

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

Flintshire County Council

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Audit snapshot

What we looked at

- 1 We looked at the recruitment and retention challenges that Flintshire 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 The majority of the Council's day-to-day spending is used to pay for its workforce. However, it is facing a number of challenges to recruit and retain people to deliver its services.

What we have found

- 4 We found that the Council understands its recruitment and retention challenges and has used several approaches, with some success. But it does not always evaluate whether its approaches represent value for money.

What we recommend

- 5 We make one recommendation. This focuses on the Council making sure it assesses the value for money of its key approaches to recruitment and retention.

Our findings

Understanding the challenges

The Council generally understands its recruitment and retention challenges

- 6 The Council's senior managers understand which roles are more difficult to fill and why. The reasons why some roles are hard to fill include:
 - national shortages in some specialised roles, including social workers, local planning officers, data analysts and HGV drivers;
 - fewer college courses for some professions resulting in skills shortages;
 - limited awareness of career options available in local government; and
 - pay scales that are not competitive with businesses or neighbouring councils.
- 7 By understanding which posts are hard to fill and why, the Council can target its efforts in the right place and at the right time.
- 8 Senior managers understand recruitment and retention pressures in their services, but this understanding is not as clear corporately. As part of the annual business planning process managers identify service pressures including recruitment and retention challenges. However, there is no central list of posts that are hard to fill. As a result, the Council may not identify trends or council-wide recruitment and retention issues.
- 9 The Council collects and manages information about its workforce which allows it to understand and respond to recruitment and retention challenges. This includes information such as vacancy numbers, sickness absence, agency spending and staff turnover rates. This information is reported to its Senior Management Team (SMT) monthly.

- 10 The Council's HR Business Partners also discuss recruitment and retention issues at monthly Directorate Management team meetings. Recruitment and retention challenges are integrated into the Council's formal risk monitoring process. Individual services maintain their own risk registers, and the Council's Corporate Risk Register is reviewed monthly and reported to councillors.
- 11 By having information to understand its workforce challenges, the Council reduces the risk of missing opportunities to stop problems from happening or getting worse. It also reduces the risk of having short term solutions that do not provide value for money over the longer term.
- 12 The Council understands its use of workforce management approaches such as recruitment freezes, market supplements, fixed term contracts and agency staff, to help ensure a sustainable workforce. For example, the Council has a clear process to manage the use of market supplements. It has used them in areas where salaries are lower than other employers. Managers must complete a business case, and the supplement must be reviewed annually. As a result, the Council is in a better position to attract the right staff and once employed, save the costs of having to recruit new staff. This is particularly important where the jobs are hard to fill.
- 13 These workforce management approaches offer managers more flexibility in recruiting staff. Understanding how it uses different workforce management approaches can help the Council avoid negative impacts on the morale of existing staff.

Addressing the challenges

The Council has taken action to address its recruitment and retention challenges, with some success

- 14 The Council uses a range of approaches to respond to recruitment and retention challenges. These include:
- offering a range of staff wellbeing and reward offers;
 - developing social work and occupational therapy trainee pathways;
 - creating more apprenticeships and graduate trainee programmes;
 - target campaigns to recruit people thinking about becoming social workers.;
 - reducing high rates of sickness absence through early intervention, management training and investing in occupational health services;
 - improving staff work-life balance through a range of flexible working options; and
 - prioritising leadership development to grow future leaders.
- 15 The Council has also used job fairs, work experience, and social media to attract candidates. Exit interviews and staff surveys are also helping the Council understand why people leave and why they stay. The Council has also adapted recruitment processes to reduce barriers for applicants including those with protected characteristics. These actions support fair access for applicants and help fill posts more quickly, reducing the risk of long-term vacancies.
- 16 Having a range of approaches to recruiting and retaining staff is likely to increase the Council's ability to attract candidates and retain a motivated workforce.

- 17 The Council engages with its workforce on recruitment and retention challenges. For example, the Council engaged with various staff networks when developing its people strategy. It also used staff feedback to develop its employee wellbeing programme. The Council also offers exit interviews to staff who are leaving the organisation, and this information is regularly reviewed to identify common themes. Effectively engaging its staff can help the Council to identify solutions to its recruitment and retention challenges.
- 18 The Council works with others to address recruitment and retention challenges. It collaborates with colleges and professional bodies and with all six North Wales local authorities on social care recruitment. The Council also works with the third sector to support recruitment for care homes. Exploring opportunities to working with a range of partners is important to help the Council take opportunities to share capacity and expertise.
- 19 The Council is making use of technology to help with recruitment and retention. The Council has:
 - re-designed its jobs and careers web pages;
 - developed an online Application Hub to make it easier for applicants to apply for jobs, track progress and get feedback;
 - moved its application process for apprentices and graduates online;
 - introduced new computer software in social services and environmental services to reduce workload pressures; and
 - increased the use of AI and digital tools in its customer contact centre to improve efficiency and reduce workload pressure on staff
- 20 By making effective use of technology, the Council can make the most of opportunities to reduce costs and improve efficiency. It can also help the Council to improve the effectiveness of its recruitment processes and reduce workload pressures for existing staff.

Reviewing value for money

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

- 21 The Council does not routinely assess the value for money of its approaches to meet its recruitment and retention challenges. It does monitor the costs of some of its approaches, including its use of agency staff. But it does not usually assess the costs as well as the effectiveness of its key approaches. It has also not set out who is responsible for assessing and monitoring their value for money.
- 22 By not having clear arrangements in place, it is difficult for the Council to know if its approaches are providing value for money.
- 23 The Council seeks to learn about the effectiveness of its approaches to recruitment and retention. The Council shares lessons learned internally through its HR partners. It also seeks to learn from others. For example, it has sought to understand how to make the best use of social media in recruitment, and about different 'grow your own' staff initiatives across the UK. All jobs are now advertised on social media and tailored to each audience. By implementing the right improvements and applying lessons learned, the Council increases opportunities to improve the way it recruits and retains its staff.

Recommendations

- R1** The Council should develop a way of assessing the value for money of its key approaches to recruitment and retention (paragraphs 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 assesses 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 and data relevant to the audit questions we were seeking to answer.

2 About us

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