

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

Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council

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# Audit snapshot

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## What we looked at

- 1 We looked at the recruitment and retention challenges the Council is facing. This included 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 The Council has a broad understanding of hard to fill posts and is taking a range of actions to tackle recruitment and retention challenges with some successes. This includes its graduate and apprenticeship programme.
- 6 Whilst the Council evaluates some of its activities it does not always evaluate the value for money of its approach to recruitment and retention. We also found there is scope to improve its use of data to help target recruitment and retention activity.

## What we recommend

- 7 We have made one recommendation to the Council covering its use of data, assessing and monitoring value for money, working with external partners and reviewing its response to its recruitment review.

# Our findings

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## Understanding the challenges

### **The Council has a broad understanding of its recruitment and retention challenges but recognises there are opportunities to strengthen this**

- 8 The Council understands which posts are hard to fill within individual service areas. For example, its children's services department has used exit surveys and retention interviews to understand the root causes behind staff leaving. These include high workloads, a lack of flexibility with working patterns, and salary. The Council does not however maintain a list of hard to fill posts across the Council, which limits its ability to maintain corporate oversight. Identifying hard to fill roles and the reasons why helps the Council know the extent of its recruitment challenge and target resources appropriately.
- 9 The Council understands how it is using workforce management approaches such as market supplements, fixed term contracts and agency staff. For example, the Council keeps a record of the number of fixed-term contracts within each directorate, which are primarily used for grant-funded roles. The Senior Leadership Team (SLT) also receives a monthly update on agency staff use. The Council has also committed to reduce reliance on agency use, and its children's services department has been successful in doing this. The Council has also clearly set out and consistently applies its approach to using market supplements when offering an increased salary for hard-to-fill posts.
- 10 By using workforce management approaches appropriately, and understanding their impact, the Council is more likely to recruit and retain the people it needs, with a more stable workforce and improved staff morale.

- 11 The Council's understanding of its recruitment and retention challenges is supported by a range of workforce data. This includes data on:
- employee numbers (multiple demographic groups);
  - local labour market and salary comparisons; and
  - reasons for leaving, broken down against various demographic groups.
- 12 There is also good communication between heads of service, the Human Resources (HR) team and SLT on recruitment and retention challenges. The HR team receive regular updates from individual service areas and combine this information with data collected from its digital HR system to understand where the challenges are. The results of this are regularly reported to SLT and elected members, to help them maintain oversight of recruitment and retention challenges.
- 13 The Council does not, however, collect and monitor data on long term vacancies across the Council as a whole. Without this data, it is difficult for the Council to monitor the position and the potential impact on the workforce overall. Potential impacts of long-term vacancies can include for example increased workload and lower morale amongst existing staff. The Council also recognises that its workforce data is not always available to managers in a timely way and is working to address this.

## Addressing the challenges

### **The Council is taking action to address its recruitment and retention challenges with some successes**

- 14 The Council uses a range of ways to attract and retain staff. These include:
- use of social media to advertise jobs and promote the Council as a good place to work;
  - attending job fairs;
  - updating job descriptions to reach a broader audience and making sure they are accurate;

- investing in its graduate and apprenticeship programme to help minimise future recruitment and retention challenges;
  - a number of schemes to support disadvantaged groups to gain employment with the Council;
  - a well-being strategy and reward offers including for example, flexible working policies, additional leave schemes, mental health support, and occupational health services; and
  - learning and development opportunities, including accredited qualifications, in-house training and leadership programmes, to help foster a positive culture of personal development.
- 15 Having a range of approaches to recruit and retain people can help the Council secure the talent it needs to deliver its services and objectives. In particular, the Council's graduate and apprenticeship programme has helped it to grow its future workforce and reduce workforce pressures for some services. This has resulted in 390 apprentices being recruited since 2012, and 151 graduates recruited since 2016 with 94% of them still employed by the Council.
- 16 The Council also has a well-structured onboarding process for new starters. The Council's process supports applicants and the services they join by:
- making good use of technology to automate and streamline processes;
  - delivering a structured induction programme, and;
  - providing support materials to inform and guide new starters.
- 17 Having effective onboarding processes means successful candidates are more likely to remain with the organisation.
- 18 The Council also engages staff to help address recruitment and retention issues in a few ways. The Council's annual staff survey, 'Inform & Involve' sessions, retention interviews, and new starter surveys in the children's services team, help inform how it addresses recruitment and retention challenges. Although the new starter surveys have not been used in other service areas.

- 19 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 graduate and apprenticeship schemes. The Council has also worked with partners to respond to short-term capacity issues, including sharing resources with regional working group partners to respond to emergencies. But the Council does not typically seek to resolve longstanding recruitment or retention challenges through partnership working.
- 20 The Council is making use of technology to ease recruitment and retention challenges. For example, to:
- streamline recruitment and employee management;
  - facilitate hybrid working;
  - reduce workload pressures through trialing use of Artificial Intelligence (AI); and;
  - digitally market vacancies.
- 21 By making effective use of technology the Council can make the most of opportunities to reduce costs and improve both the efficiency and effectiveness of its recruitment processes.

## Reviewing value for money

### **The Council reviews some recruitment and retention initiatives, but does not always evaluate if its approaches provide value for money**

- 22 The Council has reviewed the cost effectiveness of some recruitment initiatives, including job advertising, well-being provider contracts, and its graduate and apprenticeship programmes. There is also regular oversight of recruitment and retention issues by SLT. The Council's scrutiny committees have also considered a range of recruitment and retention-related data. By ensuring senior leaders have oversight of recruitment and retention challenges, the Council reduces the risk that they are not identified and addressed.
- 23 The Council has also acted following recruitment reviews to address weaknesses. For example, following its recruitment review in 2024, the Council developed an automated employment request and approval portal. However, it is not clear why the Council progressed some of the recommendations from this review and not others.
- 24 We also identified some weaknesses in the Council's arrangements to monitor the value for money of its recruitment and retention activity. For example:
- the Council does not assess how recruitment and retention activity contributes towards its wider corporate objectives;
  - responsibilities for assessing value for money of recruitment and retention activity are unclear;
  - there is no clear timeline to monitor delivery of actions arising from the Council's recruitment review or to track their progress; and
  - the Council does not always understand the cost of its recruitment and retention initiatives or ensure that it benchmarks its approaches with other organisations.

- 25 By not having these arrangements in place, it is more difficult for the Council to assess value for money or to respond to challenges in a timely way.
- 26 There are some good examples where the Council has shared learning from its recruitment and retention activity both across the Council, and with partners. Examples include sharing learning from its graduate and apprenticeship scheme with other public bodies. However, the Council does not have arrangements in place to ensure this always happens, or that learning is always captured. Sharing learning helps to ensure that opportunities to improve value for money are identified and helps to reduce the risk of duplication.

# Recommendations

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- R1 The Council should strengthen its corporate approach to recruitment and retention by:**
- 1.1** ensuring it has comprehensive data to enable it to plan for and respond to recruitment and retention trends in both the short and medium term (**paragraphs 8 and 13**);
  - 1.2** ensuring that where appropriate the Council explores opportunities to work with external partners to resolve recruitment and retention challenges whilst securing value for money (**paragraph 19**);
  - 1.3** assuring itself that it has either addressed any outstanding actions or issues from its review of recruitment undertaken in 2024 or that it is clear as to why any outstanding actions or issues no longer need to be addressed. (**paragraph 23**); and
  - 1.4** establishing arrangements to ensure it assesses and monitors the value for money of its recruitment and retention initiatives and shares lessons learned from these (**paragraphs 24 and 25**).

# Appendices

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# 1 About our work

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## 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 explain '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 relevant to the audit questions we were seeking to answer.

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