



Belfast City Council

Report to:	Strategic Policy and Resources Committee
Subject:	Pre-employment training programmes for the long-term unemployed
Date:	22 February 2008
Reporting Officer:	Trevor Salmon, Director of Corporate Services, extension 6083
Contact Officer:	Jill Minne, Principal HR Advisor (Acting Head of Human Resources), extension 3220

Purpose of report:

To seek approval to widen the scope of the council's community outreach programme by engaging with the Citywide Employability Consortium (CEC) to:

- (1) develop pre-employment training programmes for the ¹long term unemployed which would lead to successful trainees being guaranteed job interviews for relevant publicly advertised council posts; and
- (2) participate in a Workforce Buddies Project, which is an employee mentoring scheme, to support the retention of former long term unemployed appointees.

Relevant background information:

The CEC is part funded and managed by Belfast City Council's Economic Development Section and is made up of representatives from the 4 areas of the city – LEAP (North), Stepping Stones (East), Gems NI (South), Employment Services Board and Employers Forum (West & Greater Shankill).

The CEC has developed an operational plan for a city-wide employer interface service and has asked BCC to assist the long term unemployed in these areas to gain the necessary skills and experience to support them in gaining employment.

Key Issues

(1) Developing pre-employment training programmes for the long term unemployed:

BCC has facilitated some short term work experience placements for the long term unemployed through its current community outreach programme and the CEC has requested further council engagement in providing pre-employment training programmes that are specifically designed to link the unemployed and economically

¹ Long-term unemployed is defined as those being without work for over 1 year (International Labour Organisation)

inactive to specific job vacancies within the council and the wider public sector.

Such training programmes, which can be delivered on-site or off-site, will be designed by the council, other participating public sector organisations, the CEC and a recognised training organisation e.g. Belfast Metropolitan College. This training will reflect the skills, qualities and values required for basic entry level posts within the public sector e.g. a cleansing operative, and modules may include an awareness of health and safety, an introduction to IT, customer service skills, communication skills, team skills, learning to work as a team, dealing with conflict, decision making techniques, interview techniques and mock interview sessions.

The programme duration can range from three to 7 weeks and the maximum number of participants per programme is 15. As part of the programme, the council would be required to provide work experience placements, site visits to BCC locations for those involved and guarantee a job interview for relevant publicly advertised council posts to those who have successfully completed the course.

Other large public sector organisations such as the N.I. Housing Executive are also considering participation in this initiative and, as such, would be a partner organisation for the council in this regard. The Mater Hospital, the North & West Belfast Trust and the Royal Group of Hospitals have already successfully completed eight pre-employment training programmes and therefore provide useful case studies.

In terms of the legal implications of guaranteeing interviews to the long term unemployed, the Equality Commission for N.I. has advised that employers are permitted to treat long-term unemployed persons more favourably than other persons providing this condition or requirement is applied to all unemployed persons. The CEC will have responsibility for ensuring fair selection of the trainees on a city-wide and equality basis and for liaising with other organisations in terms of similar employability programmes. Regardless of such a guaranteed interview scheme, all council appointments would of course continue to be based on the merit principle in line with the Local Government Staff Commission's Code of Procedure on Recruitment and Selection.

(2) Workforce Buddies Programme:

The council has also been asked to consider engaging in the Workforce Buddies Project to support the retention of a former long-term unemployed appointee and to help him/her settle effectively into his/her new role. This project is an employee mentoring scheme where council workers who by attending formal training (with the option of gaining an OCR Certificate in Coaching which could also go towards an NVQ qualification) can act as a 'buddy' for the new start by providing coaching, mentoring and support for up to 6 months. The 'buddies' would be required to undertake the role voluntarily without additional remuneration but the role is a personal development opportunity. This approach has been evaluated as very successful in both the Mater Hospital and the Royal Group of Hospitals.

Resource Implications

Financial

(1) Pre-employment training programme for the long-term unemployed:

The CEC has advised that the cost of running a 3 year training programme, with 120 participants, is £406,444 across all the engaging organisations (a cost of £3,387 per participant). However, the North Belfast Partnership Board (NBPB) which works in partnership with the CEC and who will have project management responsibility has recently secured European funding to administer such pre-employment programmes

across the city for public sector employers. This leaves a match funding requirement of £142,256. Of this amount, it is anticipated that £55,500 will be obtained through a Government Training Programme leaving an outstanding amount of £86,756 to be sourced. Whilst other funding sources are being investigated by the NBPB e.g. BRO, the council has been asked to make a contribution to this amount. This contribution is not essential to participation in the scheme but it does present an opportunity for the council to enhance its corporate social responsibilities and take a leading role in this initiative. Given that the sum of £86,756 is for a three year period (equating to £28,918 per annum), should Members agree to engage with this initiative it is proposed that the council contribute a third of the costs i.e. £10,000 per annum from the Human Resource corporate workforce development budget. This equates to the council contributing £250 per participant per annum (based on 40 participants) which is in line with the national average currently being spent per employee per annum on training and development within the public sector. The NBPB would prefer this funding as a lump sum for the three years. It is recommended however that funding should be given by BCC for year one only (i.e. £10,000 contribution for 2008/09) with funding for years two and three being dependant on successful evaluation of the first year of the programme and agreement from committee in this regard.

(2) Workforce Buddies Project:

The cost of mentor training per council employee would be £500 with formal accreditation costing an additional £200. Time off for training would also need to be factored into operational considerations.

Human Resources

Given the scope and scale of this long-term project, initial communication and consultation has taken place with COMT, relevant council sections, the management side of the JCC and the trade unions. If engagement in the programme is agreed, this will continue in order to ensure its effective planning, project management and communication. Specifically, detailed discussions regarding resource implications will take place with the individual council sections most affected.

The CEC is not in a position to sign the council's indemnity form or provide any indemnity cover and the council would be required to self-insure these long-term unemployed trainees whilst on a work experience placement or site visit to the council. This situation is acceptable to Legal Services and the council's Insurance Officer provided that the relevant health and safety processes are put in place.

Finally, in accordance with Section 75 duties of the N.I. Act 1998, a consultation and screening process will ensue to assess if there is any adverse impact in relation to one or more of the Section 75 categories.

Asset and Other Implications

There are no assets or other implications contained within this report.

Recommendations

Members are asked to agree to widen the scope of the council's community outreach

programme by engaging with the Citywide Employability Consortium (CEC) to:

- (1) develop pre-employment training programmes for the ²long term unemployed which would lead to successful trainees being guaranteed job interviews for relevant publicly advertised council posts; and
- (2) to participate in a Workforce Buddies Project, which is an employee mentoring scheme, to support the retention of former long term unemployed appointees.

Members are also asked to agree that the council funds these initiatives as detailed above.

Key to Abbreviations

CEC- Citywide Employability Consortium
NBPB- North Belfast Partnership Board
BRO – Belfast Regeneration Office
JCC – Joint Consultative Committee

² Long-term unemployed is defined as those being without work for over 1 year (International Labour Organisation)