

# **Attract and Retain a Younger Workforce**

**An Overview and Scrutiny Report  
July 2025**

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Further information regarding this report can be obtained from:

**Amelia Wiltshire**

E-mail: [amelia.wiltshire@birmingham.gov.uk](mailto:amelia.wiltshire@birmingham.gov.uk)

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# Chair's Foreword

**Councillor Katherine Iroh, Chair of Inquiry and Chair of Sustainability and Transport Overview and Scrutiny Committee**



As a committee we were very concerned to learn that, out of a workforce of nearly ten thousand, the Council only employs eight people under the age of 20 and 167 people under the age of 25. This equates to 0.08% of our workforce being under the age of 20 and 1.74% of our workforce being under the age of 25. Birmingham is the youngest city in Europe where according to the 2011 census the percentage of 16 to 24-year-olds in the city was 14.9%. The committee asserts that it is essential that the workforce of the Council adequately reflects the people of Birmingham that we serve. Indeed, if 14.9% of our workforce were under the age of 25 this would equate to over 1400 members of staff.

It was worrying for the committee to discover that half of the Council's workforce are due to retire in the next 5-10 years. The knowledge, skills and experience of these dedicated staff are invaluable and must not be allowed to be lost. The committee raised this issue to the Corporate Risk Register as we believe this to be a potential crisis unless the Council plans to mitigate this risk. Succession planning including recruiting and training younger staff should be key control measures.

Youth unemployment in the city is 17.2%, more than double the national average of 8.2% (May 2025 figures). As the second largest employer in Birmingham after the NHS the committee maintains that the Council should play its part in reducing youth unemployment by employing more young people. Furthermore, as Corporate Parents, the Council should do more to provide interview and work experience opportunities for care leavers.

It was clear to the committee that workforce policies and procedures at the Council should be reviewed and developed to support young people to work for the Council. This includes all aspects of recruitment and retention such as job adverts, the application process, interviewing, onboarding, training, development opportunities, etc. A particular focus should be on the Graduate Entry Programmes and Apprenticeship Programmes as it was clear that many of these colleagues are not utilised or managed to their full potential.

The committee has proposed twelve recommendations which we hope will transform the way the Council employs young people. We look forward to monitoring these recommendations and scrutinising the progress the Council makes over the coming months.

I would like to thank Cllrs Hunt, Morrall and Rai as members of the Task and Finish Group who committed so many hours to evidence gathering, reviewing key findings and editing recommendations. My gratitude to the Scrutiny Team, Amelia and Baseema, for their ongoing dedication and support.

# Summary of Recommendations

Ref	Recommendations to Cabinet Members	Responsibility	Completion Date
<b>R01</b>	Council asks the Executive to:	Cabinet Member for Transformation, Governance and HR	September 2025 (2 months)
	a) Confirm the timeframe for when long term workforce planning for each directorate will be completed;		March 2026 (9 months)
	b) Analyse key findings from exit interviews with leavers aged 24 and under to understand why 50% are leaving within their first 12 months;		March 2026 (9 months)
	c) Provide both a corporate and directorate summary of how these workforce plans will deliver on corporate objectives, with a specific focus on how they will increase numbers of staff aged 24 and under and informed by exit interviews;		September 2025 (2 months)
	d) Advise how this will be monitored in the future to ensure plans are on track and remain focused on delivering corporate objectives; and		September 2025 (2 months)
<b>R02</b>	e) Ensure there is a corporate list setting out the number and directorate/ service for all early entrants including apprentices and graduates.	Cabinet Member for Transformation, Governance and HR	September 2025 (2 months)
	Council asks the Executive to:		September 2025 (2 months)
	a) Advise when the review of the Attraction Policy will be complete and the timescale for the implementation of a new policy; and		July 2025 (12 months)
	b) Implement a new Attraction Policy including refreshed careers content on the Council website; information to school, colleges and universities;		

Ref	Recommendations to Cabinet Members	Responsibility	Completion Date
	attendance at Job Fairs, and with a focus on how local government careers can deliver social impact.		
<b>R03</b>	<p>Council asks the Executive to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Review how work experience opportunities are accessed to ensure it is fair and equitable to all young people in Birmingham; and set out timeframes for how any improvements will be delivered;</li> <li>b) Deliver refreshed work experience programme.</li> </ul>	Cabinet Member for Transformation, Governance and HR	<p>November 2025 (4 months)</p> <p>July 2026 (12 months)</p>
<b>R04</b>	Council asks the Executive to provide a timeframe for when the Council will be able to guarantee interviews for care leavers and have appropriate support in place. This should include wraparound support for new starters.	Cabinet Member for Transformation, Governance and HR	November 2025 (4 months)
<b>R05</b>	<p>Council asks the Executive to refresh the application process for roles at the Council including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Resetting the different roles in recruitment and in particular, the role of HR, OD and Transformation as Subject Matter Experts in support of individual hiring managers;</li> <li>b) Reviewing the time taken from advert to onboarding to enable joiners to start quicker;</li> <li>c) All future job adverts and job descriptions to be reviewed by HR, OD and Transformation in line with directorate workforce plans;</li> <li>d) All future job adverts and job descriptions are inclusive by ensuring any qualifications listed are necessary and all language used realistically sets out the role;</li> </ul>	Cabinet Member for Transformation, Governance and HR	January 2026 (6 months)

Ref	Recommendations to Cabinet Members	Responsibility	Completion Date
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>e) The introduction of wider application tools including phone based applications;</li> <li>f) Reviewing managers' unconscious bias training to ensure age and care experience as protective characteristics are recognised; and</li> <li>g) Ensuring applicant data is available and used to baseline current recruitment of young people and monitor any future impact.</li> </ul>		
<b>R06</b>	Council asks the Executive to map out the current employment programmes delivered through the Council or partners and work with partners to adapt or design courses which create a talent pipeline to meet our corporate needs.	Cabinet Member for Transformation, Governance and HR/ Deputy Leader	April 2026 (9 months)
<b>R07</b>	<p>Council asks the Executive to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Consider options for how a corporately led approach for early entrant programmes could be implemented; and</li> <li>b) If this is not possible, advise what mitigations can be put in place to enable these programmes to contribute more effectively towards corporate objectives</li> </ul>	Cabinet Member for Transformation, Governance and HR	January 2026 (6 months)
<b>R08</b>	Council asks the Executive to consider introducing a challenge that all future recruitments should clearly state why this role could not be undertaken through an apprenticeship or other early entrant programme. This should be considered once the Workforce Strategy and Early Career Strategy have been completed.	Cabinet Member for Transformation, Governance and HR	July 2026 (12 months)
<b>R09</b>	Council asks the Executive to explore how further apprenticeship levy could be transferred to SMEs as part of new procurement arrangements	Cabinet Member for Transformation, Governance and HR	January 2026 (6 months)

<b>Ref</b>	<b>Recommendations to Cabinet Members</b>	<b>Responsibility</b>	<b>Completion Date</b>
<b>R10</b>	Council asks the Executive to set out clearly future career pathways supported by accredited training in the Council's long term workforce plans to create a talent pipeline.	Cabinet Member for Transformation, Governance and HR	April 2026 (9 months)
<b>R11</b>	<p>Council asks the Executive to confirm a manager package is in place to support staff on early entrant programmes. This should include (but not exclusively):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) ensuring all managers promote the Early Careers Network and provide time for their staff to participate in network activities;</li> <li>b) Surveying all early entrants to confirm how they are being supported by their managers and whether there are opportunities to improve this; and</li> <li>c) Reviewing working at home practices to ensure all staff have access to regular in-person working to support wellbeing and professional development.</li> </ul>	Cabinet Member for Transformation, Governance and HR	January 2026 (6 months)
<b>R12</b>	Council agrees that the Executive reports on its progress on these recommendations to the Economy, Skills and Culture Overview and Scrutiny Committee every 6 months and with the first report in January 2026.	Executive	January 2026

# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Background

- 1.1.1 The Economy, Skills & Culture Overview and Scrutiny Committee decided to undertake this Inquiry on 27 November 2024. The [Terms of Reference](#) were, agreed at the same time.
- 1.1.2 A cross-party Inquiry Task and Finish Group was established comprising:
- [Councillor Katherine Iroh](#), Chair of the Economy, Skills & Culture Overview and Scrutiny Committee and Chair of the Inquiry
  - [Councillor Jon Hunt](#)
  - [Councillor Simon Morrall](#)
  - [Councillor Esther Rai](#)
- 1.1.3 The key question the Inquiry Task and Finish Group asked was:  
**“What steps can the Council take to attract and retain young people in its workforce?”**
- 1.1.4 In seeking to answer this the Task and Finish Group considered the following lines of inquiry:
- How are young people currently represented within the Council's workforce? How does the Council encourage recruitment and retention of young people in its workforce? How is the Council designing career pathways for young people?
  - What are the benefits for the Council, and Birmingham, as a whole, to increase the proportion of younger staff?
  - What are the barriers and challenges the Council experiences in recruiting and retaining younger staff?
  - What can the Council learn from previous and existing Council initiatives as well as from other Local Authorities or public sector organisations?

## 1.2 Outcomes

- 1.2.1 The key findings and recommendations from this Inquiry specifically contribute towards delivering upon the following Corporate Plan 2025-2028 missions: 1. Growth and Prosperity; 2. Knowledge and Opportunity, and 6. Improvement and Recovery. However, it also underpins all of the Corporate Plan's 6 missions by enabling the Council to be in a better long term position to deliver towards them.



## 1.3 Why the Committee decided to undertake this Inquiry

- 1.3.1 The Committee had been disappointed to learn that the Council employed very low numbers of young people (18-25). This caused particular concern as the Committee had also been advised that nearly half of the Council's workforce would be able to retire within 5-10 years. Without effective strategies and plans in place to bring through the next generation, this is likely to present a significant risk upon the Council's future capacity to deliver services to Birmingham residents due to loss of skills and knowledge. The Committee wanted to understand what the Council is already doing and what it plans to do to address this challenge. It also wanted to make recommendations which could support and add value to this work in the future.
- 1.3.2 The Committee also recognised that Birmingham is a city where 66.9% of the working age population is in employment, which is below both the regional and national position<sup>1</sup>. The city's youth unemployment claimant rate (18-24) is 15.3%, which is almost twice the national average at 8%. As one of the largest employers in Birmingham, the Committee felt that the Council should lead by example as an employer of young people.

## 1.4 Evidence Gathering

- 1.4.1 Evidence gathering mainly took place between November 2024 and March 2025. The activities were:
- A [Committee meeting on 27 November 2024](#) – evidence was provided by Birmingham City Council.
  - An online evidence gathering session on 12 February 2025 – evidence was provided by Careers Matters, a social enterprise, providing career services and developing the future workforce through face-to-face and digital solutions. This is particularly across the education, health, social care and industry sectors.
  - An online focus group on 23 February 2025 – evidence was provided by 4 young people employed by the Council. The Inquiry also received two further written submissions from staff aged 24, who wished to remain anonymous.
  - Written submission on 26 March 2025 – evidence was provided by Birmingham Children's Trust.

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<sup>1</sup> LG Inform Plus: Employment rate (16-64) – Birmingham Constituency, 12 months ending December 2024 (accessed 13 June 2025). The West Midlands mean position is 70.7% and the national mean position is 76.5.

## 2 Evidence and Key Findings

### 2.1 Theme 1: Risk to the Council

- 2.1.1 As of September 2024, the Council employed 167 people aged 24 or younger, which reflects as 1.74% of the total workforce. The Inquiry Group was advised that only 8 of these 167 employees were aged under 20. It was also highlighted that this had been the position for several years<sup>2</sup>.
- 2.1.2 Table 1 below shows how this was reflected across the headcounts for different directorates. It is noted that the former Strategy, Equality and Partnerships directorate had a significantly higher proportion of young people employed (10.84%) compared to other directorates which all fell between 0.75% and 2.3%<sup>3</sup>.

Directorate	Headcount <=24	% of the total headcount
Adult Social Care	23	1.2%
Children and Families	8	0.75%
City Housing	20	1.72%
Council Management	65	2.3%
City Operations	26	1.25%
Place, Prosperity and Sustainability	7	1.79%
Strategy, Equality and Partnerships	18	10.84%
<b>Total</b>	<b>167</b>	<b>1.74%</b>

Table 1: Breakdown of workforce aged 24 or younger as % of directorate headcount

- 2.1.3 Table 2 below sets out how this was reflected across the head counts for different directorates within the Birmingham Children's Trust. While % of total headcounts are also similarly low, there may be opportunities to find out if there is any learning for the Council from the Trust's Finance and Resources directorate<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> [Evidence Gathering – Council as an Employer of Young People](#), Report to Economy, Skills and Culture Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 27 November 2024

<sup>3</sup> [Evidence Gathering – Council as an Employer of Young People](#), Report to Economy, Skills and Culture Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 27 November 2024

<sup>4</sup> Birmingham Children's Trust as an Employer of Young People, Report to the Inquiry Group, 26 March 2025.

Directorate	Headcount <=24	% of Total Headcount
Commissioning & Specialist Services	7	1.14%
Finance & Resources	31	6.78%
Help & Protection	14	1.55%
Corporate Parenting	10	3.86%
Quality & Assurance	-	-

Table 2: Breakdown of headcount <=24 as a % of total headcount by Birmingham Children's Trust directorate

- 2.1.4 The Inquiry Group was also advised that 130 of these 167 roles in the Council were at managerial (including team leader) level<sup>5</sup>.
- 2.1.5 The Council does not have data on the number of young people applying for roles or their outcomes. The Oracle re-implementation may provide an opportunity to change this<sup>6</sup>.
- 2.1.6 Within the last 2 years, 138 people left the Council from this age group; 109 (79%) within the first 12 months. The table below indicates the number of people who have joined and left each directorate aged 24 or under in this same time period.

Directorate	Joiners <=24	Leavers <=24
Adult Social Care	33	16
Children and Families	38	22
City Housing	33	12
Council Management	198	55
City Operations	54	15
Place, Prosperity and Sustainability	7	13
Strategy, Equality and Partnerships	29	5
<b>Total since 2022</b>	<b>392</b>	<b>138</b>

Table 3: Breakdown of joiners and leavers aged 24 or under over past 2 years by directorate.

<sup>5</sup> [Evidence Gathering – Council as an Employer of Young People](#), Report to Economy, Skills and Culture Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 27 November 2024

<sup>6</sup> [Evidence Gathering – Council as an Employer of Young People](#), Report to Economy, Skills and Culture Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 27 November 2024

- 2.1.7 Over the past 5 years, 47% of leavers aged 24 or under resigned, and 41% left as their fixed term contract ended. 77.8% of the current workforce in this age range are on permanent contracts<sup>7</sup>.
- 2.1.8 By comparison, the Inquiry Group were advised that the respective figures from the Birmingham Children's Trust are significantly lower<sup>8</sup>.
- 2.1.9 As of September 2024, the Inquiry Group was advised that the Council had 42.1% of its workforce aged 55 or over and with an average of service of 14.8 years. Based on the current workforce profile at that time, this was projected to rise to 57.2% by March 2030. It was confirmed that the impact of this potential workforce 'churn' had been recently added to the Corporate Risk Register<sup>9</sup>.

Birmingham City Council									
Establishment headcount 30/9/24	Occupied Headcount	Unoccupied Headcount	Predictive resource risk to maintain 100% establishment	As at 30/9/24	Count 25/26	Count 26/27	Count 27/28	Count 28/29	Count 29/30
15045	9662	5383	Count of those age 55+ (57+ from 28/29)	4064	328	286	281	288	278
			Count of those to be eligible to claim state pension	447	169	231	2	304	349
			Count of those who will reach average retirement age <b>62.4</b> (Average age of those who have left on retirement in the past 2 years)	1137	353	369	404	374	364
			Average length of service ( <b>14.8 years</b> )	5199	340	234	208	242	232
			Indication of FTC end dates ( <b>529 FTC's</b> ) *Placement end date up to end of financial year i.e. 31/3/25 where known	274	88	17	1	0	0
			Current turnover rate <b>26.58%</b>						

Diagram 1: Birmingham City Council HR metrics, September 2024

- 2.1.10 The Inquiry Group was advised that an Early Careers Strategy was in development. There was no timeframe for when this strategy and its delivery plan would be in place. Further to this, the Council's People directorate is now working with each directorate to develop deliverable long term workforce plans to meet corporate objectives, and which maximise opportunities through programmes such as the apprentices. However, while acknowledging the challenge, it was also highlighted to the Inquiry Group that due to the current financial situation for the Council, full delivery of both the Early Careers Strategy and directorate workforce plans may need to commence only once there is greater financial stability<sup>10</sup>.
- 2.1.11 The Inquiry was also advised that the current needs of the Council to deliver the Improvement and Recovery Plan and at pace means it is focused on getting candidates who have the skills and experience already. This may make it more challenging for younger candidates<sup>11</sup>. Despite this, the Strategy Equality and Partnerships (SEP)

<sup>7</sup> [Evidence Gathering – Council as an Employer of Young People](#), Report to Economy, Skills and Culture Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 27 November 2024

<sup>8</sup> Birmingham Children's Trust as an Employer of Young People, Report to the Inquiry Group, 26 March 2025.

<sup>9</sup> Economy, Skills and Culture Committee, 27 November 2024. The Chair of the Committee had requested that this was added to the Corporate Risk Register at the pre agenda meeting for this report.

<sup>10</sup> Economy, Skills and Culture Committee, 27 November 2024.

<sup>11</sup> Economy, Skills and Culture Committee, 27 November 2024.

directorate had both recruited and retained relatively high numbers of people aged 24 and under in recent years. This was also reflected in a significantly higher ratio in their overall headcount<sup>12</sup>. There may be learning for other directorates to consider as they move forward with their workforce planning. The Inquiry Group were also made aware of other positive examples from other directorates (such as Public Health)<sup>13</sup>.

- 2.1.12 The Inquiry Group considered there may be learning for other directorates from these two examples to consider as they move forward with their workforce planning. The Inquiry was subsequently advised that initial evidence suggests that degree related/ graduate related roles within this space have had an outside of standard deviation impact in the former SEP directorate. As with any average based statistical review utilising an area outside of the median and with such a vast differential, it is not recommended to provide learning for other directorates<sup>14</sup>.
- 2.1.13 **Key Finding:** The Council is facing a real crisis to deliver its service within the next 5-10 years through a potential 'churn' of approximately 50% of its workforce to retirement while the number of staff aged 24 and under is correspondingly very low. With average length of service over 14 years for staff aged 55+, these staff members have extensive skills and experience which will be difficult to replace without effective workforce planning. The Council needs to act now to address this crisis by investing in its future and bringing through the next generation. This needs to be delivered through greater corporate oversight working collaboratively with directorates.
- 2.1.14 **Key Finding:** When young people leave the Council, they most often leave within their first 12 months of employment. This suggests that further work needs to be done to create a working environment which retains young people. This includes better supported careers pathways. This will be considered further in section 2.4.

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<sup>12</sup> [Evidence Gathering – Council as an Employer of Young People](#), Report to Economy, Skills and Culture Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 27 November 2024

<sup>13</sup> Economy, Skills and Culture Committee, 27 November 2024.

<sup>14</sup> '8 day rule' response from the Executive, 5 June 2025.

Ref	Recommendations	Responsibility	Completion Date
<b>R01</b>	<p>Council asks the Executive to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Confirm the timeframe for when long term workforce planning for each directorate will be completed;</li> <li>b) Analyse key findings from exit interviews with leavers aged 24 and under to understand why 50% are leaving within their first 12 months;</li> <li>c) Provide both a corporate and directorate summary of how these workforce plans will deliver on corporate objectives, with a specific focus on how they will increase numbers of staff aged 24 and under and informed by exit interviews;</li> <li>d) Advise how this will be monitored in the future to ensure plans are on track and remain focused on delivering corporate objectives; and</li> <li>e) Ensure there is a corporate list setting out the number and directorate/ service for all early entrants including apprentices and graduates.</li> </ul>	<b>Cabinet Member for Transformation, Governance and HR</b>	<p>September 2025 (2 months)</p> <p>March 2026 (9 months)</p> <p>March 2026 (9 months)</p> <p>September 2025 (2 months)</p> <p>September 2025 (2 months)</p>

## 2.2 Theme 2: Recruitment

- 2.2.1 In their evidence, Birmingham Children's Trust clearly set out the benefits of young people to their organisation, which could also be translated across for the services delivered by the Council<sup>15</sup>:

*"Young people bring fresh perspectives and innovative ideas, which can help drive change and modernization within the Trust. They are often more adaptable to new technologies, enabling the Trust to stay at the forefront of technological advancements.*

*Additionally, employing young people can enhance the Trust's image, making it more appealing to other young talent and helping to build a dynamic and diverse workforce. This can lead to increased employee engagement and satisfaction, as well as improved overall performance.*

*Furthermore, young workers can contribute to succession planning, ensuring that the Trust has a strong pipeline of future leaders.*

*Specifically, in social worker roles, young people can bring a unique set of strengths. Their fresh perspectives and innovative ideas can help identify new ways to engage with clients and communities, fostering better outcomes and more effective interventions. They are often more in tune with contemporary social issues, which can lead to more relevant and empathetic support for those in need."*

- 2.2.2 The Inquiry Group listened to experiences from young people aged 24 and under who were working for the Council in its focus group. They suggested that the most significant barriers to considering a career at this Council are:

2.2.2.1. Understanding what the Council (and local government) can offer; and

2.2.2.2. Accessing and navigating opportunities<sup>16</sup>.

- 2.2.3 The focus group advised that they thought many young people did not know what roles were available in the Council, and information was not provided in the places where they would be looking. For example, the Council is not present at Job Fairs as a potential employer and it does not have a digital footprint on relevant social media where young people are looking for opportunities. The length of time to complete recruitment and commence employment was also highlighted<sup>17</sup>.

- 2.2.4 The Council's People Service directorate highlighted that the attraction policy for the Council needs to be reviewed. The current policy is currently focused on WM Jobs, which is not well known outside of the public sector. This view was also put forward by

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<sup>15</sup> Birmingham Children's Trust as an Employer of Young People, Report to the Inquiry Group, 26 March 2025.

<sup>16</sup> Focus group (online) with staff (aged 24 and under), 23 February 2025

<sup>17</sup> Focus group (online) with staff (aged 24 and under), 23 February 2025

the focus group who suggested other opportunities should be explored as WM Jobs is not the 'go to' for young people. Careers Matters also highlighted the 'digital divide' as some people don't have access to laptops<sup>18</sup>.

- 2.2.5 The Birmingham Children's Trust set out how they have already several targeted approaches designed to appeal to the unique strengths and interests of young generations. A key part of this strategy is to boost the Trust's presence on digital platforms including podcasts, YouTube and job boards popular with younger job seekers. They have also invested in search engine optimisation through Eploy to ensure our postings rank higher in search results for relevant job queries. By also utilising popular and often free platforms such as Indeed and Google Jobs alongside paid platforms such as Totaljobs, Reed and CV Library, the Trust aims to reach a broader and more diverse pool of applicants<sup>19</sup>.
- 2.2.6 The Trust advised that these steps have proven successful, evidenced by 1333 applications received from young people over the past 6 months. This surge in interest from younger job seekers underscores the effectiveness of the digital strategies. The Trust remains committed to ensuring the increased numbers of applications convert into job offers and young people succeed at interview stage<sup>20</sup>.
- 2.2.7 There is also limited information available on the Council's website which could better market careers and opportunities through the Council and local government, unlike other Local Authorities. If in place, this could take advantage of national campaigns produced by the LGA.
- 2.2.8 The Inquiry Group learned that the Council is attending Job Fairs. However, in the examples it found, the Council is attending to promote access to particular employment programmes such as the [Pure \(Placing Urban vulnerable Residents in Employment\) Project](#) (funded through UK Government and the Shared Prosperity Fund). The Council is not attending to promote itself as an employer. The Council is currently working with partners on a range of different programmes and projects designed to reduce unemployment. One officer described how we 'don't see ourselves as the employer at the end of the journey' and the Council needs to 'explore how to take these initiatives and link them to employment opportunities in the Council.'
- 2.2.9 As set out in the [current statutory guidance for the Participation of young people in education, employment or training](#), Local Authorities should work in local partnerships with schools, colleges and other partners to help develop the careers guidance offer (all schools and colleges are required to secure independent careers guidance for young people in years 7-13). As part of this careers guidance offer, it does not appear

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<sup>18</sup> Evidence gathering session with Careers Matters (online), 12 February 2025

<sup>19</sup> Birmingham Children's Trust as an Employer of Young People, Report to the Inquiry Group, 26 March 2025.

<sup>20</sup> Birmingham Children's Trust as an Employer of Young People, Report to the Inquiry Group, 26 March 2025.



that the Council (or careers through local government) are being offered as a potential career path.

- 2.2.10 The Inquiry Group was advised that the Council has ‘not got strong links with schools to ensure fair and equitable access to work experience opportunities or providing information on council careers.’ The Council’s website provides very limited information on work experience placements. There is information on opportunities in the [Parks](#) service for Year 10 and 11 students<sup>21</sup>, and information for older students in [Public Health](#)<sup>22</sup>. The Council is providing work experience opportunities though for 16-18 year olds across other departments. It is not clear how young people are finding out about these opportunities and accessing them. The Inquiry was assured that targeting careers advisors in schools, colleges and local universities will form part of the Early Careers Strategy. The Inquiry Group Chair (who works in a secondary school) spoke to her school’s careers advisor, who suggested the Council is seen as a ‘facilitator rather than a potential employer.’
- 2.2.11 The Council has previously committed to guaranteeing interviews for care leavers, and it receives funding to support this group. The Inquiry Group was informed that work is underway with Birmingham Children’s Trust to ensure there is an appropriate support model in place to support care leavers during any recruitment process and sign up to the Care Leavers Covenant<sup>23</sup>.
- 2.2.12 The Council delivers a wide range of services, where better insight and lived experiences could support future transformations of these services. For example, candidates for roles at the Council (including aged 24 and under) could be, or have been, a council tenant or a young carer. The Inquiry Group discussed whether there is an opportunity for the Council to collaborate with organisations such as Careers Matters to evaluate and improve policies around recruitment, employment and supporting individuals with lived experiences. This is further explored in section 3.4.
- 2.2.13 The focus group highlighted how job adverts and descriptions ‘inflate the reality of the job to make it sound more appealing’ and ‘recruitment culture uses big glossy titles.’ They raised concerns that younger candidates may not be able to understand what the job actually entails and decide not to apply, while candidates more familiar with this language can ‘see through these inflated descriptions’<sup>24</sup>. They suggested that the Council could offer sessions to help prepare these candidates who may not benefit from family or social networks including people have worked in local government<sup>25</sup>.

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<sup>21</sup> [Birmingham City Council website, Volunteering and Work Experience in Parks](#) (accessed 13 June 2025)

<sup>22</sup> [Birmingham City Council website, Public Health](#) (accessed 13 June 2025)

<sup>23</sup> Economy, Skills and Culture Committee, 27 November 2024.

<sup>24</sup> Focus group (online) with staff (aged 24 and under), 23 February 2025

<sup>25</sup> Focus group (online) with staff (aged 24 and under), 23 February 2025

- 2.2.14 Further to this, the focus group suggested that unnecessary qualifications are also included in some job descriptions. They shared concerns that this would deter people, and in particular younger people, from applying. They described this as ‘qualification discrimination’<sup>26</sup>.
- 2.2.15 The Council’s People Services directorate also raised concerns. They explained how a traditional recruitment model was in place where the hiring manager led with limited involvement from People Services. They set out how they intend to change this to enable specialist People Services staff to act as Subject Matter Experts during recruitments. The directorate has also put steps in place which include automatic challenge to ensure only required qualifications are asked for, as well as checking language in job adverts. Managers have also received training on addressing unconscious bias in recruitment<sup>27</sup>.
- 2.2.16 **Key Finding:** The Council has stopped thinking about itself as a potential employer for young people in this city. It needs to market and raise awareness of the different career paths across local government and what they can offer to encourage more young people to consider a career at the Council. It is currently not making effective use of available resources such as the Council’s website or careers advisors in schools, colleges and universities. It could also do more to match training in externally funded employment programmes which the Council lead (or play a role in) to future opportunities in the Council.
- 2.2.17 **Key Finding:** The Inquiry is concerned that work experience opportunities, which could help to attract people at an early point to careers at the Council, are not being accessed in a fair and equitable way. This is further reinforced by the current recruitment approach, which may mean young people who cannot access advice through their own family or social network, may not be able to understand fulfil the stages of the recruitment process. Links with schools, colleges and universities need to be strengthened.
- 2.2.18 **Key Finding:** While the Council remains committed to guaranteeing interviews for care leavers, the related support is not in place yet (although funded) and no timescale is available.
- 2.2.19 **Key Finding:** The Council has many roles where lived experience could prove to be an asset in delivering service transformation and supporting services to be more customer focused. The Council needs to consider how it can best harness this experience to deliver better outcomes for its residents while also ensuring staff are properly supported. Staff who are aged 24 and under may be able to play an important

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<sup>26</sup> Focus group (online) with staff (aged 24 and under), 23 February 2025

<sup>27</sup> Economy, Skills and Culture Committee, 27 November 2024.

part in this. If this is taken forward, the Council should review its policies and procedures to deliver on this. The Inquiry acknowledges that this is an area to explore in the future, as it is not currently covered in the Council's collective agreement with Trade Unions.

- 2.2.20 **Key Finding:** The Council's application process is dated and traditional. Language used and unnecessary qualifications in job descriptions may deter younger applicants while not accurately reflecting the nature of the role. A new modern and quicker approach reflecting current best practice is required. The work undertaken by the Trust may be an example to follow. Unconscious bias training for managers needs to be retained.

<b>Ref</b>	<b>Recommendations</b>	<b>Responsibility</b>	<b>Completion Date</b>
<b>R02</b>	<p>Council asks the Executive to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Advise when the review of the Attraction Policy will be complete and the timescale for the implementation of a new policy; and</li> <li>b) Implement a new Attraction Policy including refreshed careers content on the Council website; information to school, colleges and universities; attendance at Job Fairs, and with a focus on how local government careers can deliver social impact.</li> </ul>	<b>Cabinet Member for Transformation, Governance and HR</b>	<p>September 2025 (2 months)</p> <p>July 2025 (12 months)</p>
<b>R03</b>	<p>Council asks the Executive to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Review how work experience opportunities are accessed to ensure it is fair and equitable to all young people in Birmingham; and set out timeframes for how any improvements will be delivered;</li> <li>b) Deliver refreshed work experience programme.</li> </ul>	<b>Cabinet Member for Transformation, Governance and HR</b>	<p>November 2025 (4 months)</p> <p>July 2026 (12 months)</p>
<b>R04</b>	Council asks the Executive to provide a timeframe for when the Council will be able to guarantee interviews for care leavers and have appropriate support in place. This should include wraparound support for new starters.	<b>Cabinet Member for Transformation, Governance and HR</b>	November 2025 (4 months)

<b>R05</b>	<p>Council asks the Executive to refresh the application process for roles at the Council including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Resetting the different roles in recruitment and in particular, the role of HR, OD and Transformation as Subject Matter Experts in support of individual hiring managers;</li> <li>b) Reviewing the time taken from advert to onboarding to enable joiners to start quicker;</li> <li>c) All future job adverts and job descriptions to be reviewed by HR, OD and Transformation in line with directorate workforce plans;</li> <li>d) All future job adverts and job descriptions are inclusive by ensuring any qualifications listed are necessary and all language used realistically sets out the role;</li> <li>e) The introduction of wider application tools including phone based applications;</li> <li>f) Reviewing managers' unconscious bias training to ensure age and care experience as protective characteristics are recognised; and</li> <li>g) Ensuring applicant data is available and used to baseline current recruitment of young people and monitor any future impact.</li> </ul>	<b>Cabinet Member for Transformation, Governance and HR</b>	January 2026 (6 months)
<b>R06</b>	<p>Council asks the Executive to map out the current employment programmes delivered through the Council or partners and work with partners to adapt or design courses which create a talent pipeline to meet our corporate needs.</p>	<b>Cabinet Member for Transformation, Governance and HR/ Deputy Leader</b>	April 2026 (9 months)

## 2.3 Theme 3: Early Entry Programmes (e.g. Apprenticeships and Graduates)

2.3.1 The Inquiry was advised that the current schemes in place to attract a new workforce are<sup>28</sup>:

2.3.1.1. Apprenticeships – the Apprenticeship Levy was set up in 2017 as a 3 year initiative. (It was then extended). 29,000 organisations nationally have participated in the scheme. The Council pays 0.5% (equivalent to approximately 2.5million and on average £243-250k per month). The Council can then use these ringfenced funds within 2 years on apprenticeships. If the funds are not used, they are given to Government. In the latest Government report (2022), £3.5billion nationally had been sent to Government as unspent funds.

2.3.1.2. National Graduate Development Programme (NGDP) – a national programme introduced to the Council in 2021.

2.3.1.3. Ad hoc work placements devolved within directorates – these are local arrangements where they take place.

2.3.1.4. Cabinet Member shadowing – managed through the Cabinet Office and is currently a virtual offer.

2.3.2 The Inquiry was told that at a corporate level, it is still not clear how many staff fall into each of these programmes<sup>29</sup>.

### **Apprenticeships**

2.3.3 The Council currently have 270 employees on an apprenticeship since the Apprentice Levy was introduced. 30 had been recruited in the last 2 years including 14 new hire apprentices (2 in schools based roles) in 2023/24; the remainder are on an apprenticeship to upskill. The overall number of apprentices is low given the size of the organisation<sup>30</sup>.

2.3.4 The Inquiry Group learned that the current arrangements for apprenticeships are devolved to directorates and led by individual hiring managers. Corporately, there is minimal sight or planning until requests for support are received from individual services. This devolved approach has led to a lack of consistency and support for apprentices. It has also meant that the programme has not been matched to clear corporate outcomes that are monitored to show impact<sup>31</sup>.

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<sup>28</sup> [Evidence Gathering – Council as an Employer of Young People](#), Report to Economy, Skills and Culture Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 27 November 2024

<sup>29</sup> Economy, Skills and Culture Committee, 27 November 2024.

<sup>30</sup> Economy, Skills and Culture Committee, 27 November 2024.

<sup>31</sup> Economy, Skills and Culture Committee, 27 November 2024.

- 2.3.5 The current financial situation for the Council has meant that the programme has refocused on increasing apprentices through internal development opportunities. For example, a cohort was set up where staff developed better project management skills; this had been identified in the Improvement and Recovery Plan<sup>32</sup>.
- 2.3.6 The Council has returned £9.5million to Government to date in unspent funds; approximately £111k per month. Most employers are losing levy, in particular, from Councils. However, this Council is currently using 24.4% of its levy contributions compared to 55% national average. Factors which have contributed to this include lack of corporate and directorate investment and capacity to manage and deliver the programme. Due to recent initiatives, the Council has started to increase what it spends; it is now returning £96k per month. At this time, two members of staff in People Services have been working on this<sup>33</sup>.
- 2.3.7 This increase has been achieved through using funds to upskill existing staff, as set out in 2.3.5, and also through maximising the Levy Transfer Scheme. This enables the Council to transfer up to 50% of its funds to offset to costs of apprenticeship qualifications for small and medium sized businesses<sup>34</sup>.
- 2.3.8 The Inquiry Group was advised it will be very difficult to bring the returned levy to £0k per month. To achieve this, the Council would need to enrol 669 new apprentices every year, which would be equal to 55 new apprenticeships every month<sup>35</sup>.

### **National Graduate Development Programme**

- 2.3.9 In 2021, 8 graduates were recruited; 10 graduates in 2022; 8 graduates in 2023. Currently only 5 of the 8 graduates recruited in 2023 remain on the programme<sup>36</sup>.
- 2.3.10 There are other graduate programmes across the Council, most notably in Public Health. In 2023/24, the cohort reduced from 9 to 4 due to financial pressures. They are managed within these respective directorates, and People Services have limited sight of these programmes.
- 2.3.11 **Key Finding:** A devolved approach does not enable these programmes to either meet the needs of the individuals or the corporate objectives. A corporately held approach with sufficient resources is required to link these opportunities with clear outcomes and demonstrate their impact. The Inquiry Group is aware that the resource supports the

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<sup>32</sup> Birmingham City Council, Corporate Plan 2025-2028

<sup>33</sup> Economy, Skills and Culture Committee, 27 November 2024.

<sup>34</sup> Economy, Skills and Culture Committee, 27 November 2024.

<sup>35</sup> Economy, Skills and Culture Committee, 27 November 2024.

<sup>36</sup> [Evidence Gathering – Council as an Employer of Young People](#), Report to Economy, Skills and Culture Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 27 November 2024

Early Careers work at the time of providing evidence has now reduced, and the recent progress towards increasing the apprenticeship levy spend may be at risk.

<b>Ref</b>	<b>Recommendations</b>	<b>Responsibility</b>	<b>Completion Date</b>
<b>R07</b>	Council asks the Executive to: a) Consider options for how a corporately led approach for early entrant programmes could be implemented; and b) If this is not possible, advise what mitigations can be put in place to enable these programmes to contribute more effectively towards corporate objectives	<b>Cabinet Member for Transformation, Governance and HR</b>	January 2026 (6 months)
<b>R08</b>	Council asks the Executive to consider introducing a challenge that all future recruitments should clearly state why this role could not be undertaken through an apprenticeship or other early entrant programme. This should be considered once the Workforce Strategy and Early Career Strategy have been completed.	<b>Cabinet Member for Transformation, Governance and HR</b>	July 2026 (12 months)
<b>R09</b>	Council asks the Executive to explore how further apprenticeship levy could be transferred to SMEs as part of new procurement arrangements	<b>Cabinet Member for Transformation, Governance and HR</b>	January 2026 (6 months)



## 2.4 Theme 4: Future Career Pathways and Staff Support

- 2.4.1 The Inquiry Group was advised we need to rebuild the career pathways for young people which had previously existed in the Council. Initial early entrant roles now are often Fixed Term contract roles, which do not direct open up to other opportunities. The focus group emphasised how staff need to have confidence that career progression is realistic. They felt that the Council would be in a better position to retain staff if there were opportunities for upward movement. They highlighted examples of how people had left to secure positions elsewhere<sup>37</sup>.
- 2.4.2 The focus group highlighted they did not feel supported by the organisation around professional development or supported in terms of career pathways. They have not always felt that their managers knew what to do with them and how to support them. For example, one of them highlighted how they often ran of things to do. Another was offered training which is no longer available. They also flagged whether managers were aware of specific support in place such as the early Careers Network (set out in 2.4.4 below) to signpost them to<sup>38</sup>.
- 2.4.3 The focus group also questioned the quality of the onboarding process and the length of time it took. One person highlighted important gaps such as not being aware they could request reasonable adjustments. They pointed out how when you join a large organisation, “You don’t know how things are going to work.”<sup>39</sup>
- 2.4.4 Careers Matters highlighted how wraparound support will be essential to support members of staff with specific needs including care leavers. Their work shows that if there are inadequate support systems in place, organisations will not retain young people in employment<sup>40</sup>.
- 2.4.5 While the focus group acknowledged benefits with current hybrid and working from home arrangements, they did highlight how it had potentially impacted upon opportunities to network. They described how “when you are in an office and you’ve got a team, you’ve got that morale of building each other up.” They also noted that “getting more people back into the office will help them learn about new opportunities and the ability to network.” They were also aware though that working from home can prove to be a more accessible and productive environment for some<sup>41</sup>.

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<sup>37</sup> Focus group (online) with staff (aged 24 and under), 23 February 2025 and Economy, Skills and Culture Committee, 27 November 2024.

<sup>38</sup> Focus group (online) with staff (aged 24 and under), 23 February 2025

<sup>39</sup> Focus group (online) with staff (aged 24 and under), 23 February 2025

<sup>40</sup> Evidence gathering session with Careers Matters (online), 12 February 2025

<sup>41</sup> Focus group (online) with staff (aged 24 and under), 23 February 2025

- 2.4.6 To address both of these challenges above, an Early Careers Network was set up a few years ago by two graduates from the graduate scheme. The network has both a professional development and social side. Activities have included information and guidance on preparing supporting statements and interviews. They have also set up a LinkedIn page to highlight careers within Local Government and the Council, in particular.
- 2.4.7 They also highlighted how there didn't seem to be any professional development available outside of the apprenticeship programme, or their managers weren't aware of it. They felt that this was an important way to feel valued and recognised<sup>42</sup>.
- 2.4.8 **Key Finding:** If the arrangements for early entrant programmes are devolved with no (or minimal) corporate oversight, this is likely to result in the current situation where apprenticeship, graduate or other programmes are not part of career progression pathways. Both corporate and directorate workforce plans need to introduce career pathways and supported by accredited training to enable apprenticeship funds to be used. This will give staff confidence that there is future career progression and increase retention.
- 2.4.9 **Key Finding:** All members of staff need to feel supported. Younger members of staff may have different needs as they would have a different knowledge level about the workplace. There feels inconsistencies in how managers are supporting staff on these programmes, and particularly around future career development. The Inquiry Group questioned whether there was a standard offer to support managers, so they are clear on what they need to do and the information they should provide. Supported mentoring programmes beyond direct line managers may be another idea.

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<sup>42</sup> Focus group (online) with staff (aged 24 and under), 23 February 2025

<b>Ref</b>	<b>Recommendations</b>	<b>Responsibility</b>	<b>Completion Date</b>
<b>R10</b>	Council asks the Executive to set out clearly future career pathways supported by accredited training in the Council's long term workforce plans to create a talent pipeline.	<b>Cabinet Member for Transformation, Governance and HR</b>	April 2026 (9 months)
<b>R11</b>	<p>Council asks the Executive to confirm a manager package is in place to support staff on early entrant programmes. This should include (but not exclusively):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) ensuring all managers promote the Early Careers Network and provide time for their staff to participate in network activities;</li> <li>b) Surveying all early entrants to confirm how they are being supported by their managers and whether there are opportunities to improve this; and</li> <li>c) Reviewing working at home practices to ensure all staff have access to regular in-person working to support wellbeing and professional development.</li> </ul>	<b>Cabinet Member for Transformation, Governance and HR</b>	January 2026 (6 months)