

Social Policy Working Group

Monday, 22nd November, 2021

MEETING OF THE SOCIAL POLICY WORKING GROUP

HELD REMOTELY VIA MICROSOFT TEAMS

- Members present: Councillor O'Hara (Chairperson);
Alderman Copeland; and
Councillors Hanvey and McLaughlin.
- In attendance: Mr. J. Walsh, City Solicitor and Director of Legal
and Civic Services;
Mr. J. Tully, Director of City and Organisational Strategy;
Ms. N. Bohill, Head of Commercial and Procurement
Services;
Ms. C. Sheridan, Head of Human Resources;
Ms. S. O'-Regan, Employability and Skills Manager;
Ms. L. Toland, Senior Manager, Economy;
Mr. L. Murray, Strategic Category Manager;
Ms. C. Patterson, Inclusive Growth-Policy and
Programme Officer;
Ms. B. Lawlor, Enterprise and Business Growth Officer;
Ms. N. Donaghy, Employability and Skills Officer,
Ms. M. Robinson, Employability and Skills Officer;
Ms. C. Hutchinson, Policy and Performance Analyst;
Mr. G. Dickson; Strategic Policy Lead Officer;
Mr. J. Uprichard, Community Planning Officer;
Mr. M. Mulholland, Policy Officer; and
Mr. G. Graham, Democratic Services Assistant.

Apologies

Apologies for inability to attend were reported on behalf of Councillors Heading and Kyle.

Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of 28th September were taken as read and signed as correct.

Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were reported.

Update on Actions

The Working Group noted the update on actions which had been circulated previously by the Strategic Policy Lead Officer.

Update on City Charter

The Director of City and Organisational Strategy provided an update on progress which had been made in the development of the City Charter, explaining how the approach could be validated and tested, with a number of organisations, including SME's, anchor institutions and the traditional sectors.

The Director highlighted the need to promote the Charter and the vision culminating in the "Your Say" platform and referred to a future institutions event which would be hosted by the Lord Mayor. He highlighted the need to examine the future staffing requirements, including an assessment of the best way to secure momentum and ensure a strong and viable delivery of the charter programme.

The Working Group was informed that the charter approach required to be tested and, in so doing, ensure that organisations were committed with the charter approach which was being envisaged.

In response to a question from the Chairperson in regard to the number of adopter businesses and potential early champions attached to the charter, the Policy and Performance Analyst stated that sixteen organisations on the external Business Working Group, which included a mix of anchor institutions, large statutory organisations and a number of small business enterprises, had shown interest in the Charter programme. In response to a further question on staff resources to deliver the programme, the Director stated that staffing requirements were being considered currently.

Noted.

Update on Social Value Procurement Policy

The Strategic Category Manager provided an update on the progress which had been made to date in the development of the Social Value Procurement Policy. It was reported that the public consultation programme was ongoing, and that a number of open sessions had taken place, involving both suppliers and members of the public. The Members were informed that, at those open sessions, participants had been provided with guidance on how to complete the surveys. The Working Group was informed also that the gap between the living wage and the national living wage had narrowed which could have implications for the procurement policy.

In response to a question from a Member in regard to the number of respondents to the consultation process, it was reported that eight responses had been received. The Working Group requested that additional efforts be made to encourage greater participation in that process. The City Solicitor informed the Members that organisations had been contacted directly as a means to secure further engagement with the consultation process. The Employability and Skills Manager referred to the importance associated with the incorporation of social values within the Council's procurement process. To that end, she stated that her section was holding currently monthly employability and skills stakeholder sessions, with the next session scheduled to be held on 1st December. She informed the Working Group that she would use that forum to

publicise and engage further with potential suppliers and SME's. In addition, the Enterprise and Business Growth Officer informed the Members that a tender workshop would be taking place in the near future, at which, she would raise awareness of the policy to the relevant attendees in an endeavour to promote further the procurement policy.

The Chairperson requested that information be circulated to the Members, prior to its next meeting, on the success or otherwise of the additional promotional activities which had been discussed.

Noted.

Update on Procurement and Commissioning Group

The Director provided the Working Group with an update on the recent Cles training which had taken place. He stated that the first cohort had been identified which included the Council, UUJ, Queens University and the South Eastern Health Trust and stated further that the Council was working closely with those groups identified within that cohort. The Director confirmed that the Council had completed an analysis of its spend which had been presented to Cles for its analysis and comment.

The Members were informed that, whilst a number of issues had been encountered with some of the cohort participants, the process included data handling and that any delays in the process were being addressed currently. The Working Group was advised that the next stage of the process would comprise an analysis of the data, prior to the identification of those organisations comprising the second cohort.

The Director stated that it was his intention to report back to the Working Group after Cles had completed its analysis after which, further engagement would take place with other anchor institutions.

The Chairperson requested that the second cohort be extended to include other organisations and suggested that The Belfast Harbour, Housing Executive, Belfast Metropolitan College and other health trusts be included as part of that cohort.

Noted.

Living Wage Accreditation

The Head of HR provided an update on the increase to the Foundation Living Wage and the implications of that increase on the lower spinal points of the Council's pay and grading structure. The Members were informed that, in order to address the implications of the increase in the Foundation Living Wage, a cross-departmental Working Group had been established, including the commencement of a benchmarking exercise for comparative purposes. The Head of HR stated that officers from the Council had met with the Living Wage Foundation as a means to establish links with other local authorities on their experiences in the achievement of being recognised as an accredited Living Wage Employer.

The Working Group was informed that Council officers had met with the Civil Service to assess the steps undertaken, by that organisation, to become an accredited Living Wage organisation. She highlighted the complexity of remedying the pay and grading structure as the Council was bound by the NJC pay bargaining agreement. She

stated that the civil service was not bound by that agreement which provided it with much greater flexibility in addressing paygrade boundaries.

The Head of HR stated that the Council had consulted with the Local Government Association in the matter and had been advised that the Council should continue to work with the nationally agreed pay spine and consider the points to grading relationship and best fit in terms of differentials. She reported that further engagement with the LGA was due to take place in the matter. The Members were informed that an analysis of the impact of payment of the Living Wage hourly rate and annual increases on the Council's agreed job evaluation process and pay structure was underway.

In response to a question from a Member in regard to the setting of a time-frame for the Council to achieve Living Wage accreditation, the Head of HR stated that the process was complex and formed part of an overall pay and grade review. She stated that she hoped to be in a position to provide the Working Group with a further update in the matter at its next meeting.

Noted.

Employee Diversity

The Head of HR, as requested at a previous meeting of the Working Group, provided a detailed report outlining the diverse elements of the Council's workforce, at departmental level. The report provided further information on staff by postcode and diversity. The Working Group was advised that the Council did not hold information on commuting times for employees. She stated that the information on diversity had been collected on a voluntary basis and was supported by a voluntary monitoring exercise, conducted on a periodical basis.

A Member observed that a significant number of Council staff resided outside the Belfast boundary and also, that ethnic minority groups formed a significantly small proportion of the overall number of staff employed. The Member requested if the figures published might form the basis of, amongst other things, the implementation of measures to encourage Belfast residents to compete successfully for jobs at all levels and within the Council's extensive range of departments.

The Head of HR responded by stating that outreach and employability work was carried out on a regular basis and that the data could be utilised to inform the Council's future apprenticeship scheme. She explained that a race action plan was being developed and acknowledged that a more extensive outreach programme, dealing with race specifically, was required.

The Working Group was informed of the impact of the Covid19 pandemic on the outreach programme and stated that the programme had targeted, in particular, those areas of multiple deprivation. She highlighted the importance of outreach work in those areas of high unemployment and linked this work to the Council's employment academies.

The Employability and Skills Manager highlighted the need to target organisations that represented specific groups, including women, who sought work in non-traditional areas of employment such as drivers and general operatives. She referred to the requirement to develop progression pathways to enable those targeted groups to upskill and meet their full employment potential. The Chairperson highlighted the need to target

other groups, for example, those covered by Section 75 legislation and of the need to develop succession planning as part of an inclusive growth programme, given the current age profile of the Council.

The Head of HR stated that her department had implemented its HR review and that Strategic Workforce Planning, was a key aspect of the new organisational structure. She agreed to report back to the Working Group, on a bi-annual basis, to provide information on diversity.

Noted.

Agency Workers

The Head of HR provided information following a previous request from the Working Group to present an analysis of the numbers and distribution of agency workers employed throughout the Council. She stated that five main job types accounted for sixty per cent of agency usage and that the Council was endeavouring to ringfence basic entry posts to target the long-term unemployed.

The Working Group was provided with an analysis of the range of job types covered by agency staff and was advised that full implementation of reviews, such as OSS, would reduce significantly, the number of posts filled currently by agency workers. The Head of HR informed the Working Group that it was her intention to implement an agency gatekeeper role to monitor and evaluate the level of agency staff employed throughout the Council.

In response to a question from a Member, the Head of HR confirmed that agency workers were engaged under an agency framework. She agreed to provide the Working Group with information on the annual cost, to the Council, associated with the recruitment and employment of agency staff.

A Member raised concerns about the number of staff within the Council who were on temporary contracts for long periods of time and questioned if those posts might be converted to full time permanent posts. He suggested also that it might be beneficial, from a financial perspective, for the Council to provide its own recruitment service for temporary staff cover rather than making use of employment agency for that purpose.

In response, the City Solicitor agreed that a report in the matter would be brought back to a further meeting of the Working Group.

Noted.

Update on Employability and Skills – Presentation

The Employability and Skills Manager provided the Members with a presentation on the work undertaken to tackle the issues of unemployment, economic inactivity and underemployment in the city, with particular reference to addressing skill gaps and increasing job opportunities for the most disadvantaged and under-represented groups within the community.

The Working Group was provided with an update on the success of the Employment Academies which had attracted 427 participants from April till September

2021, against a backdrop of previous annual participation of 500 per annum and which, until this year, tended to be recruited in the demand lead months of January and September each year. The Employability and Skills Manager stated that the Council was working to secure additional resources to assist with the funding of the academies from the Labour Market Partnership and that, currently, there was a waiting list of 200 entrants to the academies, which provided an indication of the level of demand from potential participants.

The Members were informed of some of the high value areas of employment which the academies were helping to support, including covid testing, logistics and transport. The Employability and Skills Manager highlighted the success of the open jobs market held recently at St. Georges Market with a further jobs market planned to be delivered in January 2022. The Members were informed that the jobs markets provided a valuable opportunity for Belfast residents to engage with employers directly.

The Working Group was provided with information on the communication channels used to engage with participants and employers, these included regular bulletins and monthly workshops. The Employability and Skills Manager referred to the Council's recently developed CRM information management system which was integral to the identification of under-represented groups and provided important data to allow the Council to tackle those impediments, preventing access to gainful employment by disadvantaged and under-represented groups.

The Employability and Skills Manager informed the Members that the Council was looking currently at upskilling to match employment requirements for the emerging green economy. She referred to the retro-fit of homes as one specific example, stating further, that the Council was in contact with the Community Renewal Fund to provide the necessary qualifications matched to the new green economy. The Working Group was reminded that the Council was planning to host an Employability and Skills Conference in June 2022, through the Labour Market Partnership. She stated that it was anticipated that the conference would assist in the provision of business support to employers, local businesses and residents as well as a policy/practice conference for employability and skills providers. The Employability and Skills Manager stated that the Belfast Business Promise would be useful in deciding which employers the Council would engage with over the longer term.

Noted.

Date of Next Meeting

The Working Group was advised that the next meeting of the Working Group would be arranged after the 2022 Committee schedule was completed.

Chairperson