 in GCSE Maths and English in order to apply.

Members raised concerns around the grade required to qualify, and that it seemed quite high for an apprenticeship scheme. Members were informed that this requirement was set by Leicester College. Members asked the HR Manager to question the college and find out if this was a national requirement set by Government, or a local decision made by the college.

Following further investigation, Scrutiny was pleased to note that apprentices without GCSE Grade 4 in Maths and/or English would study to this level or via a Functional Skills Level 2.

Members learned that apprentices tended to join services that could accommodate an apprentice and provide an adequate level of support required by the scheme set out by Leicester College. Many teams at the council were quite small and worked in a hybrid arrangement (both office and remote working), which did not suit the apprentice scheme.

Members noted that Local Government Reorganisation and Devolution could provide future opportunities for apprenticeship schemes.

Feedback from Service Managers

All Managers interviewed were eager for the opportunity to be offered an apprentice. In order to request an apprentice from HR, each service was required to have an appropriate budget, costs were not met from a central corporate budget. Some Managers responded that they do not have adequate budget in their service to support an apprentice.

Managers and Members also considered an alternative option to Leicester College, where internal staff could be offered a new style of apprenticeship where they would support each service for a short period of time. It would upskill the person in several services. The Council would have a bank of talent, solve some recruitment and retention issues and they would be shaped to the 'Blaby way' of working. This would

also solve the issue of the apprenticeship ending with Leicester College and the apprentice having to find alternative employment elsewhere.

Recommendation 14 – That a central corporate budget be created to actively encourage and support the Apprenticeship Scheme.

Managers also responded they had underestimated how much capacity was required to manage an apprenticeship, including skills required in managing young people. An appropriate service, or more resource in HR was required to manage the apprenticeship scheme and provide support to managers if it was to be effective and successful.

8. Human Resources

Members considered the existing departmental structure of the team. Members questioned the differing roles of team members and future plans for the service.

Recommendation 15 – Scrutiny supports comments made to increase resource in the Service, with a renewed focus to aid Learning and Development in the Council.

5. Case Study: Development of Generative AI Tools

Many authorities are experimenting with the use of generative AI tools and automation within services, taking a pioneering approach by developing their own custom AI tools.

Scrutiny considered a case study of West Berkshire Council, where the Council had focused on streamlining the creation of job adverts and LinkedIn posts to expedite the recruitment process. They developed a prototype using OpenAI's GPT models, enabling the automation of content generation. Based on survey feedback senior managers were impressed, rating the AI-generated content at an average of 8 out of 10. This new system integrated with the council's existing digital platform, allowing for the automated gathering of information required for job adverts. Through forms, details like job titles, salaries, locations, and reporting lines were collected and then fed into the OpenAI API to generate the advert itself.

The implementation of Gen AI has had a significant impact. Managers reported a substantial reduction in the time it takes to draft job postings. The use of AI has also ensured consistent formatting and the inclusion of all essential information, leading to a more uniform presentation of job adverts across the council.

Further information can be found here: [West Berkshire Council: Development of generative AI tools | Local Government Association](#)

Recommendation 16 – That Human Resources consider using AI Generative tools to drive efficiency, optimise workflow and embrace technological advancements.

6. Local Government Reorganisation and Devolution

In 2024, the Government announced a significant reform programme for local government. Although in its early stages, Scrutiny acknowledges that local government reorganisation and devolution will play a big role in the Council's future.

During this period of unprecedented change, Scrutiny accepts that Cabinet Executive will reprioritise their work, noting that there will be implications for the Human Resources Service.

7. Conclusion and Summary of Recommendations

A modern Human Resources team has a critical role in the Council focusing on the effective support of employees, enhancing overall performance and the achievement of strategic objectives.

When completing the exit survey, staff listed the top three 'dislikes' and 'likes' of working at the Council. The top dislikes were given as recognition, communication and development opportunities. Scrutiny considers that addressing these may aid in staff retention.

Members were pleased to note that the top likes for the authority were teamwork, job content and pride and commitment, which corresponded with the Council's 'Blaby Way' ethos.

Scrutiny was pleased to hear from Managers who said that their experiences of working with Human Resources was positive, the team are helpful, and they were agreeable to changes proposed. They felt they could 'own' the recruitment process.

Scrutiny's main concerns are that the recruitment process appears lengthy, outdated and labour intensive. Scrutiny considers that the recruitment process needs to be:

- Flexible – to match the recruitment process to the role, with the use of CV's and more manager discretion.
- Creative – quietly headhunting the best people.
- Concise - with realistic parameters of roles and remits within the process.
- Using the latest AI technology to drive decision-making.

In order to support Human Resources in actioning the recommendations set out in this report, Scrutiny considers that establishing a small working group of officers may help to shape the future of Human Resources for the Council.

Recommendation 17 – That a small working group of Officers from varied services be established to support the Human Resources team to enact the recommendations detailed in this report.

Summary of Recommendations

No.	Recommendation Detail
1.	That Scrutiny be provided with a date or timeline of when the next Workplace Health Needs Assessment or Staff Survey is planned.
2.	That a review of the Jobs Fair be carried out to ensure that it reaches its full potential.
3.	That the online job application form, including the completed form format be reviewed to ensure it is modernised and fit for purpose.
4.	That shortlisting and interview forms be reviewed to ensure they are user friendly and fit for purpose.
5.	That unsuccessful applicants receive a response from the Council.
6.	That Managers be given the opportunity and flexibility to consider which recruitment process suits the role they are recruiting to. Scrutiny considers this to be an increased use of CV's and covering letters, simpler application forms where appropriate to match the recruitment process to the role.
7.	That the 'Guidance on Applying' webpage be reorganised and guidance notes are combined into one document.
8.	That exit survey feedback be provided to Group Managers to disseminate to line managers.
9.	That anonymised exit survey feedback be provided to Scrutiny Commission annually for consideration.
10.	That the exit survey process be reviewed, and all leavers be strongly encouraged to complete it.
11.	Scrutiny welcomes a review of annual leave provided to enhance the quality of the current benefits package.
12.	That learning and development training needs are assessed corporately by the authority to deliver an efficient learning and development programme.
13.	That 360-degree appraisals be introduced at the Council for Managers.
14.	That a central corporate budget be created to actively encourage and support the Apprenticeship Scheme.
15.	Scrutiny supports comments made to increase resource in the Service, with a renewed focus to aid Learning and Development in the Council.
16.	That Human Resources consider using AI Generative tools to drive efficiency, optimise workflow and embrace technological advancements.
17.	That a small working group of Officers from varied services be established to support the Human Resources team to enact the recommendations detailed in this report.