

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

Monmouthshire County Council

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Audit snapshot

What we looked at

- 1 We looked at the recruitment and retention challenges that Monmouthshire 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. However, the Council is facing challenges in recruiting and retaining people to deliver its services.

What we have found

- 4 The Council has a limited understanding of its recruitment and retention challenges and has taken action to address these with some success. The Council does not always assess the value for money of its recruitment and retention approaches.

What we recommend

- 5 We made two recommendations. These focus on strengthening the Council's use of workforce information to better understand current and future recruitment and retention challenges; and developing its approach to assessing the value for money of its recruitment and retention activity.

Our findings

Understanding the challenges

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

- 6 The Council has a limited corporate understanding of its hard to fill posts. Officers know which roles are hard-to-fill and why within their services, but the Council does not collate this information to enable it to have an organisation-wide picture. Without an overall understanding, the Council may focus its actions in the “wrong” areas reducing the value for money of its activities.
- 7 The Council has some information to help it understand its recruitment and retention challenges. For example, it uses discussions with officers and exit interviews to understand its current challenges. But the Council has limited information to help it identify future trends. The Council has recognised within its People Strategy a need to improve its workforce information and is developing a corporate dashboard to improve the frequency and depth of workforce information provided to its senior leaders.
- 8 By not having comprehensive information, the Council is not able to fully understand the challenges it faces or forecast future trends. This increases the risks of not spotting problems early and of designing short-term solutions that do not provide value for money over the longer-term.

- 9 The Council generally understands how its use of a range of workforce management approaches helps it address its recruitment and retention challenges. These include use of agency workers, fixed-term contracts, recruitment freezes and market supplements. For example, it has clear processes in place for employing agency workers and using recruitment freezes. It has a well-established vacancy control process that involves justification for filling roles, consideration of alternatives and senior officer oversight of decisions. It uses fixed-term contracts to cover maternity leave or for managing seasonal demand for some services, but it does not have a formal policy for their use.
- 10 The Council also manages its use of market supplements through a clear policy. It uses them only in exceptional circumstances after a detailed business case is approved by a Chief Officer.
- 11 By understanding the impact of different workforce management approaches, the Council reduces the risk of negatively impacting the culture and morale of the organisation. This can help the Council to retain the talent it needs.

Addressing the challenges

The Council is taking action to address its recruitment and retention challenges, with some success

- 12 The Council uses a range of approaches to address its recruitment and retention challenges. However the Council recognises that challenges remain in some services, such as social care, leisure and cleaning services. The approaches it uses include:
- creating apprenticeship and 'grow your own' opportunities to develop people so they can undertake hard-to-fill posts;
 - attending recruitment fairs targeted at recruiting to 'hard-to-fill posts';
 - improving the appeal and reach of job adverts by using supporting videos and social media; and
 - improving its recruitment website to make it easier for people to look and apply for jobs.
- 13 The Council has a clear commitment to increase diversity and inclusion. For example, it has an inclusive workplace promise and has a guaranteed interview scheme for people with disabilities or who are neurodiverse. By having arrangements to recruit from the full diversity of its community, the Council increases its available pool of talent and increases the likelihood of securing the talent it needs.
- 14 The Council is making use of technology to improve the effectiveness of its recruitment activity. For example it is:
- digitising its job application process;
 - making it easier for job applicants to complete application forms via its website;
 - distributing QR codes to potential applicants at job fairs to make it easier for them to register an interest in future jobs that may become available; and
 - improving the accessibility of vacancies and other information about working for the Council on its website.

- 15 The Council's onboarding arrangements do not always enable new staff to take up their posts quickly. In some cases, these delays have caused the Council to lose preferred candidates to competitors. In response, the Council is developing an online recruitment platform to improve the speed with which it onboards new staff. Its new recruitment platform also has potential to help the Council monitor the timeliness of onboarding in the future. Making sure that new staff start work quickly is important to help the Council continue to deliver services for its communities as well as reducing workload pressure on existing staff.
- 16 The Council has set a specific objective within its People Strategy to establish itself as an employer of choice and is taking positive action to achieve this aim. For example, it offers a range of wellbeing and reward offers including pensions, health benefits and flexible working options. These can improve staff wellbeing, productivity and support retention. In addition, the Council offers a range of learning and development opportunities for staff through its e-learning system. This supports staff to access training for their current roles and can help them to progress into more senior roles in future. Supporting staff development and wellbeing together with reward offers can help improve their motivation and performance whilst improving staff retention.
- 17 The Council works with its staff and their representatives to overcome its recruitment and retention challenges. For example, the Council formed working groups to improve its recruitment arrangements and retention of staff. This is important as involving employees in developing and delivering solutions to tackle recruitment and retention challenges can potentially help the Council identify different ways to address them. Without involving staff the Council may miss opportunities to identify practical solutions and secure staff buy-in to changes.
- 18 The Council works with partners to help overcome its recruitment and retention challenges. For example, it works with another council to provide youth offending services and with other councils and the local health board to provide IT services. By exploring opportunities for collaboration, the Council reduces the risk of missed opportunities to share resources, expertise, and notable practice to support its workforce sustainability.

- 19 Senior leaders have regular oversight of recruitment and retention challenges but gaps in information reduce its effectiveness. For example, councillors receive regular risk management reports updating progress on actions to address the Council's workforce pressures. However, as set out earlier in the report there are gaps in the information the Council collects to understand its recruitment and retention challenges. Making sure that senior leaders have the information they need to have regular oversight of recruitment and retention challenges reduces the risk that they are not identified and addressed in a timely way.

Reviewing value for money

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

- 20 The Council does not always assess or monitor the value for money of its recruitment and retention approaches. It has also not clearly set out who has responsibility for monitoring this. The Council sometimes reviews the costs of initiatives and puts in place cost control measures. For example, in its use of agency staff, recruitment control and external job advertising. However, by not always considering the cost and effectiveness of its approaches it is unable to determine if they provide value for money.
- 21 The Council also does not have arrangements to ensure that it always learns from its different approaches and those of other organisations. For example, the Council does not benchmark its approaches to recruitment and retention with other bodies. 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.
- 22 By not consistently identifying and sharing lessons learned the Council risks missing opportunities to improve value for money.

Recommendations

R1 The Council should make sure that its senior leaders have the information needed to fully understand its recruitment and retention challenges (**paragraphs 7 and 19**)

R2 The Council should develop arrangements to assess the value for money of its approaches to recruitment and retention and share lessons learned from this (**paragraphs 20,21 and 22**).

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 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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