

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

Powys County Council

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Audit snapshot

What we looked at

- 1 We looked at the recruitment and retention challenges that Powys 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 has a good understanding of its recruitment and retention challenges and is successfully using a range of approaches to address these. However, the data it holds on the number of vacant posts is not correct, and the Council does not always assess the value for money of its approaches to recruitment and retention.

What we recommend

- 6 We made two recommendations to the Council. These were to correct the data on the number of staff vacancies and to improve 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 service-level workforce plans and from its workforce dashboards to identify which roles are difficult to recruit to and the reasons for this. All services complete an annual workforce plan, which looks ahead five years, and includes a specific set of questions on recruitment. The Council identifies difficult to recruit to roles including social care practitioners, trades people, surveyors and specialist regulatory roles. The Council also uses data from its workforce plans to identify where future recruitment pressures might develop by looking at a range of data including age profiles of staff, turnover rate and the risk of people leaving.
- 8 The Council also identifies wider labour market factors that contribute to its recruitment difficulties. These include: its rural location, a limited local labour pool, high levels of self-employment, lower-than-average unemployment, competition from neighbouring authorities and other sectors, and the absence of a local university. By understanding its recruitment challenges, the Council can better target its resources to address them.
- 9 The Council also uses workforce dashboards to provide services with data on starters and leavers, vacancies, fixed-term contracts and the risk of people leaving.

- 10 However, some of the workforce data that the Council holds is not accurate. The overall vacancy figures shown in the workforce dashboards are not correct. Vacancy rates are reported significantly higher than the real position (vacancy rate across the Council reported at over 18% of total posts). This is because the data includes vacant posts that are historic or not actively being recruited to. Not collecting accurate data reduces the Council's understanding of its vacancy rates and therefore where it might need to target its recruitment and retention activity.
- 11 The Council understands how it uses workforce management approaches, including fixed-term contracts, agency staff and market supplements, to help maintain a sustainable workforce. These approaches are monitored at service level and managers understand the rationale for their use.
- 12 Fixed-term roles are generally used where posts are grant funded. The Council recognises that fixed-term contracts are generally less attractive to employees than permanent contracts, which can impact on recruitment and retention. As a result the Council looks to move staff to permanent contracts, where there is a reasonable expectation that funding will continue.
- 13 The Council monitors and tries to reduce its reliance on agency staff. The Council has been successful in reducing its use of agency staff in key services, particularly in children's services. This is important as using agency staff can also have cost implications.
- 14 The Council is developing staff capacity and its future workforce through learning and development opportunities, apprenticeships and 'grow your own' routes. Several services include trainee and apprenticeship roles in their workforce plans, particularly in services areas with hard-to-fill posts such as trades, planning, social services and environmental health.
- 15 Where the Council uses market supplements to pay staff more than usual for a specific grade, a business case is completed so it understands the need for the supplement and its likely impact. Business cases are reviewed annually. In some areas, such as with mental health professionals, even with the application of market supplements the Council is still not able to fill key posts.

- 16 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. This in turn can help the Council to recruit and retain the workforce it needs.

Addressing the challenges

The Council is successfully taking a range of actions to address recruitment and retention challenges and monitors its 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:
- actively promoting the benefits of working for the Council, including flexible working and wellbeing offers, to attract more applicants and support retention;
 - targeted recruitment campaigns and increased use of branding, social media and digital channels to attract candidates for Council jobs;
 - outreach activities such as recruitment stands at builders' merchants with people encouraged to make their application on-line whilst they are at the stand: this has proved effective in increasing recruitment to trade roles including plumbers and plasterers;
 - using apprenticeships, trainee roles and 'grow your own' approaches in areas with persistent skills shortages.
- 18 The Council has improved the efficiency of parts of its onboarding process, including the use of simplified online forms and a paperless system for disclosure and barring checks. The Council is also working to improve the efficiency of other aspects of its recruitment process through use of technology as part of wider improvements to its human resources (HR) systems. This includes its approach to digital shortlisting and onboarding process.
- 19 The Council actively involves staff in identifying and responding to recruitment and retention challenges. This includes through workforce planning discussions, trade union meetings, employee networks and staff surveys. The Council also uses short pulse surveys and team discussions to gather insights on barriers to recruitment and retention.

- 20 The Council also undertakes annual staff surveys. It uses some of the same questions each year to allow it to track trends in staff views of working for the Council. The surveys cover a range of issues relevant to recruitment and retention, including workload pressures, training and development, recognition and morale, wellbeing, inclusion, communication, teamwork and innovation.
- 21 The Council collects information on why staff leave the organisation. It also offers exit interviews to capture additional feedback, although take up of exit surveys is low. The Council has also developed surveys to find out if staff might be at risk of leaving their job. The use of these surveys will start during 2026-27.
- 22 Involving staff in identifying and responding to recruitment and retention challenges can help the Council identify opportunities to improve its approach and get better value for money.
- 23 The Council has worked with partners on recruitment and retention challenges. The Council is part of a regional skills partnership which is supporting future skills development across Powys. It also works with health partners and schools and colleges to engage learners to increase interest in health and social care careers.
- 24 The Council uses technology to help with recruitment and retention challenges. The Council has:
- expanded use of its workforce dashboards to support data-driven recruitment and retention decisions;
 - simplified digital application forms for some roles to make it easier for people to apply for jobs;
 - used technology to reduce administrative work, for example, automated note taking to reduce workload pressures;
 - provided access to more learning and development resources through digital platforms to improve staff skills and support retention.

- 25 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.
- 26 Senior leaders maintain oversight of recruitment and retention issues through a range of ways. The information they receive to help them do this includes:
- annual workforce planning reports;
 - quarterly corporate performance reports; and
 - quarterly strategic risk register reports.
- 27 Ensuring that senior leaders have access to appropriate and timely information can help ensure that recruitment and challenges are identified and addressed.

Reviewing value for money

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

- 28 The Council has not evaluated the value for money of all its recruitment and retention activity. It has reviewed whether some approaches are effective, drawing on activity data and considering their impacts. It also reports performance data on the effectiveness of recruitment activities including percentage of jobs successfully recruited on first attempt and the time taken to fill vacancies. But it has not assessed the value for money of all its approaches to recruitment and retention. This means the Council may be missing opportunities to improve the value for money of its approaches.
- 29 The Council learns from some recruitment and retention activity. For example, practices such as simplified application processes or targeted outreach of potential job applicants have been used in different service areas, where they have proved effective. However, learning from these approaches is not captured or shared consistently, which limits the Council's assurance that effective practice is routinely identified and adopted across the organisation.

Recommendations

R1 The Council should ensure its staff establishment data is accurate, including correcting known errors in the HR database on vacant posts, to give the Council a clear understanding of the vacancy rate (**paragraph 10**).

R2 The Council should evaluate the value for money of its approaches to recruitment and retention and capture and share learning across services to help it ensure that it is securing value for money, and to inform its future decision-making (**paragraphs 28 and 29**).

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 February 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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