

# Why councils should nurture ambitious staff

AFTER 16 years of working in local councils Alex Cousins switched to the private sector.

What drove the 36-year-old was not the promise of a bigger salary (she was initially offered less) but the desire to increase her skills and fill the experience gaps in her CV.

"I do feel loyalty to the public-service ethos, but my first responsibility is to myself and my career," she said.

"I've worked for two local councils in a variety of roles and I've always thought it was important to move around to avoid stagnating."

Cousins, who is now employed by an IT consultancy, is keeping her options open about returning to the public sector. But she is confident that working in business has given her an added edge.

"Changing your working environment gives you the opportunity to learn new skills, to reinvent yourself and be innovative," she said. "My goal in my last job was to make the changes I'd been brought in to oversee within two years. Once I'd done that, it was time for the next thing."

Alex's go-getting approach is a far cry from the stereotyped image of the local-authority worker cosily settling into a job for life.

Research by Penna, a human-resources consultancy, suggests that she is typical of an emerging breed of independently minded and ambitious public-sector worker.

Such people, said Penna, were aware of the need to manage their own careers, unsentimental about loyalty and ready to move — even if that meant switching to the private sector — if their employer could not fulfil their aspirations.

According to the research, nearly two-thirds of public employees are looking for job opportunities and a third con-

Talented people who feel their careers have stalled need to be motivated if they are not to switch to the private sector, says **Jane Hughes**

tinue to search the market, even on the first day of a new post. Nearly half (47%) said they felt more loyal to their careers than to their employers.

Of the more than 250 people questioned, 39% said they were not expecting to be with their current employer in 12 months' time and 75% said they were keeping their CVs up to date — a figure 10% higher than in the private sector.

The findings are partly a reflection of rising aspirations and job changes within the public sector as fixed-term contracts become more popular and more public services are outsourced to private companies. As the traditional boundaries between public and private sectors blur, there is increasing movement between workforces.

But employees are also reacting against what many of them perceive to be a lack of effort on the part of employers towards their workers' personal development.

Four out of ten of those questioned said their employers had shown no interest in finding out what they wanted from their careers and a similar proportion felt that employers were no more loyal than their staff.

Cousins has some sympathy. "If you don't get rewarded, you need to look elsewhere," she said. "I never felt that public-sector managers saw employ-

ees as a resource that they had paid good money for and should get as much value from as possible.

"Nobody really sat down with me to assess my skills gaps and ask how I could progress. When I joined my present company, my boss said to me, 'You can go as far as you want to, but it's up to you to ask.' I never heard that in the public sector."

Sally Barnes, 47, a middle manager of a council housing initiative, agrees that there is a problem. "Local authorities are traditionally not very good at motivating or developing staff, particularly when people reach a ceiling or the end of a career path," she said.

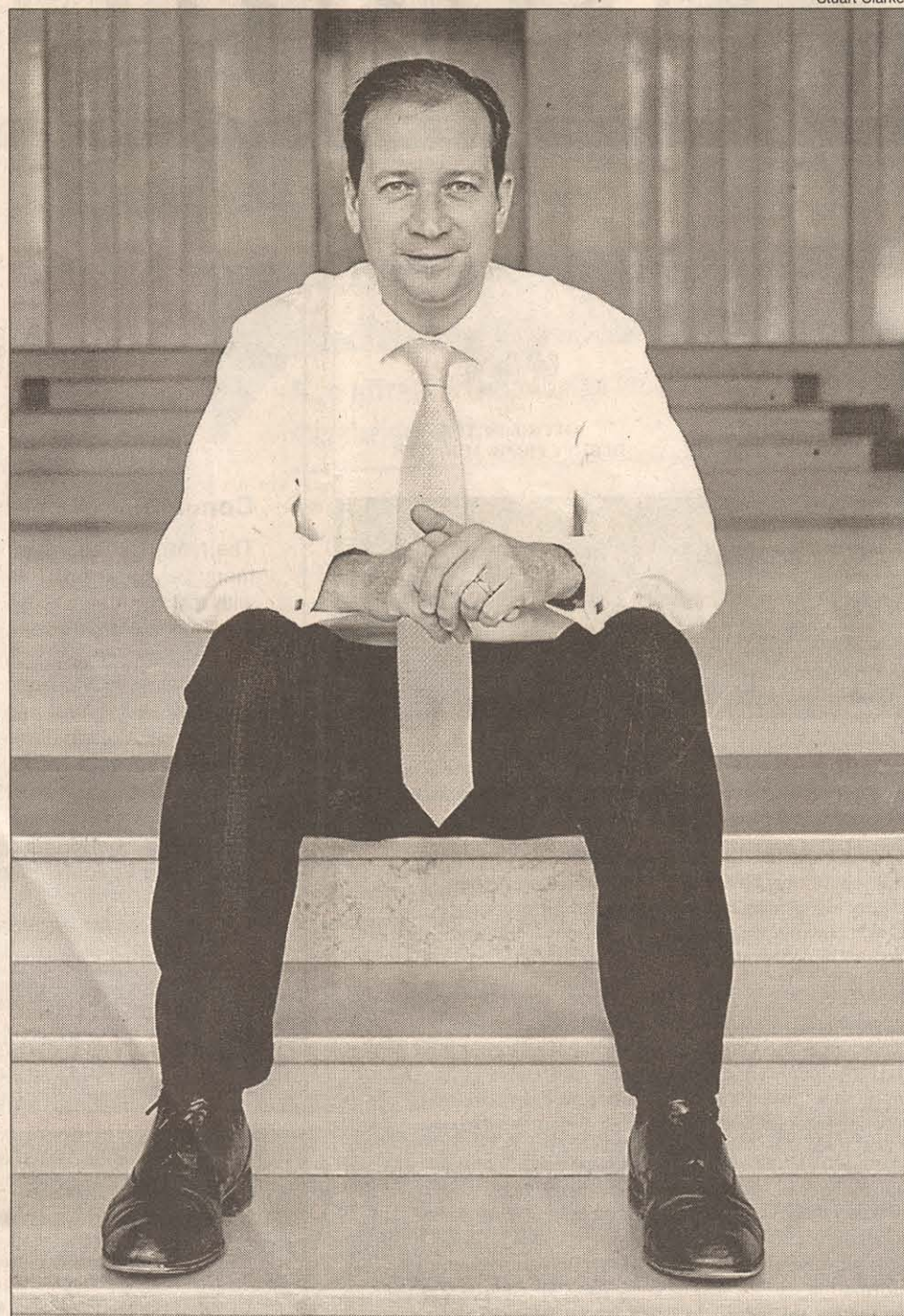
"In my previous post there was no interest in finding out what I could offer the wider organisation. I was just a person there to do the job. It's frustrating but it puts the emphasis firmly on you to decide what you want to do and where you want to go."

Barnes said she had avoided getting stuck in a rut by planning ahead and looking out for opportunities with different teams or projects or with other local authorities.

"I'm always thinking about how I can add new experiences to my CV, about what is going to interest and motivate me and how I can balance that with my financial security," she said.

Not surprisingly, the research showed that staff were more likely to stay if their careers were developed and valued through internal promotion and better training, and if their contribution to the organisation was given more recognition.

There are encouraging signs that local authorities are now addressing these issues. But some increase in the mobility of employees is inevitable and that can be beneficial, said Graham Farrant, chief execu-



Thinking harder: Graham Farrant is raising staff aspirations at Barking and Dagenham council

tive of Barking and Dagenham council.

"People who have worked in different organisations and roles or in the private sector will have a range of experience to bring to the job. It's too easy to think that we always do it best," he said.

The thorny problem of how to retain quality staff remains, however. Salary differentials are not too significant at middle-management level but increase for senior managers. Farrant suggests that local authorities need to think harder about performance-related pay.

He said there were personal-development initiatives at Barking and Dagenham to raise aspirations to deliver better public services through setting long-term aims. Staff who had been sent on external management programmes had come back "fired up with enthusiasm and with first-hand experience of best practice".

In the past four years the council had made much greater use of mentoring between senior and junior managers, he said. It had also carried out "360-degree leadership analyses", whereby senior managers

were appraised not only by their bosses, but also by their peers and subordinates.

Farrant said: "People found this incredibly galvanising and it encouraged them to be creative in developing new skills." He was well aware that raising aspirations could also encourage people to move elsewhere, but said that it was a price well worth paying.

"It's not all one-way traffic. People come back, too, and they bring with them a broader perspective on how to improve the organisation," he said.

□ Some names have been changed

Stuart Clarke

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