

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

Denbighshire County Council

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Audit snapshot

What we looked at

- 1 We looked at the recruitment and retention challenges Denbighshire 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 Most 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 the Council has a good understanding of its recruitment and retention challenges and is using a wide range of approaches to address them. But it does not generally assess the value for money of those approaches.

What we recommend

- 6 We make one recommendation which is about the Council making sure it assesses the value for money of all of its major approaches to recruitment and retention.

Our findings

Understanding the challenges

The Council has a clear understanding of its recruitment and retention challenges

- 7 The Council has identified which roles are hard to fill and the underlying reasons. Services explain recruitment and retention issues in workforce plans, risk registers, and as part of the Service Challenge Process. Service level findings are drawn together into corporate level documents. The Council has a recruitment control panel which reviews every vacancy. The panel discusses, challenges, and has oversight of all vacancies.
- 8 By understanding which posts are hard to fill and why, the Council reduces the risk of putting resources to work in the wrong place.
- 9 The Council has a clear understanding of how it uses workforce management approaches such as market supplements, fixed-term contracts, agency workers, and recruitment freezes to help create a sustainable workforce. The Council's Recruitment Policy clearly explains all types of posts it uses and highlights the need to review any opportunities provided when a vacant post arises. It is also supported by individual policies on the use of fixed-term contracts and agency workers.
- 10 The Council does not have a recruitment freeze in place, but it challenges any vacant post through its recruitment control panel. It also has a policy for its use of market supplements which is supported by a clear process for approval and review. The Council recognises market supplements as a short-term fix and does not use them widely.

- 11 By understanding the use and impact of these different workforce management approaches, the Council reduces the risk of damaging culture and morale. This, in turn, reduces the risk of it not being able to attract and retain the people it needs to deliver its objectives and services in ways which secure value for money.
- 12 The Council gathers and uses a range of information on its workforce to understand its current and future recruitment and retention challenges. Service-level workforce plans contain information on the current position and on potential future changes that may impact the workforce. These plans are supported by data from the HR team to inform discussion between Heads of Service and HR Business Partners (HRBPs). The Service challenge Process looks at a SWOT analysis and service-level workforce plans to inform discussions on challenges. The HR team also provides monthly data via its workforce dashboard.
- 13 By having information to understand its workforce challenges, the Council reduces the risk of missing opportunities to stop challenges from happening or getting worse. It also reduces the risk of designing short-term solutions that do not provide value for money over the longer term.

Addressing the challenges

The Council is taking a wide range of actions to respond to its recruitment and retention challenges

- 14 The Council uses a range of actions to tackle its recruitment and retention challenges and establish itself as an employer of choice. The Council's actions for attracting and retaining staff include:
- offering a range of benefits that it presents clearly in an online brochure;
 - providing a number of supportive policies that allow employees to manage their work-life balance;
 - delivering a Learning and Development (L&D) Policy, supported with online resources and an L&D specialist;
 - reviewing its application forms, job descriptions, and recruitment webpages;
 - introducing career pathways and apprenticeship programmes to tackle recruitment and retention issues in specific service areas;
 - running targeted recruitment campaigns for specific hard-to-fill roles;
 - analysing the barriers to recruitment and retention in services through workforce planning; and
 - providing training to managers on diversity, supported with resources on Safer Recruitment and Equalities, Diversity and Inclusion.
- 15 By taking these actions, the Council increases the likelihood of being able to recruit and retain a motivated workforce by being an employer of choice. However, whilst the Council is taking action, some services still face specific recruitment and retention challenges such as fleet maintenance, legal, and social care.
- 16 The Council involves its staff and their representatives in reviewing its recruitment and retention challenges to identify ways in which the Council can improve how it recruits and retains people. For example:

- HRBPs are aligned to services and attend departmental meetings along with recruitment specialists;
 - its Staff Council Forum and the Employee Relations Consultation Group meet regularly to discuss issues, including recruitment and retention challenges;
 - staff leaving the Council are offered exit interviews, but completion rates are low;
 - its social care service has an action plan to tackle recruitment challenges that includes a wide range of ways to involve staff; and
 - its social care service has also used a “Stay Survey” to understand why people remain in their roles.
- 17 By involving its employees, the Council is more likely to identify solutions to its recruitment and retention challenges.
- 18 The Council's senior leaders have oversight of recruitment and retention challenges through several ways. For example, the Council's Self-assessment, Well Run Council Performance Board, and Service Challenge Process have all considered recruitment and retention challenges and proposed actions to address them. Recruitment and retention challenges and actions to address them are also captured in its risk registers which help senior leaders to have oversight of them.
- 19 By ensuring that senior leaders are provided with the information they need, the Council helps to ensure they are aware of recruitment and retention challenges and can take action to address them.
- 20 The Council works with a range of partners to tackle its recruitment and retention challenges. For example, it has worked with colleges and universities to provide training. The Council has also explored joint roles with other councils to deal with specific recruitment challenges. By working with partners, the Council will have more chances to share resources, expertise, and good practice and is more likely to make the most of its resources to secure value for money.

- 21 The Council is also using technology to improve its recruitment process and release workforce capacity. For example, the Council is:
- improving its website to make it easier for people to find and apply for jobs;
 - looking at ways to speed up HR processes so that staff have more time to work on other things;
 - introducing a new module to improve the efficiency and speed with which it onboards new people .
- 22 By making use of technology, the Council reduces the risk of missing opportunities to improve its recruitment processes, efficiency and staff wellbeing and reduce costs.

Reviewing value for money

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

- 23 The Council does not routinely assess the value for money of its approaches to addressing its recruitment and retention challenges. It has also not set out who has responsibility for assessing this. It reviews the costs of recruitment activity and has taken action to reduce spending, such as through its recruitment control panel and the in-house management of recruitment campaigns for senior officers. The HR team uses some data to evaluate the cost-effectiveness of recruitment activity and has clear guidance on the use of paid advertising. But the Council has not assessed the value for money of its various approaches to meet its recruitment and retention challenges.
- 24 By not assessing the value of money of its approaches to recruitment and retention the Council does not know if they are economic, efficient, or effective.
- 25 Where the Council has reviewed its approaches to recruitment and retention, it has made improvements, and shared lessons. For example, the Council reviewed its Recruitment Policy and processes in 2025. The Council has also introduced improvements such as career grade posts, the recruitment control panel, and tailored recruitment campaigns. The Council also shares lessons learned on its recruitment and retention activity through its Service Challenge Process.
- 26 By making improvements and sharing lessons learned, the Council increases the likelihood of it getting value for money.

Recommendations

- R1** The Council should ensure it assesses the value for money of its major recruitment and retention approaches (**paragraphs 23 and 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 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 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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