

PROPOSAL FOR ACADEMIC RESEARCH INTO TALENT MANAGEMENT AS AN AID FOR RETENTION IN LOCAL COUNCILS.

Background

Talent management is a critical aspect of organisational effectiveness, particularly within the public sector where local councils play a pivotal role in delivering essential services to communities.

The Commission working in partnership with the Local Government Association (LGA) and linked to CIPD seeks to undertake a programme of academic research to explore and analyse talent management approaches within local councils in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland. The research aims to provide insights into current practices, identify challenges, and propose recommendations to enhance talent management strategies within local councils.

Current Talent Management Challenges

Talent management in local councils within England, Wales and Northern Ireland presents a myriad of challenges, reflecting the complexities of the public sector and the dynamic nature of local governance.

Key reasons as to why talent management in local councils in England, Wales and Northern Ireland is particularly challenging include:

Existing Competency-Based Frameworks for Talent Management Assessment:

Work already undertaken identified shortcomings with the application of individual competence-based frameworks within local councils. Councils approach these skills audits by only focusing on what the individual needs to demonstrate for that specific role. The councils do not provide an opportunity for the individual to demonstrate what else they can bring to the role. Therefore, the perception exists that a culture exists in local councils whereby they prescribe the competencies that the individual should have, and it can be concluded that current competency framework assessments are used to identify employees as best fit 'pegs' to go into a hole in the shortest time possible.

What appears to be currently missing from the talent management approach is the consideration by local council employers that the employee needs to be dimensionally fit for that role.

Budgetary Constraints:

Local councils operate within tight budgetary constraints, which can limit their ability to invest in talent management initiatives. Limited resources may restrict councils' capacity to offer competitive salaries and benefits, hindering their ability to attract and retain top talent. Additionally, budgetary pressures may reduce investment in training, professional development, and employee learning and development programmes.

Attraction, Recruitment and Retention:

Recruiting and retaining skilled professionals poses a significant challenge for local councils, particularly in the face of competition from other sectors and neighbouring local authorities. In some regions, councils may struggle to attract talent due to factors such as geographic location, limited job opportunities, and demographic trends. Moreover, retaining employees in local government roles can be challenging, as individuals may seek better career prospects, greater flexible working opportunities or higher salaries elsewhere. There is a need for a whole innovative approach to local council recruiters and marketers taking learning from organisations such as Caterpillar and Komatsu.

Workforce Diversity and Inclusion:

Promoting workforce diversity and inclusion remains a persistent challenge for UK local councils. Despite efforts to enhance diversity, many councils continue to grapple with systemic barriers and unconscious biases that hinder equitable recruitment and advancement opportunities. While it is encouraging to see an increase in diversity policies, good words and intentions will be seen as lip service without action and results. Systemic change requires a comprehensive assessment of policies and processes that limit or deter inclusion and diversity and collective ownership throughout the organisation. The role of line managers involved in hiring decisions is critical, but currently, just 68% of organisations report their line managers to follow objective assessment and scoring criteria (CIPD 2021. *Resourcing and talent planning survey 2021*. London: Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development.)

Skills Gap and Technological Advancements:

Local councils must prepare for the rapid technological advancements and changing skill requirements brought about by emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, data analytics, and automation. This modern technology has the potential to transform local government operations but also requires employees to adapt and acquire new competencies. Bridging the skills gap and providing ongoing training in digital literacy and technology proficiency are essential for ensuring that councils remain agile and responsive in an increasingly digital world.

Succession Planning and Knowledge Transfer:

Effective succession planning is critical for local councils to mitigate the risks associated with workforce turnover, an ageing workforce and a lack of youthful employees entering the organisations. However, many councils struggle to prioritise succession planning amidst competing priorities and limited resources.

Workforce Wellbeing and Work-Life Balance:

Balancing the demands of public service with employee wellbeing and work-life balance is a pressing concern for local councils. The impact of austerity combined with the nature of local council work often entails long hours, high stress levels, and limited resources, leading to employee burnout, elevated levels of sickness absence, high staff turnover and ethical issues among employees.

Success in Talent Management Strategies:

Several councils have implemented successful talent management policies, but it is challenging to pinpoint a single council as the definitive example as success can be subjective and dependent on numerous factors such as organisational culture, leadership, and local context.

However, some councils have gained recognition for their innovative approaches to talent management. For instance, Westminster City Council has been commended for its talent management strategy, which focuses on attracting, retaining, and developing employees to ensure a skilled workforce capable of delivering high-quality services to residents. Similarly, Birmingham City Council has implemented initiatives to identify and nurture talent within the organisation, including leadership development programs and apprenticeship schemes.

Research Objectives

Working alongside the LGA Academic Researchers from the University of Sunderland will deliver on the following objectives:

- To investigate the talent management practices employed by local councils in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland.
- To identify factors influencing talent acquisition, development, and retention within local council settings.
- To assess the effectiveness of talent management strategies in meeting the workforce needs and organisational goals of local councils.
- To explore the role of leadership, organisational culture, and external factors in shaping talent management outcomes.
- To provide evidence-based recommendations for improving talent management practices in local council environments.

Research Methodology

Literature Review: Conduct a comprehensive review of academic literature on talent management, public sector management, and local government studies to establish theoretical foundations and identify gaps in existing research.

Qualitative Research: Use qualitative research methods such as interviews and focus groups to gather insights from HR professionals, senior managers, and elected officials in a diverse sample of local councils.

Quantitative Analysis: Administer surveys to local council employees to collect quantitative data on talent management practices, perceptions, and outcomes.

Case Studies: Select a subset of local councils for in-depth case studies to provide rich, context-specific insights into talent management approaches and their impact on organisational performance.

Mixed-Methods Approach: Integrate qualitative and quantitative data to triangulate findings and enhance the validity and reliability of the research outcomes.

Expected Research Outcomes

- A comprehensive understanding of talent management practices within local councils in England, Wales and Northern Ireland including common approaches, challenges, and areas for improvement.
- Insights into the factors influencing talent acquisition, development, and retention in the public sector, with a focus on local government contexts.
- Analysis of the effectiveness of talent management strategies in meeting organisational objectives and addressing workforce needs within local councils.
- Identification of key drivers and barriers to successful talent management, including the role of leadership, organisational culture, and external factors.
- Evidence-based recommendations for enhancing talent management practices in local council settings, informed by research findings and best practices.

Expected Deliverables

- **Research Report:** A scholarly report detailing the research methodology, findings, analysis, and recommendations for academic and practitioner audiences.
- **Academic Publications:** Peer-reviewed articles submitted to academic journals in the fields of public administration, human resource management, and local government studies.
- **Conference Presentations:** Presentations of research findings at academic conferences and symposiums to engage with scholarly communities and disseminate research outcomes.
- **Policy Briefs:** Summaries of key research findings and recommendations targeted at policymakers, local government practitioners, and relevant stakeholders.
- **Talent Management Guidance, Tools, and Support Materials:** To create and pilot generic talent management materials, tools, templates, and guidance for local councils across the UK, that could be applied nationally, yet still allow for bespoke application. This part of the project is to be completed by NEREO.

Estimated Timeline for Delivery

It is estimated that the research programme will be completed by the end of November 2024, and include the following activities:

- Scoping
- Stakeholder Analysis
- Communication Plan
- Literature Review
- Research Design and Ethics Approval
- Data Collection
- Data Analysis
- Report Writing and Review
- Publication and Dissemination
- Material Creation

Conclusion

In conclusion, talent management in local councils will continue to be a challenge due to a combination of budgetary constraints, recruitment and retention difficulties, workforce diversity and inclusion barriers, skills gaps, succession planning complexities, and workforce wellbeing concerns.

By providing insights and recommendations into current practices, challenges, and opportunities in talent management, the research aims to inform policy and practice to improve workforce outcomes and organisational effectiveness within local government settings, proactively addressing these challenges.

This research programme will also contribute to the academic literature on talent management in the public sector, with a specific focus on local councils in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland.