

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

Ceredigion County Council

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Audit snapshot

What we looked at

- 1 We looked at the recruitment and retention challenges that Ceredigion County Council (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.

What we have found

- 5 The Council has a good understanding of its recruitment and retention challenges and is successfully using a range of approaches to address them. There is also good use of data and oversight by senior leaders of progress in this area, but the Council does not always assess the value for money of its approaches to recruitment and retention.

What we recommend

- 6 We made one recommendation to the Council about improving how it assesses the value for money of its recruitment and retention activity.

Our findings

Understanding the challenges

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

- 7 The Council uses a range of information to understand its recruitment and retention challenges. It uses data from its workforce plans and its human resources (HR) dashboards to identify which roles are difficult to recruit to and the reasons for this. It also uses information on the wider job market from outside the Council to help it understand why some posts are hard to fill. The roles that the Council is facing challenges to recruit to include areas where there are known national shortages, including social workers, engineers and care assistants.
- 8 The Council understands its use of workforce management approaches, including fixed term contracts, agency staff and market supplements, to help ensure a sustainable workforce. Any job that it recruits to has to be supported by a business case. These are reviewed by senior managers including the Chief Executive. This helps to ensure strong corporate oversight of recruitment activity.
- 9 The Council uses fixed term contracts for roles of less than two years or where they are linked to grant funding. The exit strategy for these roles is considered when they are approved.
- 10 Agency staff are used where roles are urgently needed but difficult to recruit to. The Leadership Group (the Council's senior management team) regularly monitors the use of agency staff. This monitoring helps the Council identify where reliance on agency staffing may present risks to workforce sustainability or budgets.

- 11 Where market supplements are used, for example for qualified social worker roles, they are subject to annual review. The review includes an analysis of vacancy trends, regional pay comparisons, and workforce forecasts to assess the need for continuing the extra payment.
- 12 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 Council uses data to help it understand recruitment challenges. Its HR dashboards include information on:
 - overall vacancy rate;
 - turnover;
 - the time taken to fill vacant jobs;
 - the number of applications for each recruitment campaign; and
 - the number of candidates that successfully meet the criteria to be shortlisted for interview.

These monthly reports to managers can be filtered by sector, grade and service area to help identify persistent recruitment challenges.

- 14 The Council also undertakes a new-starter feedback survey to understand candidates' experiences of the recruitment and selection process. The 2025 survey showed that respondents most often gave work-life balance/flexible working, career progression, job role, community impact, and job security as reasons for joining the Council. The survey showed high overall satisfaction rates. 88% of respondents said they would recommend the Council as an employer. The Council uses this information to inform its future recruitment and retention work.

Addressing the challenges

The Council is successfully taking a range of actions to address its recruitment and retention challenges and monitors its progress

- 15 The Council uses a range of positive actions to address recruitment and retention challenges. The Council's approach to attracting and retaining staff includes:
- promoting vacancies through its own and other careers websites and social media;
 - producing targeted recruitment materials and monitoring the success of recruitment campaigns;
 - promoting the Council as a good place to work and highlighting the benefits staff can get;
 - providing learning and development opportunities, including leadership programmes, apprenticeships, routes into roles, and support for professional qualifications; and
 - promoting wellbeing, rewards and flexible working offers, including extra paid leave for carers.
- 16 Through this range of actions, the Council is developing and promoting its employer offer to support both recruitment and retention.
- 17 The Council draws on staff feedback to inform its approach to recruitment and retention. Feedback is through appraisals, annual staff surveys, new-starter surveys, and consultation within services. The Council also engages its staff for feedback through its trade unions and staff networks. This feedback provides insight into employee experiences and helps shape the Council's approach to recruitment and retention. Examples where staff have been involved include development of the hybrid working policy, wellbeing strategy, and values and behaviours framework.

- 18 Senior officers and councillors have oversight of recruitment and retention challenges through corporate performance reporting arrangements. This supports challenge and accountability within the Council. Recruitment and retention is also a risk on the Council's strategic risk register and this is considered quarterly by Senior Leadership Team and the Governance and Audit Committee.
- 19 The Council works with partners to support recruitment and address skills shortages. For example, in social care the Council works with a university to deliver a trainee social worker scheme. This approach is supported by regional skills partnerships to attract, train and develop future social workers. However, partnership working is not used consistently across the organisation. There is also an opportunity for the Council to strengthen how it captures, shares and applies learning from collaborative activity to support recruitment and retention more widely.
- 20 The Council uses technology to support recruitment and retention activity. For example, in recruitment through its applicant tracking system and virtual information sessions for applicants. Use of digital tools also supports the Council's pre-employment checks and the onboarding processes.
- 21 The Council is also looking to use technology to help make work more efficient, freeing up staff time to make workloads more manageable so that staff want to stay. For example, highways inspectors use tablet computers to record defects and issue work orders in the field saving time in the working day. The social services department is introducing an online case-management system to give officers more capacity to deal with clients. Using technology is important to ensure that the Council does not miss opportunities to improve its recruitment and retention processes, reduce costs, and improve efficiency.

Reviewing value for money

The Council does not always assess the value for money of its recruitment and retention activity but is strengthening its arrangements

- 22 The Council has identified outcomes for its recruitment and retention activity which enables it to monitor progress. These outcomes have improved over the last two years. In March 2025 the Council reported:
- reduced turnover from 13.88% in 2023 to 11.99% in 2025;
 - reduced average vacancies from 650 in 2023 to 301 in 2025; and
 - improved candidate attraction from 5.91 to 12.45 applicants per post from 2023 to 2025.
- 23 The Council has also strengthened its approach to recruitment and retention challenges. For example its understanding of its recruitment and retention issues has been improved by improved data availability and use of surveys. It has also acted on the views of new-starters and existing staff to improve recruitment processes and its employer branding. Targeted recruitment campaigns have also had positive impacts in hard to recruit to positions including fleet technicians, planning officers and social worker roles.
- 24 However the Council does not always assess the value for money of its approaches to recruitment and retention activity. By not doing so the Council may be missing opportunities to improve the value for money of its approaches.

Recommendations

R1 The Council should more consistently assess the value for money of its approaches to recruitment and retention to support future decision-making (**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 the how it reviews the value for money of its approaches.

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

We undertook this review between January and March 2026.

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.

2 About us

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