

UNISON Bexley branch response to London Borough of Bexley Organisational Blueprint 2020

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Contents

Introduction	2
Workload and stress for staff at all levels	2
Permanent vs agency/interim/locum staff.....	2
Recruitment into new management roles.....	2
Re-evaluation of jobs in restructures.....	3
Seek further funding from central government.....	3
Examples from elsewhere	4
Equalities Impact Assessment	4
Risk Assessment	4
Voluntary redundancies	4
Redundancy terms.....	4
Finance-specific feedback	5
Leaving oneSource.....	5
Consolidation of staff.....	5
Draft Finance management structure.....	5
Quality of work.....	5
Staff morale.....	6
Consultation process	6
Feedback outside scope.....	7

Introduction

This report represents and summarises the views gathered from UNISON members employed by the London Borough of Bexley through consultation by email and a well-attended online members' lunchtime meeting.

Our members were reached by email and encouraged to read the Blueprint documents and attend the council's staff Blueprint briefing on 7 July in order to ensure they fully understood the proposals and could feed back in an informed way.

All feedback emailed to us or raised and discussed at our meeting was gathered on condition of collective anonymity. We have broken down the feedback under headings when summarising and collating the feedback.

Workload and stress for staff at all levels

Members have expressed concerns about workload at all levels of the organisation as a result of the changes proposed in the Blueprint (as well as more generally).

The spans of control of Deputy Directors and Heads of Service will increase under these proposals, so there is a concern that the holders of these roles will become further overworked. Across the organisation there is a perception that a lot of responsibility is not delegated, causing 'log jams' of approvals with senior management. There is concern that, if this continues in the new structure, workload and delays will increase if the smaller cohort of senior managers retain the same amount of oversight and decision making.

One other aspect of the restructure that may cause stress at senior levels is where there are multiple staff competing for one of the roles in question. Members expressed concerns that senior managers competing for roles could create difficulties for collaborative working between their departments. Stress experienced by managers may inevitably filter down to their staff too. This is perhaps a reason to try to ensure these changes are made quickly and, as far as possible, voluntarily where [redundancies](#) are concerned.

Permanent vs agency/interim/locum staff

Something members regularly feed back to us as a money-saving idea is replacing the (generally more costly) agency/interim/locum staff with permanent staff. It's therefore good to see that this Blueprint seeks to recruit permanent postholders into roles which have been filled on interim bases up to now. We hope to see this approach taken elsewhere in the council as further restructures follow on from the implementation of the final agreed Blueprint.

Recruitment into new management roles

UNISON believe that the creation of new management roles should provide an opportunity for staff working within those areas to progress in their careers, should they wish to do so.

This would particularly be the case in areas where there have been gaps in senior management for periods of time which have seen staff needing to cover many of the kinds of duties the senior managers above them would otherwise have been doing. (Some such areas may be identified with reference to staff at the next tier down who may have been receiving honoraria for 'acting up'.)

This could be a good opportunity to see Bexley 'grow its own' and give existing staff some advancement, so it's disappointing to see the communications around this being about telling people from outside Bexley about the jobs, without suggesting Bexley staff apply for them.

Re-evaluation of jobs in restructures

The report contains a lot of information about extra work for the Director of Finance and Corporate Services and mentions bringing all Directors up to the same level. No grading information for any of the roles has been provided in this consultation but we interpret this to mean that the DoFCS role is being re-evaluated as part of the Blueprint and raised to bring all Directors' grades into line with each other.

Some members have expressed concerns about a Director taking a pay rise at a time of great financial difficulty; however, it is UNISON's overall view that it is right that when someone's job changes and they take on more duties, their role should be re-evaluated and their pay increased accordingly. Given the scale of change happening at LBB, we would expect to see this happen at all levels of the organisation in the coming months so that all staff who take on more work are appropriately rewarded for this.

Seek further funding from central government

We understand that the general principles of the Blueprint predate the coronavirus pandemic, but we also understand that both this and future restructure proposals have been made all the more urgent by the pandemic's financial impact on the council.

In March the government promised to do "whatever necessary" to support councils through the Covid-19 crisis, but we now know that the crisis has made LB Bexley's financial position worse because the government are only covering 36% of our costs and losses so far (as at the time of the last general Staff Briefing).

Many of the staff affected by additional savings proposals will be people who have gone above and beyond to assist with the crisis. We understand that the Chief Executive and the Leader have been lobbying the government for more money, but we would welcome further work at both officer and political levels to encourage the government to keep their promise not to leave the council worse off financially as a result of the pandemic.

UNISON would of course be happy to be involved in any activity along these lines on behalf of all our members, to support the council receiving more funding, if we can be useful.

Examples from elsewhere

Members suggested it might be helpful to their understanding of the proposals, and to staff's faith in them, if they could see examples of similar management structures or organisational principles to those proposed in the Blueprint (e.g. centralised "technical and project delivery hub") which had been used in other organisations and succeeded; or even perhaps information about which particular management model or HR business model the proposals would be following. Examples of similar successes from elsewhere may be something that the council could include in future briefings and other communications of these (or future) proposals.

Equalities Impact Assessment

The report mentions that an Equalities Impact Assessment has been undertaken. Can this be published, and could future EIAs be published as a matter of course alongside consultations? We know the council has recently begun work on an equalities action plan so would be keen to see how this focus on equalities is informing restructure decisions.

Risk Assessment

Some members raised broad but serious concerns around questions such as whether the council would definitely still be able to fulfil all its statutory obligations under this proposed reduced management structure. In light of this, we wondered whether a Risk Assessment was undertaken of the proposals in the Blueprint, and if so whether this could be published?

Voluntary redundancies

In all restructures which result in a reduced headcount, UNISON advocates for voluntary redundancies being sought ahead of any other route leading to compulsory redundancies. We have not received specific representations in relation to any of the proposed redundancies in the Blueprint but our principle on this stands, and we hope to see this pursued in any future restructures as well.

Redundancy terms

Some concerns have been expressed that the terms in effect for the currently proposed redundancies, affecting senior managers, may be worsened in a future renegotiation of council staff terms and conditions, before the next round of restructures and redundancies follow on from the implementation of the Blueprint.

We hope the council appreciate how unfair it would be if senior managers being made redundant now received better redundancy terms than the staff whose redundancies may follow quite rapidly on from this as the restructuring works its way through the rest of the organisation, and we therefore hope that proposals to worsen redundancy terms will not be brought forward at this time.

Finance-specific feedback

Leaving oneSource

While we understand that the restructure within Finance is not in the scope of this report, we note that no proposals have yet been provided for what will happen within Finance once the services within this area have left the oneSource partnership.

Members in Finance report to us that staff at another council withdrawing services from oneSource has already been briefed and consulted on the future shape of their services, with reviews, structures and job descriptions out for consultation since May. Bexley staff, by contrast, feel that they are in the dark about what will happen to them, even though we are now just two weeks away from Bexley's involvement in oneSource ceasing. This is adding further anxiety at an already stressful time and UNISON would welcome consultation of unions and staff on the future of the Finance department as soon as possible.

Consolidation of staff

The report mentions the planned consolidation of staff based in directorates working in the same function/discipline, citing Business Support, ICT etc. as examples. Members in Finance asked whether there were similar plans for any staff working in financial disciplines around the organisation to be brought into the Finance department and suggested this could provide more resilience given the number of vacancies in the service in recent months and years.

Draft Finance management structure

Members in Finance broadly welcomed the outline senior management proposals for their area as representing a move towards more sustainable staffing and resourcing of the service, while reserving full judgement until full Finance proposals are published.

In line with general concerns elsewhere (see [Workload and stress for staff at all levels](#)), the main concerns expressed about the senior management structure related to large spans of control. For instance, the new Deputy Director role was welcomed but it being responsible for so many areas including Property, Assets and Facilities Management is a concern, particularly when some Head of Service roles beneath this will initially be vacant. Similar concerns related to the idea of a single Head of Business Partnering to cover this work across the whole council.

Quality of work

Members in Finance were keen to record that criticisms of oneSource not delivering "tight financial planning and control of the Council's finances" should not be seen as reflecting on the staff themselves, many of whom have had a stressful move into oneSource and now face an uncertain move back from it, all while going above and beyond to keep delivering their service.

As the report acknowledges, there have been persistent difficulties in recruiting into vacant Finance roles in oneSource, so UNISON would like to see this under-resourcing explicitly recognised as causing problems with service delivery.

Staff morale

A recurring theme in feedback from our members, both during and outside this consultation, is how rock-bottom morale at LBB now is. Some of the communications which staff have been receiving have been extremely demotivating and worrying.

One clear formal example of this is the message from June's emails and briefings, which said: "If there are jobs or roles that haven't been done in the last few months and haven't been missed, then we need to consider whether we bring them back at all." This was included in a list of potential efficiencies as if it were an unremarkable statement – but this sentence demoralises staff in multiple ways, suggesting some of their jobs, everything they do for the council, can be stopped overnight and not missed, and that redundancies are imminent, without explaining anything further so it's left to people's imaginations.

More broadly, numerous members tell of how team meetings are relentlessly miserable as the council's difficult financial position is "drummed into" them and they are repeatedly told to work out how they will "justify" their jobs continuing to exist.

The reports of low morale that we have heard from our members give cause for concern about staff's mental health and wellbeing. While it is not the first time we have heard and reported low morale, it does feel especially low at the moment.

Consultation process

We welcome the Blueprint document being shared with unions in advance of wider distribution to all staff, putting us in a better position to undertake meaningful consultation with our members and offer them support with the questions they had when the document was released to staff – thank you. We trust that this will continue to be the case with future consultations too.

However, the overall timescale for this major consultation was very short, with the document released to us at 10.45pm on 29 June and responses for inclusion in Committee papers required to be with HR by 16 July, only just over two weeks later. This would be a tight turnaround time for a small consultation affecting a single department, but for something as all-encompassing as the Blueprint it posed a real challenge to our ability to engage meaningfully with our members.

UNISON Bexley branch is keen to engage constructively with LBB at a time of major ongoing change for the organisation, but our representatives have very limited time available to do this on top of their substantive jobs without significantly eating into their own time as well, at a time of increased concern around staff mental wellbeing. We know the Blueprint is the first of many restructures expected over the coming months and therefore wish to flag now that we will struggle to consult our members and provide useful feedback in those if the timescales remain so short.

Our members too have fed back to us that they feel the Blueprint is being "rushed through" and that timescales for this consultation have been inadequate. For something that has been in preparation for so long, and was expected to be imminently published in March before the

coronavirus pandemic interrupted it, members found it disappointing that it was finally published so late ahead of the Committee's consideration.

Staff have also found the approach to the briefings quite rushed and unclear. Members reported having to use the weekend to read the Blueprint ahead of the 7 July staff briefing. There have ended up being two council-wide staff briefings and one additional briefing for each directorate – but none of these was announced with more than two working days' notice, and each one was the only one announced at the time it took place, meaning for instance that UNISON sent both Branch Secretaries to the first one, and heavily promoted it to all members, on the assumption that there would not be any more.

Between the short timescale and lack of pre-announcement, it would have been possible for a member of staff to go on leave for just 7 working days (logging off at 5pm Friday 3 July and returning at 9am on Wed 15 July) and miss the announcement of the Blueprint's existence and all the briefings about it – and have just a day left to feed back their views on it for proper consideration by the Committee.

For future consultations, we would prefer to see clear timetables set out at the start listing all planned consultation activity with dates, to ensure we can make the most efficient use of these opportunities. This clear timetable could then also include deadlines for responses, dates of decisions etc. as well.

Feedback outside scope

Finally, we wanted to register the large volume of feedback we received during this consultation period which on consideration we deemed was outside the scope of the Blueprint (due to being solely focussed on team structures and other matters from far lower down the organisational structure). We have therefore not included this feedback in our report in detail at this stage.

In particular, we have had a lot of feedback that has related to matters covered in the council's Medium-Term Financial Strategy, including detailed questions and concerns around the closure of Children and Family Centres and changes to the Learning & Enterprise College Bexley. Staff are concerned that some such proposals were only first mentioned to them a few hours before they were published in council papers. As a union we are concerned that we were not informed or consulted about these significant proposals from the MTFS before they were published, and unions have not had the specific proposals drawn to their attention either (just the overall MTFS).

UNISON's consultation process has demonstrated that our members around the council are very engaged with the challenges Bexley faces and are keen to feed their thoughts and concerns into the way these are addressed going forward after the Blueprint has settled the top tiers of the organisational structure.

UNISON therefore believe that the earlier in the process of future restructures (within individual departments and service areas) you are able to open a dialogue with unions and affected staff, the more the process will be able to benefit meaningfully from the input of those most directly affected.