

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

Wrexham County Borough Council

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Audit snapshot

What we looked at

- 1 We looked at the recruitment and retention challenges Wrexham County Borough 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.
- 2 Our main audit question was, “Does the Council have proper arrangements to address its recruitment and retention challenges?”

Why this is important

- 3 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.
- 4 The majority of the Council's day-to-day spending is used to pay for its workforce.

What we have found

- 5 We found that the Council is using a range of approaches to address its recruitment and retention challenges, with some success. However, the Council's corporate oversight of its recruitment and retention challenges is limited. The Council does not assess the value for money of its approaches to recruitment and retention.

What we recommend

- 6 We made two recommendations for the Council. The first is about providing timely information to its senior leaders to help them oversee its recruitment and retention challenges. We also recommended that the Council develops arrangements to assess the value for money of its approaches to recruitment and retention.

Our findings

Understanding the challenges

The Council knows which posts are difficult to fill but does not always understand the reasons why

- 7 The Council is aware of its which of its roles are hard-to-fill but does not have a comprehensive understanding of the reasons why. The Council has identified 'hard to fill' roles across many service areas, for example in social care, planning and ICT. To identify these the Council uses manager insight as well as data on vacancy patterns, posts that have been recruited to repeatedly, and anecdotal experience of low applicant numbers. But the Council's understanding of hard to fill roles is largely informal and mainly based on ad-hoc discussion within services. It does not have a systematic approach to understanding the reasons why posts are hard to fill across the Council.
- 8 By not understanding why some roles are hard to fill the Council may be trying to solve the "wrong" problem. This increases the risk of it not securing value for money.
- 9 The Council understands its use of workforce management approaches. For example, it uses short term contracts for grant funded roles, and for some interim roles. It also applies recruitment freezes when it is aware of potential future redundancies, and it agrees these at a senior level.
- 10 The Council understands its use of agency workers. It uses them to fill short term staff needs to maintain service delivery. For example, it uses agency workers in social care roles. By being clear on its use of workforce management approaches and why, the Council reduces the risk of using short-term solutions which could make problems worse over the longer-term.

- 11 The Council does not provide clear information to enable its senior leaders to easily understand its recruitment and retention challenges. The Council reports some workforce data, for example sickness rates and agency usage, but does not turn this into information that helps it to easily understand its recruitment or retention challenges. By not having a full understanding of its recruitment and retention challenges the Council risks not securing value for money.
- 12 The Council does not provide workforce information to its senior leaders with sufficient frequency to enable them to have a timely overview of recruitment and retention challenges. For example, the Council's senior leadership team receive workforce data monitoring reports every six months. This makes it difficult for senior leaders to identify emerging challenges and ensure timely action is taken to address them.
- 13 The Council has a 3-year programme to modernise its HR systems which has the potential to help improve its workforce information.

Addressing the challenges

The Council is addressing its recruitment and retention challenges with some success

- 14 The Council successfully uses a range of approaches to attract candidates. For example, it uses targeted adverts, tailored job descriptions and simplified application forms for some roles. The Council has also recognised barriers to recruitment, including lack of access to digital technology, lack of confidence and literacy skills. In response it has held drop-in sessions across the County to offer support with application forms. It also uses supplementary payments for some roles and has clear arrangements for doing so.
- 15 The Council has also put in place a new e-recruitment system to streamline its recruitment processes and to increase the number of viable applicants for jobs.

- 16 By using a range of approaches to recruit staff, the Council increases the likelihood of recruiting the talent it needs to deliver its objectives and services.
- 17 The Council has taken action to help retain its staff. For example, it has a broad package of wellbeing and reward offers available to its staff that includes support with physical, mental and financial health including access to saving with a local credit union. It also provides training and development opportunities including traineeships and grow your own pathways. Supporting staff development and wellbeing can help improve their motivation and performance whilst improving staff retention.
- 18 The Council make some use of technology to help retain its staff but has only used this in limited areas. A recent example is use of technology for automated documentation in social care to help to reduce administrative burden and workload pressures on staff. However, the Council does not routinely explore how technology can help staff retention. By not actively exploring new ways to use technology, it may miss opportunities to reduce workload pressures, helping to retain staff whilst improving efficiency.
- 19 The Council uses a range of ways to engage with its workforce on recruitment and retention challenges but it is not always clear if its engagement is effective. For example, it surveyed staff in 2025 and the response rates was just 10%. Less than half of staff who responded recommended the Council as a good place to work.
- 20 The Council also uses exit surveys to help it understand why staff are leaving, but completion rates for these are also very low. The Council is seeking to improve completion rates for exit interviews through the introduction of an electronic system.
- 21 By not effectively engaging with its staff the Council may miss information or ideas to identify solutions to its workforce challenges. It may also reduce the support of staff to implement solutions successfully. The Council recognises the need for improved communication with its workforce and is developing an action plan to address this.

- 22 The Council works with some other organisations to help overcome its recruitment and retention challenges. For example, it works with other councils to recruit to some specialist roles in areas such as legal, minerals and ecology. It also works with a local college to raise the profile of social care as a career. However, the Council does not always consider working with other organisations to address its recruitment and retention challenges. This means the Council risks missing opportunities to share resources, expertise, and good practice that could help it secure value for money.

Reviewing value for money

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

- 23 The Council does not have arrangements to ensure that it always assess the value for money of its approaches to recruitment and retention. It has also not clearly set out who has responsibility for monitoring this. By not considering the cost and effectiveness of all its approaches it is unable to determine if they provide value for money.
- 24 Where the Council has identified weakness in its approach to recruitment and retention it has introduced improvements. This includes the introduction of a new recruitment system. The Council has also successfully addressed specific recruitment and retention challenges in its social care and planning services. This includes targeted action to reduce reliance on agency staff.
- 25 The Council does not formally benchmark its approaches to recruitment and retention with other organisations. It also does not have corporate arrangements to ensure that it always learns from its different approaches internally. Whilst learning is shared internally within the Council through informal discussions, it does not have a mechanism to ensure that learning is always captured and shared. By not ensuring that it identifies, and shares lessons learned the Council risks missing opportunities to improve value for money.

Recommendations

R1 The Council should ensure it provides timely information to senior leaders to enable them to have oversight of current and future recruitment and retention challenges. **(Paragraphs 11 and 12)**

R2 The Council should develop an approach to assessing the value for money of its approaches to recruitment and retention and to sharing lessons learned from this. **(Paragraphs 23 and 25)**

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 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. 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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