

Attracting the next generation of local government stars

Luke Judd of Starfish Search reflects on a discussion they had with the 'rising stars' of local government as part of their Top Talent series run in conjunction with *The MJ*

We know local government has a diverse array of innovative, hard working and talented people at all levels, but we also know it can be a huge challenge to attract young people into the sector. What can local authorities do differently to capture the interest of those at the start of their career when there are so many competing options?

To help us find answers to that question, we caught up with some of the people we have featured in a series of Starfish articles we have been running in *The MJ* on 'rising stars' in local government. These articles have covered various service areas such as place, communications, HR and people services, and have highlighted talented local government officers nominated by their authority. So, who better to answer this burning question? Their answers were insightful and uplifting.

There was certainly one very clear message coming from our group – and Rebecca Lea (pictured) at Greater Manchester Combined Authority summed it up well by saying that local government needs to highlight 'the positive influence the sector can have on people's lives. Working in the public sector is a fantastic opportunity to directly help people, make a real difference and influence positive, lasting change'. Many others echoed this view, such as Victoria Jeffrey at Sutton LBC, who noted 'key to each role is that we help make the lives of our residents better', as did Amy Harris at Redbridge LBC, who said: 'It's tangible, real, on your doorstep – changing lives every day.'

Kate Price (about to join Ipswich BC from Great Yarmouth BC) agreed: 'Local government often fails to communicate quite what a vital role it plays, leading people to overlook it in favour of more directly related roles in voluntary and social enterprises.'

As Sam Saxby (pictured) from Calderdale Council noted, personal values are a key driver for young people: 'They are often very passionate about justice and equality as their friends and wider network of online contacts are directly impacted by these issues.'

So, the importance of making a difference, change and social value was the big take away, but the second key theme was around the variety of roles that are available within the sector. Alistair Dinnie (pictured) at Edinburgh City Council told us: 'Local government gives you a



huge range of options. We should promote this more and show potential local government officers what a fulfilling and varied career they can have under the umbrella of one organisation.' As Kara MacFadyen (pictured) at Derby City Council noted: 'We work with hundreds of services, and that offers the opportunity for an equally diverse career path.'

Might the challenges facing the sector over the last few years, and the immense budgetary pressures, put people off? Not if, as Hannah Heineman (pictured) at North Yorkshire Council noted, 'innovation, creativity and collaboration are at the forefront of what councils pursue. Transformation and change, whether that is through partnerships, technology or innovative delivery models, provide exciting opportunities for young people to get involved and I think that this is a message we should be getting out to young people.'

Edwina Quansah (pictured) at Coventry City Council stressed the need to attract diverse young talent, commenting: 'A more intentional approach also needs to be taken to ensure the sector is representative of the diverse communities it serves, by working with schools, colleges, and universities to build early connections and inspire diverse young talent.'

Others offered some great ideas on how to get these important messages across to young people choosing a career path. Christine Urry at Buckinghamshire Council noted that most young people 'have absolutely no idea what most of

us do on a daily basis', and hence engagement was key. Sarah Goodwin at Richmond and Wandsworth Councils commented: 'We need to be "selling" these stories in a better way, engaging with young people through schools, colleges and universities so they can hear the voices of young professionals already in the sector to dispel some myths and encourage young people to seriously consider local government as a career option. We also need to do more to promote varied routes into local government including apprenticeships and internships and to ensure we share diverse role models to help all groups see they can have a successful career in local government.' And Esther Fajoye at Camden also suggested young people should 'see the role first hand, such as a "day in the life of" to see what a day is like in various roles.'

Lily Hall at Rotherham Council made a great suggestion: 'In Rotherham our staff-led groups, such as the Young Employees Network, help us to create new and engaging ways to recruit. If young people help to design the solution, you won't go far wrong!'

Several respondents mentioned apprenticeships, and Naseir Khan (pictured) at Birmingham City Council gave us a positive personal insight: 'When I joined local government, I was 19 years old and what enticed me to join was the idea of the apprenticeship route. Becoming an apprentice sounded good to me and an idea of a promising future and of course not being paid the minimum apprenticeship wage but an actual salary with an offer of a permanent job at the end of it.'

This was echoed by Kay O'Flaherty at Wrexham CBC who said: 'At Wrexham we have had great

success with our modern apprenticeship scheme. As many young people choose not to have the expense of university this is a good way to get into work and learn a wide variety of skills.' Viki Mannion at Cheshire West and Chester Council agreed it was important to 'champion apprenticeships and share the wealth of learning opportunities that come from working in a local government environment – demonstrate the importance of having people with lived experience in the workforce'.

We also asked our group about the crucial qualities they feel are important to succeed as a local government officer. They put forward a great array of qualities such as innovation, collaboration and resilience, but authenticity and integrity came through as perhaps the most fundamental trait. Sam Kirk at Hackney LBC summed it up brilliantly: 'Be an authentic leader, don't be afraid to show vulnerabilities, and lead with honesty and transparency, all of which will build trust within your team, the organisation and the community.'

What was inspiring about talking to this group of leaders was their positivity, passion and commitment. All of them saw the sector as a great place to influence change and they all felt that they were making society a better place to be. If local authorities can tap into this ethos when recruiting young people, the sector will be in safe hands. ■

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