Archwilio Cymru
Audit Wales

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

Carmarthenshire County Council

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- section 17 of the Public Audit (Wales) Act 2004 (the 2004 Act) to help enable the Auditor General to be satisfied (or not) that the Council has put in place proper arrangements to secure value for money in the use of its resources; and
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Audit snapshot

What we looked at

1 We looked at the recruitment and retention challenges that Carmarthenshire County Council (the Council) is facing. Including how well the Council understands its challenges, what it is doing in response, and how it assesses 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. However, like many other councils, it is facing challenges to recruit and retain staff.

What we have found

4 We found that the Council generally understands its current recruitment and retention challenges and uses a range of approaches to address them. But it does not evaluate their value for money or routinely share learning from them across the organisation.

What we recommend

5 We have made three recommendations to the Council. These focus on strengthening the Council's understanding of its current and future challenges, exploring opportunities to work with external partners and assessing the value for money of its recruitment and retention activity.

Our findings

Understanding the challenges

The Council generally understands its recruitment and retention challenges

6 The Council generally understands where it has recruitment and retention challenges. For example, it identifies which posts are hard to fill and why within its service areas. These include some roles within its waste, health and safety and pensions administration services. The reasons the Council has identified for roles being 'hard to fill' include:

- national shortages in some professions;
- fewer university and college courses for some professions;
- difficulties in attracting candidates with the right level of experience; and
- pay scales that are not always competitive with the private sector.

7 Senior managers understand the recruitment and retention challenges in their services. For example, as part of the process to produce annual business plans, service managers are required to identify workforce pressures. However, the Council does not draw this information together to enable it to have an organisation-wide understanding of recruitment and retention challenges. Without an overall understanding, the Council risks missing organisation-wide trends or issues and therefore focusing its resources in the 'wrong' areas.

8 The Council has a good understanding of how it uses workforce management approaches to help it have a sustainable workforce. For example, the Council has a well-established vacancy control process. This requires service managers to justify filling vacant roles, with consideration of alternatives, and involves senior officer oversight of decisions. It also provides clear guidance on the use of fixed-term contracts to help managers understand when it is appropriate to use them. The Council also recognises that market supplements are a short-term solution and uses them sparingly.

9 The Council also understands how it uses agency staff, and monitors agency spending closely. In response to high use of agency staff in its social care and waste services, the Council now directly engages casual workers as an alternative. This has helped the Council to reduce its costs.

10 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 recruit and retain the talent it needs.

11 The Council collects some information to help it understand its current recruitment and retention challenges. For example, every three months the Council provides information on job vacancies, sickness absence, and progress with transformation projects related to workforce planning.

12 However, the Council has limited information to help it identify potential future trends in recruitment and retention challenges. The Council currently relies on officers in its human resources department to identify specific recruitment and retention challenges at an early stage. But it does not collect or report data that would help it to identify emerging, or potential future challenges. The Council recognises the need to strengthen its collection and analysis of workforce data to help address this.

13 Having the information it needs to understand current and future challenges can help the Council to target its resources in the right areas.

Addressing the challenges

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

14 The Council is taking action to address its recruitment and retention challenges, with some success. The Council's approaches to attracting and retaining staff include:

- creating apprenticeship and 'grow your own' opportunities to develop people so they can perform hard-to-fill roles;
- holding roadshows in community locations where potential applicants can hear about roles on offer and get help with making applications;
- a clear onboarding and induction process for new starters;
- offering a range of staff wellbeing and reward offers; and
- improving management development to grow its own future leaders.

15 The Council has improved its arrangements to fill vacant roles quickly. For example, it has improved its jobs website to make it easier for potential applicants to use and to highlight the benefits of working for the Council. It has also simplified application forms, attended job fairs, offered work experience, and used social media to attract potential candidates. It also surveyed its new starters to gather their experiences of beginning work with the Council to identify opportunities to improve. These approaches have the potential to help the Council secure the talent it needs in a timely way.

16 The Council is taking action to enable it to help recruit staff from the full diversity of the population. It has a clear strategic objective to be a diverse and inclusive organisation. To help achieve this objective, the Council offers application forms in a range of formats to help applicants with different needs to apply for roles. It also guarantees an interview from applicants who are Armed Forces veterans, reservists or have a disability that meets essential criteria for posts.

17 The Council also undertook a mystery shopper exercise to help improve its recruitment processes. This involved submitting test job applications and assessing the Council's arrangements from the applicant's perspective. 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.

18 The Council involves its workforce in tackling its recruitment and retention challenges. For example, acting upon staff comments in its annual survey and exit surveys, the Council introduced additional support for neurodiverse staff. Involving employees in developing and delivering solutions to tackle recruitment and retention challenges can potentially help the Council to identify solutions and secure staff buy-in to changes.

19 The Council's senior leaders provide regular oversight of recruitment and retention challenges. For example, every three months the Council provides a range of reports that include data on recruitment and retention challenges to its senior leaders. The Council is currently developing an online dashboard to improve the workforce information and frequency it provides to senior leaders.

20 Making sure that senior leaders have regular oversight of recruitment and retention challenges reduces the risk that they are not identified and addressed in a timely way. It can also help the Council to spot problems early and avoid the risk of designing short-term solutions that do not provide value for money over the longer term.

21 The Council recognises the importance of learning and development in helping to address recruitment and retention challenges. The Council supports staff learning and development through a wide range of methods that include work-based learning, graduate programmes and apprenticeships.

22 By supporting employee development, the Council can help to motivate its workforce and improve productivity. This can also help to encourage staff to continue working for the Council, rather than leaving for other opportunities.

23 The Council has worked with some external partners to address recruitment and retention challenges. This includes its work with local colleges, as part of its apprenticeship schemes and two jointly funded posts with a health board. But the Council does not typically seek to resolve longstanding recruitment or retention challenges through partnership working.

24 The Council has used technology to help address its recruitment and retention challenges. For example, it has developed an e-recruitment platform to make it easier for applicants to apply for jobs and for the Council to administer the process. The Council is also using Artificial Intelligence to reduce workload pressures. By exploring how technology can improve its recruitment processes and reduce the workload of existing staff, the Council also reduces the risk of missing opportunities to further improve efficiency, reduce costs, and enhance employee wellbeing.

Assessing value for money

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

25 The Council does not always assess the value for money of its approaches to recruitment and retention. The Council also does not set out who is responsible for monitoring and assessing value for money.

26 The Council does not always share learning from its recruitment and retention activity. There are some examples where the Council has shared learning across its services. For example, the Council's successful reduction in use of agency staff by creating a casual pool of staff has been followed by another service area. But it does not have arrangements to ensure that learning is always shared and instead relies on informal arrangements.

27 By not having arrangements in place to assess and monitor the value for money of its approaches or always share learning, the Council may be missing opportunities to improve value for money.

Recommendations

R1 The Council should make sure that it has the information it needs to fully understand its current and future recruitment and retention challenges, and to help senior leaders provide oversight of them (**paragraphs 11, 12, 13, 19 and 20)**.

R2 The Council should ensure that, where appropriate, it explores opportunities to work with external partners to resolve recruitment and retention challenges whilst securing value for money **(paragraph 23)**.

R3 The Council should develop arrangements to assess and monitor the value for money of its approaches to recruitment and retention (**paragraphs 25, 26 and 27**).

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 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. They were 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 and data relevant to the audit questions we were seeking to answer.

2 About us

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