

Kent County Council

Helping young people into employment across the county

Kent County Council is keen to support local young people to develop their skills and secure jobs both within the organisation and at other employers across the region. It operates a work experience programme, apprenticeships scheme and a graduate recruitment programme – and it also recognises an innovative staff group that, since 2007, has been actively promoting and supporting the career development and wellbeing of the council's younger employees.

Supporting young people

A key part of the overall strategy at Kent County Council (KCC) is to support young people in the region – in particular, to help them develop their employability skills, such as self-management, teamwork and business awareness. In practice, this involves providing jobs for young workers within the council – as well as working with other local employers to offer employment opportunities across the region.

'As a local council – and as the county's largest employer – we have a leadership role to play within the community. If we are pledging to support the region's young people to find work and build careers, we need to be seen to be providing opportunities for them ourselves,' says Nigel Fairburn, Workforce Strategy Manager.

'But it's also in our interests as an organisation to employ more young people. We have an ageing workforce that isn't sustainable in the long-term and is going to bring problems further down the line if we don't address it. And we also want to reflect the community we serve. Around 15 per cent of Kent's residents are aged between 16 and 25 – but just 7 per cent of the council's employees fall into this age group. Finally, young workers bring value in their own right – they can help bring different ways of thinking and new perspectives to the organisation, and challenge the status quo.'

Age profile

Looking at the age profile of the council's workforce highlights its need to bring in more young employees. Currently, about 40 per cent of its staff are aged 50 or over – compared to about 14.5 per cent who are aged under 30. Moreover, the council's recruitment and retention statistics suggest this pattern is unlikely to change in the short term: the average age of a new employee at KCC is 37, while the staff turnover rate is higher among the under-30s – reflecting trends across the wider employment market.

Older employees valued

Fairburn makes the point that the council's focus on bringing in younger staff does not mean it sees less

value in its older workers – far from it. 'Older employees bring a number of benefits,' he says, 'including knowledge, skills and experience. And none of the myths about them are true – they don't have more absence, for example.'

'But, in organisational development terms, we need to look at the workforce we have now and at what we will need in the future,' he continues. 'The council is under pressure to reduce headcount over the next few years, so we need to ensure we have robust succession planning in place and that we are recruiting young people with the potential to develop and work their way up through the organisation.'

Attracting young employees

Kent County Council's efforts to support young people in the region and bring more young employees into the workforce can be seen in a variety of initiatives. These include its recently overhauled work experience programme (see the box on page 27), its extensive apprenticeships scheme, its graduate recruitment programme, and its staff group for younger employees.

Apprenticeships

In KCC's last four-year plan, 'Towards 2010', it committed to developing an apprenticeship scheme that would provide at least 1,000 apprenticeships for young people in the region – both within the council and with other public and private organisations in the county. Between 2006 and 2010, the council surpassed this target: 344 people started an apprenticeship within KCC and a further 1,108 started an apprenticeship with other local employers, with the help and support of the council.

'The scheme is split between apprenticeships that we offer internally, within the council, and those offered

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Profile

Kent County Council is one of the largest councils in the country and provides more than 300 services for around 1.6 million residents. The council employs over 11,000 people (36,000 including school staff).

by other employers across the county, who we support,' says Sarah Colclough, Kent Apprenticeships Support Officer at KCC. 'We have developed a strong support structure for apprenticeships within the council, using our internal training provider, and we are working to recreate this for outside employers in the county.'

Apprenticeships within KCC

The council typically has around 80 apprentices on its books at any one time, in areas such as business administration, customer service and childcare. All KCC's apprenticeships last for 12 months and apprentices are paid £105 a week. They also receive the same benefits package as other employees, including pension, holiday and sick pay.

'In the past few years, managers have tended to employ apprentices in supernumerary roles,' says Colclough. 'But since September 2010 we have been challenging them to try and recruit apprentices into real roles within the council. This is hard in the current climate, as when a vacancy arises the council first needs to look to redeploy any current employees who are at risk of redundancy before considering any other options. But, if the position remains vacant and it is in one of our three entry-level grades, apprentices then take precedence over other applicants.'

Apprentices who successfully pass their six-month probation are guaranteed the role on a permanent basis, on full salary, if they successfully complete their apprenticeship. Other apprentices who are coming to the end of their apprenticeship contract are offered support to find other full-time employment either internally or externally – by providing interview skills training, for example – or they are offered help with their application for university, if that is their preferred option.

Handling training and administration

A dedicated team within KCC provides support to managers wishing to take on an apprentice. The team handles the administration side, from writing job descriptions, sifting applications and interviewing candidates, to drawing up contracts of employment (through HR) and liaising with payroll to ensure apprentices are paid correctly. It also sends someone to carry out a review after six weeks to check how the arrangement is panning out. If everything is fine at that stage, the team then takes a step back.

'All of this makes it very easy for directorates within the council to engage with the scheme,' says Colclough. 'A manager simply has to identify a role that he or she thinks would be suitable for an apprentice and then contact the training provider to start the recruitment process. The manager makes the

final decision on who to hire, from a shortlist of candidates supplied by the training provider – but other than that, all the hard work is done for them.'

The training aspect of KCC's apprenticeships is delivered by the council's in-house training provider, KEY Training Services. It also offers support to managers and young people throughout the apprenticeship programme.

Supporting apprenticeships outside the council

While the council has taken on 344 apprentices in the past four years, the majority of apprenticeships (1,108) in the county have been created by other employers. These apprenticeships can last anything from 12 months to five years.

'It's easy for our own directorates to take on apprentices because of the support they get – and that's why so many of them get involved. So we've tried to recreate the same support structures for other employers in the county,' says Colclough. 'We've set up a process whereby any employer interested in taking on an apprentice can contact the council, and we will work with them to write a job description and person specification. After this, we liaise with our extensive network of training providers across Kent to find the most suitable match for their needs. The training provider and employer can then decide between themselves how much and how little each party will do in terms of recruiting the apprentice and setting up the placement.'

Funding for training

The majority of the council's apprenticeships are targeted at 16- to 18-year-olds, as the cost of the training is completely covered by government funding. But the scheme is open to people of any age to apply. 'It can be difficult for us to persuade employers to take on apprentices over the age of 18, as they then have to contribute to the cost of the training,' says Colclough, 'although by working closely with them, we are able to highlight the benefits of taking on an apprentice, and so the extra training costs become less of an issue.'

A positive impact

The council's internal apprenticeship scheme has been successful in helping people to find jobs, with 87 per cent of those completing their training going on to gain full-time, permanent employment (68 per cent within KCC or the wider public sector and 19 per cent within the private sector).

Reaching vulnerable learners

In the past year, the council has turned its attention to supporting vulnerable learners into apprenticeships. This includes young offenders, young parents, looked-

after children leaving care, and people with learning disabilities – groups in which the unemployment rate far exceeds the national youth unemployment figures. ‘People in these groups often face discrimination, especially in the job market,’ says Colclough. ‘As a community leader, focusing on these groups is clearly the right thing to do. But it also makes sense financially, as providing apprenticeships costs the government less than supporting 16- to 18-year-old NEETS [Not in Employment, Education or Training] or dealing with young offenders who re-offend.’

Since September 2010, the council has managed to place 71 vulnerable learners into apprenticeships.

Graduate recruitment programme

KCC has a long history of recruiting graduates – its graduate recruitment programme is now in its 13th year. Candidates can apply for a place in one of four different strands – management, finance, environment and highway transportation. Each stream offers a structured, two-year development programme – with the exception of the finance stream, which lasts for three years to give graduates time to complete their CIPFA (Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy) professional accountancy qualification. Graduates are paid a starting salary of £23,054 a year, which increases with progress, and are eligible to join the local government pension scheme.

‘We take on around eight graduates a year,’ says Ann Hopkins, Graduate Services Manager at KCC. ‘Three or four join the management stream, two come into finance, two into highway transportation and one into the environment stream. The programme is always oversubscribed – this year, for example, the management stream attracted over 360 applications for just three or four positions.’

Programme structure

Each stream comprises a series of placements of between six and nine months across various key areas of the council. The actual roles graduates are asked to fill varies, but they are always chosen to challenge them and meet their specific development needs, and they often involve working on high profile projects. People on the highway transportation stream may also have the chance to work on an external placement with one of the council’s partnership organisations or services.

Qualifications

All graduates are given the opportunity to train for relevant qualifications during the course of their programme, including the Chartered Management Institute’s diploma in management and the PRINCE2 project management qualification.

Work experience at Kent County Council

Kent County Council (KCC) has always hosted work experience students, but this year it has completely overhauled the way it promotes and manages its placements. ‘In the past, it was left to schools and parents to come to us if they had a student who was interested in spending some time with the council,’ says Emma Lacey, Work Experience Project Officer at KCC. ‘We would then try to find a suitable job for them. But under the new scheme we have turned this on its head and become more proactive – we now find possible placement opportunities up front, and then seek students to fill them.’

‘Most schools and colleges tend to allow students to go out on work experience in July, for either one or two weeks, so we try to identify opportunities to match these requirements,’ she continues. ‘But if an employee can only offer one day a week for six weeks, for example, or if someone can only take a student on for three days in June, we’ll still see if there are any takers for the placement.’

Advertising placement opportunities online

All of the council’s work experience opportunities – including details of job title, description and location – are advertised on its website, so students can look for positions in which they might be interested.

‘This brings a number of advantages over the previous system,’ says Lacey. ‘For a start, it enables students to see for themselves the sort of positions we have available. This means we won’t have people applying for roles we don’t offer or roles that are full, which can result in disappointment. But it also helps promote opportunities that might otherwise be overlooked. For example, many students might think that to get legal work experience, they need to go to a law firm – they might not realise that the council has a legal department. Moving the whole process online also brings us into line with how students expect to be able to view job opportunities and make applications.’

Planning ahead

But perhaps the biggest advantage of the new system is that it allows the council to pre-plan its placements and ensure they offer good quality and relevant work experience for all students. ‘For example, if an employee knows they will be hosting work experience students in a few weeks’ time, he or she might put a suitable project to one side for them to complete during their placement,’ says Lacey. ‘We also send students a form in advance of the placement asking them to let us know of anything they would particularly like to get out of their time with us. We want to make it a good experience – we want the students to develop their employability skills and get a good feel of what a job actually involves.’

First year targets

The council is aiming to fill at least 300 work experience placements in the 2011/12 school year, which would represent a significant increase on the 200 or so students it used to host each year under the previous system. ‘The target of 300 placements equates to around 40 positions in each of the council’s directorates, and overall to around one position in each team – so it should be achievable, especially as many teams already offer several places,’ says Lacey.

Support for graduates

Throughout their placements graduates receive support from the programme manager, a recent graduate ‘buddy’ and the rest of their graduate cohort.

Each graduate is also given his or her own mentor – a senior staff member who works to ensure the individual's training needs are being met during each placement.

After the programme

People in the finance stream are offered a guaranteed job with KCC at the end of their development programme. Graduates in the other three streams are given advice and assistance to help them find a suitable role to move into before the end of the programme, and to this end they are encouraged to set up their own final placement within the council with the aim that this will lead to a permanent position.

Staff group for younger employees

KCC has four staff groups that aim to offer support, friendship, networking and training opportunities for members of staff who are 'under-represented' in the workforce. This includes groups for members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community, black and minority ethnic staff, employees who consider themselves disabled – and one for younger staff members under the age of 30.

'Greenhouse [the staff group for younger employees] was launched in 2006 by a small group of staff who felt a little stranded as young employees within such a big organisation,' says Holly Strang, Total Reward Adviser at KCC and Chair of Greenhouse. The council formally recognised the group in June 2007, and it now has around 290 members. While core membership is only open to employees under the age of 30, the group is open to any member of staff who can actively contribute to Greenhouse's aims.

The group's aims

The stated aim of the group is:

'to be proactive in empowering younger members of staff to fulfil their potential by: making it easier for them to access employment and development opportunities; and seeking and taking opportunities to expand younger employees' experiences within the working environment – including outside their day jobs.'

To achieve its aims, the group commits to:

- hold meetings at least four times a year and actively promote the group to KCC staff
- represent the views, interests and concerns of younger members of staff
- provide support by creating a non-judgemental, comfortable environment, in which younger staff can meet, share concerns, and seek advice and guidance

- create opportunities for development that younger staff may not otherwise receive, through skills and knowledge sharing, guest speakers and training events
- act as a creative forum that will generate new and innovative ideas for the benefit of KCC
- serve as a mechanism for consultation that can be used by all directorates
- provide a forum where younger staff can meet new people from a variety of personal and professional backgrounds, to try to reduce isolation and develop and improve networking links.

Forums and social events

The group holds four or five forums a year, at different venues across the county. During each event, members are updated on the group's activities and are reminded of their rights and entitlements as employees of the council. Guest speakers may also be invited to give a talk on a relevant topic – previous subjects that have been covered include coaching and mentoring, the local government pension scheme, and buddying. Greenhouse members are able to attend forums during work time and KCC provides modest funding to support the group.

The group also holds social events once a month and after every forum. 'These are a great place for young employees to get together, which is especially important for staff who work alone or in very small departments,' says Strang. And the group has its own Yammer community, which allows members to stay in touch online.

Further support for staff

Greenhouse has a number of trained members who can act as 'buddies' for younger staff. 'This means younger people have ready access to another younger person at the council to help with any issues or questions they may have,' says Strang. 'Often our members don't feel comfortable asking older colleagues what they might think are "silly" questions, like where the best café in the area is, so it can help to have someone of a similar age to talk to.'

The group also produces a 32-page guide for younger members of staff. This gives details of the benefits and entitlements that are available to all members of staff, as well as some of the services – such as buddying – offered by Greenhouse. It also contains a number of staff profiles of employees with long service at KCC, which are designed to offer an insight into how their careers have developed during their time at the council. And because the group is formally recognised by the council, it is able to act for its members in an official capacity. It can contact HR or

line managers to raise issues on behalf of its members, for example.

Organising the group

Strang runs Greenhouse with the help of eight volunteers from the group's core membership. Together they organise the forums and social events, and oversee its activities. But all members are encouraged to come up with their own ideas and initiatives for the group, and to take responsibility for designing and realising these projects.

'Working for the group in this way gives members a fantastic opportunity to do things outside of their usual role,' says Strang. 'For example, someone working in a business admin role might not get the chance to do any project management work in their day-to-day job – but Greenhouse gives them the chance to learn new skills and put them straight into practice. And the experience developed by taking part in these projects has helped several younger employees to successfully move up the career ladder within the council.'

Training and development opportunities

Greenhouse works hard to ensure younger employees have access to training and development opportunities. For example, the group has recently developed an informal network that is designed to match up members who have different skills to learn from each other in short sessions. 'All of our members have certain skills that are of value to the council and to other employees,' says Strang. 'The idea of the network is that a member who wishes to improve their presentation skills, for example, could find another member who has those skills and arrange to meet them for a 30-minute training session over lunch. And in return, the first member may be able to train the other member in one of their skills, such as report writing for example.'

On a more formal basis, last year the group successfully asked the council to run a talent management programme specifically designed for the needs of younger employees. The 'young persons talent management programme' comprised four one-day training sessions over four months – covering topics such as career development, confidence building, coaching and mentoring, and CV preparation –

followed by eight months of mentoring with a senior member of staff. Places on the programme were limited, so the council put on an additional one-day event with similar content for people who were unable to take part in the longer programme.

The group is also piloting a work shadowing scheme, where Greenhouse members can shadow a council cabinet member in their day-to-day activities. 'Thirty of our members have taken part in the scheme so far and given very positive feedback,' says Strang, 'and the cabinet members have told us they have really enjoyed it too.'

Commendations for the group

The group came third in last year's Young Local Authority of the Year, won the Young English County Council of the Year, was highly commended in the 'best public sector innovation' category at the 2010 Employers Forum on Age awards and won this year's award for Innovation in the Public Sector. 'It's nice to be recognised – we are very proud of what we've achieved. We've really helped a lot of young people progress their careers at the council,' says Strang. 'Young people have such enthusiasm and such great ideas, you need a way to ensure they are harnessed and put to use within the organisation – and we are very keen to help other councils set up similar initiatives.'

Future developments

Fairburn is happy with the progress KCC has made in the last few years, but he feels it can still improve. 'We're doing more than many others, but we would like to employ more young people' he says. 'We have some great foundations in place, in terms of the work experience, apprenticeships and graduate schemes, but we need to do more. We will further integrate our plans. For example, we will build stronger links between the work experience programme and our apprenticeships scheme, making it easier for people to see the opportunities we have and for the council to keep track of all the talent that comes into the organisation. If we can do that it would really herald a new age for the council and it would really help us move towards a "one council" model, supporting young people into employment.'