

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

Conwy County Borough Council

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Audit snapshot

What we looked at

- 1 We looked at the recruitment and retention challenges Conwy 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.

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 We found the Council understands its recruitment and retention challenges and is proactively using a wide range of approaches to deal with them.

What we recommend

- 6 We made one recommendation which focused on the Council ensuring all major significant recruitment and retention initiatives include an assessment of value for money.

Our findings

Understanding the challenges

The Council has a clear understanding of its recruitment and retention challenges and is successfully using workforce management approaches to help ensure it has a sustainable workforce

- 7 The Council understands which posts are hard to fill and the reasons why. The Council set up a working group in 2021 to complete an in-depth review of its recruitment processes. This led to the creation of the Council's Recruitment Project in 2022 to identify and tackle recruitment and retention challenges. The Council also introduced a Vacancy Control Panel to speed up and provide corporate oversight of all proposed vacancies. Weekly meetings of this panel identify and discuss hard-to-fill posts.
- 8 By knowing which posts are hard to fill and understanding the reasons why, the Council reduces the risk of targeting its resources in the wrong place. This also reduces the risk of the Council not securing value for money.
- 9 The Council has a clear understanding of how it uses market supplements, recruitment freezes, fixed-term contracts, and agency staff. The Council controls the use of market supplements, only using them in a limited capacity, supported by strong authorisation and review processes. The Council does not have a recruitment freeze in place, but it reviews any vacant post through its vacancy control process. Managers are also aware of the importance of limiting the time vacancies are held for to maintain staff wellbeing. HR Business Partners (HRBPs) also discuss fixed-term contracts with Heads of Service in regular meetings.

- 10 The Council also moved to a new managed service provider for agency staff, which led to many benefits including: increased visibility and control; live data; regular, detailed reporting; and cost reduction and avoidance.
- 11 By understanding the use and consequences of its workforce management approaches, the Council reduces the risk of negatively impacting culture and morale. This, in turn, reduces the risk of it not being able to secure the talent it needs to deliver its objectives and services in ways which secure value for money.
- 12 The Council uses a range of information to understand its recruitment and retention challenges and has a clear picture of the current situation. It has recognised the need to improve data collection and analysis to help identify future challenges and has started to address this.
- 13 The Council has introduced a workforce planning process where recruitment and retention challenges are discussed between Heads of Service and HRBPs. The HR Service has also developed workforce data reports to support this process which allow each service to identify risk areas, such as single points of contact and roles at risk. There is also clear information on the current workforce in the Council's People Strategy.
- 14 In recognising the need to improve the data and information it uses, the Council has started several projects. These include:
 - the digitisation of leaver questionnaires;
 - the analysis of the money spent on external legal staff carrying out specialist work; and
 - drafting a list of potential performance measures for the HR Service, which include specific indicators on recruitment and retention.
- 15 By having information to predict future trends, the Council will be more likely to design long-term solutions and identify opportunities to prevent challenges occurring or from getting worse.

Addressing the challenges

The Council is proactively using a wide range of actions to address its recruitment and retention challenges

- 16 The Council has taken action to establish itself as an employer of choice. It offers a wide range of benefits and rewards, presented clearly to existing and potential employees on its public-facing website. The benefits are supported by a rebranded learning and development offer. The Council's performance management process also includes discussions on wellbeing and learning and development. By taking these actions, the Council increases the likelihood of being able to recruit and retain a motivated workforce by being an employer of choice.
- 17 The Council places a strong emphasis on inclusion and the benefits of a workforce that reflects a wide range of skills, experiences and perspectives. HR works closely with the Inclusion Team on projects specifically looking at barriers to joining the workforce. One looks at barriers for people with learning disabilities and the other reviews the experiences of Black, Asian and minority ethnic people applying for roles. By having these arrangements in place, the Council increases the likelihood of being able to recruit and retain the people and talent it needs and positively impact the workplace experience.
- 18 The Council places importance on engaging with its staff and has introduced several ways to collect feedback from them. These include an in-person corporate induction; biannual staff meetings with the Chief Executive and Strategic Directors; and HR link officers in each service to provide two-way communication. By involving its employees, the Council is more likely to collect ideas about, and introduce solutions to, its recruitment and retention challenges.

- 19 The Council has arrangements in place to ensure senior leaders have oversight of recruitment and retention challenges. Senior managers discuss vacancies at weekly Vacancy Control Panel meetings. There are also three risks related to recruitment and retention on the Council's corporate risk register which it reports to councillors twice a year. The Council also reported progress on its Recruitment Project to Cabinet and the Finance and Resources Overview and Scrutiny Committee (FROSC). Services are also required to discuss any recruitment and retention challenges through the Council's Service Performance Reviews.
- 20 These arrangements help ensure that senior leaders are aware of recruitment and retention challenges and can take action to address them.
- 21 The Council works with a range of partners to tackle its recruitment and retention challenges. These include local colleges, other councils, and national professional bodies. The Council has also explored joint roles with other councils to address specific recruitment challenges. By exploring opportunities for collaboration, the Council reduces the risk of missing opportunities to share resources, expertise, and good practice.
- 22 The Council has used technology to improve its recruitment processes. It is also exploring how technology can reduce workload pressures on existing staff. It has redesigned its recruitment webpages; digitised recruitment and onboarding resources; and used AI to improve job descriptions and adverts and simplify application forms. The Council also has a technology workstream which contains a project specifically looking at the further digitisation of HR processes. The workstream also contains projects designed to increase efficiency and create additional capacity in its workforce.
- 23 By making use of technology, the Council has improved its recruitment processes to help attract and retain talent. By exploring how technology may be able to release workforce capacity, the Council reduces the risk of missing opportunities to improve efficiency, reduce costs, and enhance employee wellbeing.

Reviewing value for money

The Council assesses the value of money of some of its recruitment and retention initiatives but does not ensure this happens for all of them

- 24 There are strong examples of the Council assessing the value for money of some of its recruitment and retention initiatives. For example, a report to the FROSC on managing agency workers through the new managed service provider highlighted improvements in economy, efficiency, and effectiveness. There is potential to strengthen evaluation by expanding this approach to all major recruitment and retention initiatives, such as improving the onboarding process. The new performance measures being introduced by the HR Service may help in assessing the value for money of future initiatives.
- 25 By not assessing the value of money of all significant recruitment and retention initiatives, the Council may be unaware if its approaches are economical, efficient or effective.
- 26 The Council has reviewed its approaches to recruitment and retention and then taken action to improve them. For example, its 'End of Stage Review' for Phase 1 of its Recruitment Project evaluated the objectives and intended benefits of the original business case. The project led to improvements to job descriptions, adverts, applicant experiences, and the 'Team Conwy' employment brand. Further examples of reviewing approaches and introducing improvements include the introduction of:
- a new managed service provider for agency workers;
 - career grade posts – positions filled at lower grades but employees are given training, experience and support to progress; and
 - a vacancy control process.

- 27 The Council also has an effective Service Performance Review process. This enables councillors and senior leaders to challenge services and share learnings across the organisation.
- 28 By implementing improvements and sharing lessons learned, the Council increases the likelihood of improving value for money.

Recommendations

- R1** The Council should ensure it assesses the value for money of its major recruitment and retention initiatives (**paragraphs 28 and 29**).

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 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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