

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

Cardiff 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. However, it is facing a number of challenges to recruit and retain people to deliver its services.
- 4 The Council recognises that previous decisions to give responsibility for recruitment and retention to Heads of Service have reduced its corporate oversight. It plans to increase capacity in its human resources department to address this.

## What we have found

- 5 The Council broadly understands its recruitment and retention challenges and uses a range of approaches to help address them, with some success. However, there are gaps in how the Council monitors progress in addressing these challenges. We also found that the Council does not assess the value for money of its approaches to recruitment and retention.

## What we recommend

- 6 We have made two recommendations to the Council. These cover using data to better understand its recruitment and retention challenges and assessing the value for money of its key approaches.

# Our findings

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## Understanding the challenges

### **The Council broadly understands its recruitment and retention challenges**

- 7 The Council broadly understands which posts are hard to fill in individual service areas and the main reasons why. These include higher salaries being offered elsewhere and skills shortages, both nationally and locally. The Council compiles a central list of hard to fill posts annually, based on discussions with officers in its directorates. By understanding why posts are hard to fill, the Council reduces the risk that it targets its resources in the wrong place.
- 8 The Council has a good understanding of how it is using workforce management approaches to help address recruitment and retention challenges. These include:
  - using agency staff through its in-house agency 'Cardiff Works';
  - using fixed term contracts for grant funded posts;
  - using recruitment freezes strategically by slowing down recruitment during periods of financial pressure, whilst exempting critical hard to fill posts such as some posts in social care; and
  - using market supplements sparingly, whilst allowing their use to recruit to some hard to fill roles, for example some social services posts.
- 9 By understanding its use of workforce management approaches, the Council reduces the risk of negative impacts on the culture and morale of the organisation. This, in turn, can help the Council to retain the talent it needs.

- 10 The Council does not always have information in the format it needs for service areas to gain a deep understanding of their recruitment and retention challenges. Service areas are largely responsible for analysing recruitment and retention data. However, managers report that they do not have the capacity to carry out the in-depth analysis of this data that they need. The Council has identified this is an area which could be improved and intends to improve its performance reporting through a new recruitment system. However, the Council does not expect this system to be in place until 2027.
- 11 The Council does not use information to forecast future trends across the organisation. For example, a few services carry out forecasting, but the Council does not bring this information together to identify potential trends across the organisation. By strengthening how it uses data to predict future trends, the Council can help to prevent recruitment and retention problems from occurring or getting worse and help design solutions that provide value for money over the longer term.

## Addressing the challenges

### **The Council is taking a range of actions to address its recruitment and retention challenges, but oversight by senior leaders is limited**

- 12 The Council uses a range of ways to attract and retain staff. The Council has worked to attract candidates for roles by:
  - offering employment and skills support to people who are out of work through its 'Into work' service;
  - increasing access to its social care career pathways by promoting entry level roles and ensuring there are clearer routes to progression;
  - reducing reliance on external agency staff by developing its own internal recruitment agency; and
  - strengthening its employer brand, using social media and digitising recruitment processes.
- 13 The Council has invested in learning and development, to encourage staff retention and develop its workforce by:
  - adopting a 'grow your own' approach to developing staff;
  - providing training to managers on recruiting skills;
  - offering a range of learning and development opportunities through its Cardiff Academy and its leadership development programme; and
  - exceeding its target for recruiting apprentices in 2025-26.
- 14 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.

- 15 The Council has successfully increased the diversity of its workforce. It has done this by targeting a more diverse range of people in its recruitment campaigns and trying to reduce barriers to hiring for underrepresented groups. The Council uses diverse recruitment panels to help reduce the risk of bias at interviews and promote career progression of existing staff. The Council has achieved notable success in this area, for example it has increased successful applications from ethnic minority groups to its 'Cardiff Works' pool from 7% to 37% within two years. By increasing its potential talent pool, the Council is helping secure the workforce it needs and is helping to deliver its wider equality objectives.
- 16 The Council has worked with partners to address some challenges, including working with other councils in its region to procure agency workers. It also shares joint environmental health officer posts with other councils through its Shared Regulatory Service, and joint posts with the local health board through its integrated mental health team. However, the Council does not always explore collaboration to address specific recruitment and retention issues. By not always exploring opportunities for collaboration, the Council may miss opportunities to share resources, expertise and good practice to resolve its recruitment and retention challenges.
- 17 The Council involves its workforce in addressing some of its recruitment and retention challenges. For example, the Council used staff and manager feedback to make improvements to its application process. It also involves its staff network group in recruitment processes by asking them to be represented on interview panels. Involving staff to address recruitment and retention challenges reduces the risk of the Council missing ideas or failing to introduce solutions successfully.
- 18 The Council uses technology to ease recruitment and retention challenges. For example, it allows candidates to sit online entry assessments and has digitised its 'Cardiff Works' platform, resulting in more applications and increasing the number of people in its works pool by 56%. 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.

- 19 Senior leaders do not have regular oversight of recruitment and retention challenges. For example, reports to Senior Management Team and Scrutiny Committees do not routinely include recruitment data, other than general workforce data. Recruitment and retention issues are also not regularly discussed in other fora such as the Council's management forums. The Council is strengthening capacity in its human resources team to provide oversight of recruitment and retention issues across services. This has the potential to help improve corporate oversight at officer level.
- 20 By not ensuring that senior leaders have regular oversight of its recruitment and retention challenges, the Council increases the risk that the issues are not identified and addressed.

## Reviewing value for money

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

- 21 The Council does not regularly assess or monitor the value for money of its recruitment and retention approaches. It does consider value for money in some instances, for example, by requiring services to set out likely costs and savings before market supplements are approved. However, it has not reviewed the cost effectiveness of specific recruitment and retention initiatives after they have taken place. By not assessing the value for money of its approaches to recruitment and retention, the Council does not know if its approaches are economic, efficient or effective.
- 22 The Council has taken a range of steps to strengthen its recruitment and retention approaches where it has identified opportunities for improvement. Many of these issues were identified during its recruitment review in 2025, which was launched to support the delivery of its workforce strategy. Key changes included:
- improving application processes including revising application forms and adding a new jobs page to its website;
  - speeding up onboarding of new staff in some service areas such as social care; and
  - standardising staff exit questionnaires and issuing improved guidance to managers, to help improve understanding of why staff leave the organisation.
- 23 The Council has also improved onboarding times for its internal agency staff by streamlining processes and working to reduce its backlog in dealing with applications. This has resulted in reducing the average time it takes to accept a candidate from 40 days to 2 days.

- 24 The Council does not have a clear process for capturing or sharing lessons learned from its approach to recruitment and retention. For example, despite identifying learning actions during its recent recruitment review, there is no mechanism to monitor progress against these. By not sharing learning, the Council risks missing opportunities to improve value for money and to reduce the risk of duplication.

# Recommendations

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- R1** The Council should make sure it has the information it needs to understand its recruitment and retention challenges by:
  - 1.1** improving its use and analysis of data to inform its understanding of current recruitment challenges (**paragraph 10**); and
  - 1.2** improving its use of forecasting to help it predict future trends and help target its resources effectively (**paragraph 11**).
  
- R2** The Council should improve its approach to assessing value for money of its approach to recruitment and retention by:
  - 2.1** assessing the value for money of its key recruitment and retention approaches (**paragraph 21**); and
  - 2.2** ensuring it captures and shares lessons learned across services. (**paragraph 24**).

# 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 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 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](mailto:info@audit.wales)

Website: [www.audit.wales](http://www.audit.wales)

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