

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

Neath Port Talbot Council

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Audit snapshot

What we looked at

- 1 We looked at the recruitment and retention challenges that Neath Port Talbot 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 has a good understanding of its recruitment and retention challenges and is using a range of approaches to address these, with some successes. However, it does not always evaluate whether its approaches represent value for money.

What we recommend

- 6 We made two recommendations. These focus on the Council making the most of the information it gathers from 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 a good understanding of its recruitment and retention challenges and is successfully using workforce management approaches to help ensure a sustainable workforce

- 7 The Council uses data to help it understand which roles are difficult to recruit to and why. This data includes a list of business-critical posts, whether the post is currently vacant, and a link to the actions being taken to mitigate the risk. The Council is facing challenges to recruit in areas where there are known national shortages, such as engineers, surveyors and building trades.
- 8 In other areas where the Council reports difficulties in recruitment, such as school catering and breakfast club supervision, the Council has identified issues such as the limited hours for contracts, and, as a consequence, the level of pay. By understanding which posts are hard to fill and why, the Council is able to better target its resources.
- 9 The Council understands how it is using workforce management approaches, such as use of agency staff and market supplements, to help ensure a sustainable workforce. The Council has a contract in place for the provision of agency staff. In some areas, such as waste services and in the South Wales Trunk Road Agency (SWTRA), it has plans in place to reduce agency spend by using different approaches to recruitment.
- 10 The Council wants to reduce reliance on agency staff as it knows that the use of agency staff, potentially paid at higher rates than directly employed staff, can affect staff morale.

- 11 The Council is also developing staff through career development grades and apprenticeships. In its waste service, the Council is looking at developing its own pool of casual staff as an alternative to the use of agency staff.
- 12 Where the Council uses market supplements, these are supported by a business case. During 2026, the Council will also be undertaking a strategic review of its use of market supplements. By understanding why it uses different workforce management approaches, the Council reduces the risk of negative impacts on the culture and morale of the organisation.
- 13 The information the Council holds about its current workforce and vacancies allows it to understand its recruitment and retention challenges. The Council provides a monthly report to its Strategic Leadership Team (SLT) that includes:
 - demographic data;
 - new starters and leavers;
 - reasons for leaving;
 - turnover rate;
 - sickness absence.
- 14 SLT also receive annual reports on the delivery of the Strategic Workforce Plan. This includes information on recruitment and retention rates, as well as information on learning and development activity and employee engagement.
- 15 Corporate Leadership Team (which is made up of SLT and Heads of Service) also receive reports on HR issues. For example, on the work of the Talent Management Team and the creation of a strategic manager grade.
- 16 The Council has also developed a succession planning toolkit, which requires managers to look ahead to identify potential future challenges as staff leave the organisation. Having a wide range of data available is important because it reduces the risk that the Council designs short term solutions or misses 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, and there is strategic oversight of progress

- 17 The Council uses a range of actions to address recruitment and retention challenges, with some success, although challenges persist in some areas. The Council's approach to attracting and retaining staff includes:
- setting up a Talent Management Team to raise the profile of the Council as an employer of choice and support managers with recruitment;
 - investing in a recruiter licence for an online recruitment portal, allowing it to reach a wider range of applicants;
 - creating a new strategic manager grade to help with career progression and recruiting candidates to head of service roles;
 - developing apprenticeship and career development grades;
 - appointing candidates with relevant experience and then supporting them to get the required qualifications for roles;
 - running a leadership and development programme and a mentoring programme;
 - promoting staff wellbeing and reward offers, including:
 - mental health support;
 - discounted leisure offer;
 - finance and advice services and support.
- 18 The Council also has an onboarding portal which has digitised elements of the onboarding process. It is continuing to develop this. It has also automated the process for Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) checks, which has freed up HR resources.

- 19 Whilst overall the Council understands the reasons why some of its posts are hard to fill, progress in addressing this across service areas is variable. In some service areas, there is a strategic approach to addressing challenges, but not in all. By adopting a range of approaches, the Council increases the likelihood that it will be able to recruit and retain a motivated workforce.
- 20 The Council also involves staff in recruitment and retention challenges in a variety of ways, including in the development of its strategic workforce plan and through specific employee forums. It has three employee forums covering: ethnic minority employees, disability issues and LGBTQ+. The terms of reference for these forums include influencing policies and practices of the organisation, including recruitment practices.
- 21 The Council undertook staff surveys in 2024 and 2025. Departments were asked to implement the findings from the 2024 survey. But overall, the Council does not know what actions were taken in response to the staff survey or if they were effective.
- 22 The Council also has an understanding of why staff leave the organisation. As part of the leaving process, managers must record the reasons for leaving. This information is reported to SLT on a monthly basis. The Council also offers exit interviews to all leavers.
- 23 Collecting and acting on employee feedback is important for employee engagement. It also reduces the risk of the Council missing ideas or failing to introduce solutions successfully.
- 24 The Council has arrangements in place to enable strategic oversight by councillors. HR issues were previously considered by the Personnel Committee. This committee had good oversight of HR matters, including workforce data and input into HR policies. In April 2025, this Committee was discontinued, and HR issues are now within the remit of the Performance and Resources Overview and Scrutiny Committee. It is too early to know what impact this change will have on councillors' oversight of HR matters.

- 25 The Council also works with a range of partners to address its recruitment and retention challenges. The Council's Talent Management Team works with local colleges and universities, the Job Centre and charities, and attends a range of job fairs and recruitment events. By working with a range of partners, the Council increases opportunities to share resources, expertise and good practice.
- 26 The Council uses technology to help with recruitment and retention challenges. The Council has:
- digitised its onboarding process;
 - automated DBS checks;
 - developed plans to automate more of its HR processes, to free up resources for more data analysis;
 - centralised and automated ordering for school catering;
 - introduced magic notes in social services to help with workload pressures; and
 - started exploring how AI can assist with delivering efficiencies.
- 27 Using technology is important to ensure that the Council does not miss opportunities to improve its recruitment processes, reduce costs and improve efficiency.

Reviewing value for money

The Council does not always assess the value for money of its approaches but is strengthening its arrangements

- 28 The Council has not evaluated the value for money of its approaches to address recruitment and retention challenges. It has reviewed whether some approaches are effective, drawing on activity data and considering their impacts. But it has not identified the value for money of its various approaches. By not having clear arrangements in place, the Council may be missing opportunities to improve the value for money of its approaches.
- 29 The Council learns from its approaches and shares that learning with others. For example, the Talent Management Team was set up in response to concerns from recruiting managers that they needed more support with their recruitment and retention challenges. The Council has also shared learning at national forums on its approaches to automating its DBS checks process and encouraging diversity in the workplace.
- 30 The Council is also using the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) people impact tool to track the HR Team's progress against key criteria. This includes benchmarking its results over time and against a public sector comparison group. Implementing improvements and sharing lessons learned can help the Council to improve value for money.

Recommendations

R1 To make the most of its employee surveys the Council should ensure that action is taken on the findings, where appropriate, and that this is communicated to staff across the organisation. (**paragraph 21**).

R2 The Council should develop an approach to assessing the value for money of its approaches to recruitment and retention. (**paragraph 28**).

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 acute recruitment and retention challenges.

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

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