

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

Swansea Council

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Audit snapshot

What we looked at

- 1 We looked at the recruitment and retention challenges that Swansea 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. The Council understands that historic decisions to make budget cuts to central services have impaired its ability to understand and manage its recruitment and retention challenges. The Council is taking steps to increase its Human Resources (HR) capacity, to manage recruitment processes more effectively and to prepare for longer-term challenges.

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, senior leaders do not always have the information they need to understand the extent of these challenges. The Council has a limited oversight of arrangements and it does not assess whether its recruitment and retention approaches are value for money.

What we recommend

- 6 We have made two recommendations. These focus on strengthening understanding of recruitment and retention challenges by improving access to information and developing ways to assess value for money.

Our findings

Understanding the challenges

The Council understands which posts are difficult to fill but does not routinely review the reasons behind this

- 7 The Council understands where its recruitment and retention challenges are. It has identified which posts are hard to fill and captures the reasons why in a central list of hard-to-fill posts. Reasons include national shortages in some professions and pay scales that are not always competitive with the private sector.
- 8 The Council has access to wider labour market information such as pay scales for comparable jobs elsewhere, which it uses when making the case for market supplements or restructuring.
- 9 However, the Council lacks a deeper understanding of whether there are issues specific to the Council that could impact on its ability to recruit and retain staff. It is also not clear how the list of hard-to-fill posts is reviewed and who is responsible for updating it. By fully understanding which posts are hard to fill and why, the Council could reduce the risk that it targets its resources in the wrong place.
- 10 The Council collects a range of recruitment and retention data. Some data, such as the time taken to recruit, is reported quarterly to Corporate Management Team. However, the data is not readily available to help officers understand specific recruitment and retention challenges. HR Business Partners update managers with workforce data, like vacancies and turnover rates, if requested.

- 11 However, senior leaders do not always have timely access to the data they need, in a suitable format. We were told that extracting the data is a labour-intensive process. The Council has plans to develop a dashboard to address this issue, but this is still under development.
- 12 To help it understand retention issues, the Council offers all leavers an exit interview but does not regularly review or report the data gathered.
- 13 By not collecting and evaluating all the information it could, the Council lacks a detailed understanding of the root causes behind recruitment and retention issues. This makes it more difficult to identify where recruitment and retention issues may arise in the future, so the Council can target resources in the right place and secure value for money.
- 14 Since our fieldwork concluded, the Council has developed a strategic workforce planning framework, which may help it to develop a more detailed and proactive approach to recruitment and retention issues. At this point the framework is untested.
- 15 The Council understands how it is using workforce management approaches to help address recruitment and retention challenges. These include fixed-term contracts, external agency staff and market supplements. For example, the Council has reviewed the use of market supplements and has previously withdrawn them where they were not successful. The Council has also reduced reliance on agency workers in its waste service, having identified benefits of creating permanent positions.
- 16 There are opportunities to strengthen some approaches to workforce management. For example, the Council has a vacancy management process, which is designed to encourage alternative approaches to recruiting. This is used to reduce costs when services are facing increased budget pressures but it is not yet used strategically as a workforce management tool. There will be an opportunity to review this approach as the Council develops its workforce strategy.
- 17 By understanding the impact of different workforce management approaches, the Council can reduce the risk of negative impacts on the culture and morale of the organisation.

Addressing the challenges

The Council is taking action to address its recruitment and retention challenges, with some success but its oversight of key issues is limited

- 18 The Council is trying different approaches to address its recruitment and retention issues, with some successful examples. For example, the Council has:
- introduced a 'Grow your own' approach to make more use of apprenticeships and trainee positions;
 - restructured and regraded posts in Legal Services to reduce caseloads and improve career progression;
 - held open days for large recruitment exercises, offering guidance on the interview process;
 - simplified application forms in Waste Services to reduce onboarding timescales; and
 - taken steps to increase HR capacity specifically in relation to recruitment and retention activity.
- 19 The Council uses an onboarding process when new starters join the Council. By carefully managing this process, the Council has reduced the time taken to onboard new starters. The Council plans to digitise the process, to make it less labour intensive. By making these improvements, the Council can increase the likelihood that candidates will experience a positive introduction to the organisation.
- 20 The Council has taken action to establish itself as an 'employer of choice'. This includes a range of wellbeing and reward offers for staff, such as an employee assistance programme and a staff reward and recognition programme. Offering different wellbeing and reward options can improve staff wellbeing, productivity and engagement, making it easier to hire and keep staff.

- 21 The Council engages with its workforce on some issues but does not always use that information to inform its approaches to recruitment and retention. The Council engaged staff as part of its recruitment and retention policy review, and surveys staff annually. Whilst staff are surveyed on their satisfaction with the organisation generally, they are not asked specific questions which would help the Council improve its understanding of recruitment and retention issues. For example, how long staff plan on staying with the organisation.
- 22 The Council works with some partners to address recruitment and retention issues. The Council has worked with a local college to deliver a well-established programme of management training. More recently, the Council has engaged with a university to encourage more graduates to apply for roles at the Council. Exploring opportunities to work with partners to resolve recruitment and retention challenges can help the Council identify opportunities to share resources, expertise, and good practice.
- 23 The Council is making use of technology to help address some recruitment and retention challenges. For example, the Council introduced technology in social services to help reduce workload pressures for social workers and enable them to spend more time with clients. The Council has begun to implement new software to make the recruitment process more efficient and has plans to improve its management data, so that it is easier to extract and present in reports.
- 24 By increasing its use of technology to address its recruitment and retention challenges, the Council can increase its opportunities to improve its processes, reduce costs and improve efficiency and employee wellbeing.

- 25 Councillors are provided with limited information to enable them to oversee and scrutinise recruitment and retention challenges. For example, Governance and Audit Committee receive some information about recruitment and retention challenges, because it is a risk on the corporate risk register. Progress against the workforce strategy, which includes a section on recruitment and retention, is reported to the Scrutiny Programme Committee annually. However, reports do not always include progress against actions and the data included in the strategy is not up to date. This makes it difficult for councillors to understand whether progress is being made in key areas.
- 26 By not routinely sharing information with councillors, the Council increases the risk that challenges are not identified by senior leaders and addressed.

Reviewing value for money

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

- 27 The Council does not assess or monitor the value for money of its approach to recruitment and retention. There are examples where a change to its recruitment approach has led to reduced costs or improved the service. For example, the Council recognised that the protracted recruitment process in Legal Services was inefficient, so provided more resources to speed this up. In doing so, the service benefitted from increased recruitment and retention levels, which reduced the amount of outsourced legal work and saved the Council money.
- 28 But the Council has not evaluated the financial impact of this change and there is no corporate or strategic oversight of which approaches represent better value for money. By not monitoring and reviewing its approaches, the Council may be missing opportunities to improve their value for money.

- 29 The Council does not have a mechanism for ensuring that learning is always captured and shared. There are some examples where learning has been shared across the Council and externally, but the Council does not ensure that this happens routinely.
- 30 There are examples where the Council has taken steps to improve its approach to recruitment and retention, such as:
- plans to introduce HR software to make its application process more efficient; and
 - restructuring legal services to reduce caseloads resulting in improved staff retention.
- 31 Although both examples are a positive response to long-standing issues, a clearer understanding of recruitment and retention issues across the organisation and within specific services might have enabled the Council to intervene earlier and avoid problems becoming more acute.
- 32 By not consistently sharing the lessons it learns, the Council may miss opportunities to improve its approaches and improve value for money.

Recommendations

- R1** The Council should ensure it has the information and data it needs to enable it to understand current and future recruitment and retention trends. As part of this it should:
- 1.1** engage with staff to help inform this understanding (**paragraph 21**); and
 - 1.2** provide senior leaders with sufficient and appropriate information to enable them to understand and monitor its recruitment and retention challenges (**paragraphs 10, 25 and 26**).
- R2** The Council should develop an approach to assessing the value for money of its approaches to recruitment and retention (**paragraphs 27 and 28**).

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 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. 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 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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Audit Wales

Tel: 029 2032 0500

Fax: 029 2032 0600

Textphone: 029 2032 0660

E-mail: info@audit.wales

Website: www.audit.wales

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