

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

Caerphilly County Borough Council

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Audit snapshot

What we looked at

- 1 We looked at the recruitment and retention challenges the Council is facing. This included 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. The Council is in the process of reducing its workforce by 600 full time equivalent posts as part of its transformation programme. The Council acknowledges the need to balance recruiting to essential hard to fill posts whilst also meeting workforce reduction targets where it cannot identify a viable need to maintain roles.

What we have found

- 5 The Council is using a range of recruitment and retention approaches, based on a broad understanding of its challenges. There are opportunities for the Council to improve its use of data for strategic planning and to further evaluate its approach to monitoring value for money.

What we recommend

- 6 We have made one recommendation to the Council. This focusses on its use of data to predict future trends, evaluating outcomes and assessing and monitoring value for money.

Our findings

Understanding the challenges

The Council broadly understands its recruitment and retention challenges

- 7 The Council broadly understands which of its posts are hard to fill. For example, the Executive Leadership Team (ELT) maintains an understanding of which services and roles are experiencing recruitment or retention issues through weekly vacancy management meetings.
- 8 The Council has identified hard to fill roles in services including highways, asset maintenance staff and social services. The Council has identified that challenges recruiting to these roles relate to:
 - non-competitive pay;
 - travel and location constraints;
 - specialist qualification requirements; and
 - limited reach of advertising channels.
- 9 The Council has improved its understanding of why posts are hard to fill, but there are further opportunities for it to gain a more complete understanding. The Council has carried out a survey of managers to identify and understand hard to fill roles. However, only one third of its managers participated in the survey, which limits the extent of the Council's understanding.
- 10 If the Council does not fully understand why posts are hard to fill across services, it may focus its actions on the wrong areas and reduce value for money.

- 11 The Council understands how it is using workforce management approaches to help address recruitment and retention challenges. The Council is aware of the potential impact its workforce reduction plan could have on recruiting for key roles and retaining staff in these roles. To help reduce the impact, the Council has controls in place to help it identify if recruitment for a role is essential or if an alternative solution is more appropriate.
- 12 The Council uses fixed-term contracts and agency staffing in a structured way. This has helped the Council to take steps to help improve staff retention, for example by working with managers to look for ways to bring staff on fixed-term contracts into permanent roles. 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.
- 13 The Council's understanding of its recruitment and retention challenges is supported by a range of workforce data. Data taken from its digital Human Resources (HR) system, revised exit surveys and regular workforce forums include:
 - demographics of the workforce;
 - numbers of staff joining and leaving the organisation;
 - reasons for leaving; and
 - sickness absence trends.
- 14 The Council recognises the importance of using data to predict future recruitment and retention challenges and requires services to include forecasting information in their workforce plans. By understanding its future recruitment and retention challenges, the Council reduces the risk of designing short-term solutions that do not provide value for money over the long term.

Addressing the challenges

The Council is taking a proactive approach to address its recruitment and retention challenges

- 15 The Council uses a wide range of approaches to attract, recruit and support staff, including:
- improved recruitment web pages that clearly highlight the benefits of working for the Council;
 - social media campaigns for hard to fill posts;
 - attending job fairs to reach more potential job applicants;
 - speeding up recruitment processes through 'straight-to-interview' sessions for hard to fill posts; and
 - offering work placements and apprenticeships.
- 16 Having a range of approaches to recruit people can help the Council secure the talent it needs, in a timely way, to deliver its services and objectives.
- 17 The Council encourages a diverse pool of candidates to apply for roles through a range of inclusive recruitment practices. These include:
- guaranteeing interviews for disabled applicants and veterans;
 - using a 'Safer Recruitment Procedure' to ensure a fair and objective recruitment process;
 - designing a recruitment process which supports its Strategic Equality Plan;
 - including staff stories in job adverts, tied to the organisation's values and behaviours; and
 - enabling applicants to apply for jobs digitally or through other channels to encourage applications from the diversity of the community.
- 18 By ensuring recruitment is inclusive, the Council promotes a positive culture and increases the likelihood of being able to recruit and retain the people it needs, whilst also supporting its wider equality aims.

- 19 The Council aims to support staff retention in a number of ways. These include:
- flexible working;
 - occupational health and wellbeing programmes;
 - providing digital learning opportunities for staff; and
 - leadership development programmes including funding staff to gain qualifications.
- 20 Offering a wide range of wellbeing and development opportunities helps to strengthen the Council's attractiveness as an employer, and retain the talent it needs.
- 21 The Council involves its workforce in addressing some of its recruitment and retention challenges. For example, it added organisational values it had developed with staff to job descriptions, to strengthen its employer brand and attract suitable candidates. Its HR team have also involved staff in developing targeted recruitment campaigns. The Council has also engaged with staff via surveys and forums to gather feedback on recruitment and retention approaches.
- 22 Involving staff to address recruitment and retention challenges reduces the risk of the Council missing ideas or failing to introduce solutions successfully.
- 23 The Council has also worked with partners to address specific recruitment and retention challenges. For example, it has worked with a neighbouring council to develop training and qualifications for its social care workforce. It also participates in regional social care workforce partnerships. Through these initiatives, the Council has helped to retain staff in hard to fill roles and is taking opportunities to share resources, expertise, and good practice.
- 24 The Council uses technology to help address recruitment and retention challenges. For example, it has introduced digital tools which allow candidates to book their own interview times and has piloted digital onboarding to speed up the recruitment process. The Council also uses technology to reduce workload pressures on existing staff, which can help improve staff retention.

- 25 Making effective use of technology can both help the Council to recruit staff in a timely way and improve the retention of existing staff.
- 26 Senior leaders regularly monitor recruitment and retention challenges. Every week, ELT reviews all vacancy requests, including new posts, changes to grades of posts, and use of agency staff. Councillors receive updates through regular reports to the Corporate and Regeneration Scrutiny Committee.
- 27 By ensuring senior leaders have oversight of recruitment and retention challenges, the Council reduces the risk that they are not identified and addressed.

Reviewing value for money

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

- 28 The Council does not always assess the value for money of its recruitment and retention approaches. There are some examples where it evaluates the value for money of initiatives. These include, for example, evaluating agency usage, advertising costs and its approach to vacancy management. However, by not considering the cost and effectiveness of all its approaches it is unable to know if they provide value for money.
- 29 The Council has made improvements to its recruitment and retention process after reviewing feedback. These include:
 - simplifying onboarding processes;
 - modernising job descriptions;
 - procuring a new agency provider to improve value for money;
 - converting fixed-term contracts to permanent roles in the housing department to help improve staff retention; and
 - revising exit surveys to encourage more staff to complete them.

- 30 Through these actions the Council improves its chances of recruiting the right candidates in a timely way, retaining existing staff and better understanding why people leave the organisation.
- 31 The Council does not routinely compare its approaches to recruitment and retention with other organisations. Comparing and learning from others can help the Council identify opportunities to improve value for money.

Recommendations

R1 The Council should ensure it gathers the information that it needs from all service areas to fully understand current recruitment and retention challenges (**Paragraph 9**)

R2 The Council should improve its approach to assessing value for money by:

2.1 ensuring that it assesses the value for money of its major recruitment and retention initiatives;

2.2 routinely comparing its approach with other organisations to learn from others; and

2.3 ensuring that lessons learned from its own activity or from other organisations are shared across Council service areas.
(**Paragraphs 28 and 31**)

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 the 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 its address 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. They were 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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