

Recruitment and retention challenges – the right people at the right time?

Pembrokeshire County Council

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Audit snapshot

What we looked at

- 1 We looked at the recruitment and retention challenges that Pembrokeshire County Council (the Council) is facing. Including how well the Council understands its challenges, what it is doing in response, and how it reviews the value for money of its approaches.

Why this is important

- 2 Having the right workforce in place is essential for a Council to deliver the services its communities need and to meet its legal duties. To do this, the Council needs to employ the right number of employees, with the right skills, at the right time.
- 3 The majority of the Council's day-to-day spending is used to pay for its workforce.
- 4 However, it is facing a number of challenges to recruit and retain people to deliver its services.

What we have found

- 5 We found that the Council understands the challenges it faces and has tried a number of approaches, with some successes, but it has not evaluated whether its different approaches represent value for money.

What we recommend

- 6 We made three recommendations. These focused on the Council developing a data set to better understand its recruitment and retention challenges and ensuring that there is oversight of this; making the most of the information it gathers from its staff surveys; and developing a formal approach to assess the value for money of its approaches to recruitment and retention.

Our findings

Understanding the challenges

The Council has an understanding of its recruitment and retention challenges and is successfully using workforce management approaches to help ensure a sustainable workforce

- 7 The Council has an understanding of its recruitment and retention challenges. It has identified which posts are hard to fill and why. The reasons include:
 - national shortages in some professions;
 - decline in university courses for some professions;
 - fewer senior posts being available, restricting career progression;
 - low job evaluation outcomes for some professional roles;
 - pay scales that are not always competitive with the private sector; and
 - geographical location and cost of housing in the county.
- 8 By understanding which posts are hard to fill and why, the Council reduces the risk that it targets its resources in the wrong place.
- 9 The Council understands how it is using workforce management approaches, such as recruitment freezes, market supplements, fixed-term contracts and agency staff, to help ensure a sustainable workforce. For example, the Council uses recruitment freezes when there is a forecast overspend. The Council's use of recruitment freezes is reactive, in response to its financial pressures rather than used strategically for workforce management.

- 10 The Council has also used market supplements in some areas. It has a policy on their use, and they are reviewed at least annually. The Council recognises that market supplements are a short-term solution and prefers to use them sparingly. The Council has also written guidance on the use of fixed-term contracts and agency staff, to help managers understand when it is appropriate to use these approaches.
- 11 By understanding the impact of different workforce management approaches, the Council reduces the risk of negative impacts on the culture and morale of the organisation.
- 12 The information the Council holds about its current workforce and vacancies allows it to have some understanding of its recruitment and retention challenges. The human resources (HR) information provided to Cabinet and Senior Leadership Team (SLT) as part of the Council's corporate scorecard is limited. The information covers only headcount and sickness absence. SLT has received more detailed information when requested but it is not provided to them as a matter of course. The Chief Executive and Director of Resources also oversee planned recruitment as they approve all vacancies before advertisement.
- 13 The information provided to Directorate Management Teams (DMTs) is more detailed and includes recruitment information on the number of vacancies, applications and offers made. It also includes demographic information on current staff. The information is not routinely broken down to service level, so further investigation is required to understand where there are services that are experiencing particular challenges. The data the Council holds is relevant to its current workforce. Although there are some examples of the Council looking at wider evidence and data, the Council is focused on the current to medium-term staff position rather than looking more long term.
- 14 By not using a wider range of data, the Council increases the risk of designing short-term solutions, or missing opportunities to prevent challenges from occurring or getting worse.

Addressing the challenges

The Council is taking a range of actions to address recruitment and retention challenges with some success, but strategic oversight of progress is limited

- 15 The Council uses a range of actions to address recruitment and retention challenges, with some success. Although challenges persist in specific services, for example, trading standards and property services. The Council's approaches to attracting and retaining staff include:
- promoting apprenticeships and career development posts;
 - use of market supplements in difficult to recruit areas;
 - gateway payments;
 - being a disability confident employer and having a veterans' scheme (these guarantee an interview for applicants who meet the essential job criteria);
 - holding roadshows in community locations where potential applicants can hear about the roles on offer and have help with making applications;
 - offering a range of staff wellbeing and reward offers as part of its MyBenefits scheme; and
 - prioritising management development as part of its learning and development offer to grow its own future leaders.
- 16 The Council's onboarding team also aim to drive improvements in the recruitment process. For example, the Council knows that most applicants see a vacancy on its website. The onboarding team have led on improvements to its jobs and careers web pages, which are due to go live in 2026. By adopting a range of approaches, the Council increases the likelihood that it will be able to recruit and retain a motivated workforce.

- 17 The Council engages with its workforce, but it does not maximise the opportunities to add value from doing so. The Council has a range of options for collecting the views of staff and their representatives. These include:
- employee surveys;
 - a social partnership forum with Trade Union representatives;
 - use of mental health champions;
 - supporting staff events in specific areas, for example Pride and Welsh language.
- 18 The Council also offers exit interviews for some posts but not all. This risks a gap developing in its knowledge about why people are leaving.
- 19 The Council surveyed staff in 2021, 2022 and 2025. Following the 2022 survey, working groups were set up to discuss the three key findings from the survey. They identified some actions to be taken forward, but the Council did not complete this work. By not collecting all the information it could, or by not acting decisively on the information it gathers, the Council increases the risk of missing ideas and not introducing solutions successfully.
- 20 Councillors are provided with limited information to enable them to oversee and scrutinise recruitment and retention challenges. For example, Governance and Audit Committee receive some information about recruitment and retention challenges, because it is a risk on the corporate risk register. However, the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee has not received a report on recruitment and retention issues, so has had no recent oversight in this area. By not routinely sharing information with councillors, the Council increases the risk that councillors are unable to provide oversight and scrutiny.
- 21 The Council works with partners, such as universities and professional bodies and organisations, to try to address recruitment and retention challenges. Working with a range of partners is important to provide the Council with opportunities to share resources, expertise and good practice.

- 22 The Council is also making some use of technology to help with recruitment and retention. The Council has:
- re-designed its jobs and careers web pages;
 - introduced magic notes in social services to help with workload pressures; and
 - started a strategic review of the potential of AI to drive efficiencies.
- 23 Making the most of technology is important, so the Council identifies opportunities to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of its recruitment and retention processes.

Reviewing value for money

The Council does not assess the value for money of its approaches to recruitment and retention

- 24 For some of the Council's approaches, such as gateway payments and market supplements, the Council provides clear evidence and rationale to justify the adoption of the approach. However, there is no formal mechanism for assessing the value for money of all its initiatives. By not having clear arrangements in place to formally monitor and review approaches, the Council may be missing opportunities to identify ways to improve the value for money of its approaches.
- 25 The Council learns from its recruitment and retention approaches and shares that learning across the organisation. For example, in trading standards and in finance, officers are using their professional bodies to look at developing pan-Wales approaches to support recruitment challenges. HR business partners also share learning across the organisation. For example, grow your own approaches that have been successful in one service area are being adopted in other areas.
- 26 By implementing improvements and sharing lessons learned, the Council increases opportunities to improve its approaches and improve value for money.

Recommendations

R1 The Council should develop a set of data that enables it to better understand current and future recruitment and retention trends and challenges, and ensure there is effective strategic oversight of this data (**paragraphs 12 and 13**).

R2 To make the most of its employee surveys, the Council should take action on the findings, where appropriate, and explain to staff the action taken (**paragraph 19**).

R3 The Council should develop an approach to assessing the value for money of its approaches to recruitment and retention (**paragraph 24**).

Appendices

1 About our work

Scope of the audit

We looked at the challenges the Council faces in recruiting and retaining staff. This included how well the Council understands the challenges, the steps it is taking to respond to these challenges, and how it reviews the value for money of its approaches.

We did not look at the wider topic of workforce planning.

Audit questions and criteria

Questions

We set out to answer the following questions:

- Does the Council understand its recruitment and retention challenges?
- Is the Council taking action to address its recruitment and retention challenges?
- Does the Council review the value for money of its approaches to address recruitment and retention challenges?

Criteria

We have assessed the Council's arrangements by answering the above audit questions. To help us do that, we have created a set of audit criteria which explains 'what good looks like'. We have used the audit criteria to help us analyse the evidence we collected from our review of documentary evidence and the interviews we conducted.

Our audit criteria were informed by a combination of our knowledge and experience and research into this topic. It was also informed by our conversations with national stakeholders.

Methods

We interviewed senior officers and the cabinet member responsible for developing and delivering the Council's strategic approach to meeting its recruitment and retention challenges.

We also interviewed senior officers from three Council services that have faced recruitment and retention challenges.

We also reviewed a range of documents relevant to the audit questions we were seeking to answer.

2 About us

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