

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

Newport City Council

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Audit snapshot

What we looked at

- 1 We looked at the recruitment and retention challenges Newport City Council (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.
- 2 Our main audit question was, “Does the Council have proper arrangements to address its recruitment and retention challenges?”

Why this is important

- 3 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.
- 4 The majority of the Council’s day-to-day spending is used to pay for its workforce.

What we have found

- 5 We found the Council has a good understanding of its recruitment and retention challenges and is proactive in using a range of approaches to address them. It reviews its recruitment and retention activity and implements improvements. It is also developing its arrangements to improve its ability to assess value for money.

What we recommend

- 6 We made one recommendation for the Council about evaluating its arrangements to assess value for money.

Our findings

Understanding the challenges

The Council has a good understanding of its recruitment and retention challenges

- 7 The Council has a good understanding of jobs that are difficult to fill and the reasons for this. It surveys its Heads of Service and collects recruitment and retention data to inform this. The Council has Succession Planning guidance to help services identify critical roles.
- 8 The Council also has a recruitment dashboard containing a range of data to understand its recruitment activity. Each Directorate has a workforce dashboard and a service plan. All service plans have a section on workforce planning including actions to address any current and/or future recruitment or retention challenges.
- 9 Collecting data at both service and corporate levels ensures the Council has a comprehensive understanding of its recruitment and retention activities. Access to consistent information helps prevent emerging problems from being overlooked and enables timely intervention. It also enables the Council to take targeted action to address recruitment and retention challenges.

- 10 The Council has clear approaches to its workforce management. For example, the Council has not had a recruitment freeze since 2010 and is clear on the reasons why. It also has a clear policy on the use of agency workers and monitors spending on agency workers every month. Heads of Service approve all proposals for new posts, changing a role, or restructuring services. The Human Resources (HR) and Finance departments also provide appropriate challenge and oversight as part of this process. By being clear on its use of different workforce management approaches and why, the Council reduces the risk of using short-term solutions which could make problems worse over the longer term.

Addressing the challenges

The Council is proactive in addressing recruitment and retention issues and uses a range of approaches to do so

- 11 The Council uses a wide range of approaches to attract applicants. This includes through its website, social media, and attendance at student and graduate events, and job fairs. The Council maintains a Talent Pool of contact details from job-fair attendees to target future recruitment opportunities to potential candidates. By using a range of approaches, the Council can improve its chances of attracting talent to deliver its objectives and services.
- 12 The Council is committed to a 'grow your own' approach. It offers trainee positions, apprenticeships, and internships. It also has a three-tier Leadership Development Programme to improve managerial capability and support aspiring managers and leaders. Since 2018, 15 officers have been selected for its Exceptional Talent Pathway and 13 of these have since been promoted within the Council. The Council also has a Talent Identification Framework that highlights all development opportunities to all of its staff. These development opportunities can help to motivate the workforce which could lead to lower staff turnover. It can also help to resolve recruitment and retention challenges through reducing reliance on external recruitment where posts are hard to fill.

- 13 The Council has a clear process for onboarding new members of staff. This includes a digital onboarding process, and electronic Starter Pack to help new employees feel welcome and supported. The Council also monitors how long it takes to onboard staff following recruitment and is developing ways to capture new-starter feedback. An efficient onboarding process can help new employees to feel engaged and motivated.
- 14 The Council has a clear approach to use of market supplements, where extra payments are made to recruit or retain staff to hard to fill posts. It has a Market Supplement Policy and is clear that a service should only consider this in exceptional circumstances. A business case must be produced for each proposed market supplement that details risks, costs and other relevant data. Business cases also have input from the Council's HR and finance officers and must be approved by its Executive Board. These arrangements help to ensure that the Council understands its use of market supplements and considers the costs and benefits of their use.
- 15 The Council is taking a range of actions to help ensure that its workforce represents the diversity of its local population. The Council's updated Strategic Equality Plan (2024-2028) and its People Plan (2023-2028) both contain actions to achieve this aim, which the Council monitors annually.
- 16 The Council is taking action to make it easier for potential applicants to apply for vacancies. For example, the Council is developing three new generic job application forms tailored to different grades to improve accessibility and user experience. It also uses community drop-in sessions to promote vacancies, support residents with applications, and encourage interest from a diverse range of groups. Using several approaches to overcome barriers to recruitment can support the Council in addressing recruitment challenges.

- 17 The Council uses technology to help retain staff through reducing workloads, and to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of service delivery. Staff have access to a range of applications including artificial intelligence. The Council also has a recruitment portal that it uses to both accept and manage applications for vacancies. It also offers both face-to-face and online interviews and makes use of artificial intelligence to take interview notes. Making use of technology in this way can help the Council to streamline processes and enhance applicant experiences. It can also improve retention by providing staff with tools that reduce workload pressures.
- 18 The Council engages staff in a wide range of ways to help address its recruitment and retention challenges. The Council involves staff in several ways through:
- Staff Conferences;
 - Service Area Roadshows;
 - Directorate Roadshows;
 - exit interviews
 - employee surveys;
 - monthly staff newsletters;
 - staff networks; and
 - its Employee Partnership Forum.
- 19 During 2024 and 2025, the Council engaged its workforce and representatives on issues such as values and behaviours, family friendly policies, a substantial range of employee benefits and to seek views on recruitment and retention. Involving staff and its representatives can give the Council assurance it sought a range of views to improve how it recruits and retains. Staff can also have assurance the Council listens, which can encourage ongoing positive staff engagement.

- 20 The Council also benchmarked several of its HR policies and employee benefits with other councils. By understanding what other councils offer its workforce, the Council can adjust its own offerings to boost employee satisfaction. This in turn can help reduce turnover and associated recruitment costs.
- 21 The Council works with different partners to help tackle its recruitment and retention challenges. The Council visits schools, colleges and universities to promote the Council as an employer of choice. The Council is also at the early stage of exploring potential employment opportunities for ex-offenders, working with the Probation Service. Working with a range of partners can provide the Council with more opportunities to promote the Council as an Employer of Choice. By exploring opportunities for collaboration, the Council also reduces the risk of missing opportunities to share resources, expertise, and good practice.
- 22 Senior leaders have good oversight of recruitment and retention matters. For example, the Executive Board and Corporate Management Team receive regular reports on issues such as:
- use and costs of agency workers;
 - improving employee benefits;
 - business and administrative processes – Robotic Process Automation (RPA);
 - Volunteering Policy; and
 - changes to HR policies.
- 23 Scrutiny Committees also receive workforce data twice each year through service plans. The Council's Place and Corporate Performance Scrutiny Committee also reviewed a report on recruitment and retention in 2023, and a follow-up report more recently. Members asked relevant questions, sought additional information, and demonstrated strong challenge and understanding of the topic. These arrangements help ensure that senior leaders are aware of recruitment and retention challenges and can take action to address them.

Reviewing value for money

The Council is strengthening arrangements to assess value for money and where it identifies weaknesses it takes action to address them

- 24 The Council has taken action to improve its approach to recruitment and retention where it has identified weaknesses. For example, it created a dedicated Strategic Recruitment and Retention team to help address recruitment and retention challenges. This was a result of it analysing recruitment and retention data and recognising a need to strengthen its capacity to address challenges.
- 25 The Council shares learning on recruitment and retention approaches across the Council. For example, it runs workshops for managers on the recruitment process. Its Strategic Recruitment and Retention team also work with services to share learning. This can help ensure that opportunities to improve approaches to recruitment and retention are shared across the Council.
- 26 The Council recognises the importance of evaluating the value for money of its recruitment and retention activity and has begun to strengthen its approach. Although it does not always review the value for money of recruitment and retention initiatives. The Council has, however, reviewed the costs of a number of recruitment and retention initiatives. These include:
- agency staff use;
 - use of robotic process automation;
 - changes to employee benefits;
 - adjustments to family-friendly policies; and
 - different recruitment methods.

- 27 As part of its work to strengthen arrangements, the Council has developed a Return on Investment document to help it consistently assess the value for money of initiatives. This is not yet in widespread use across the Council. It is also strengthening its arrangements to:
- compare the costs of initiatives with the outcomes they deliver; and
 - assess recruitment campaigns against historic data to learn lessons.
- 28 Whilst the Council is strengthening its arrangements, by not always assessing and monitoring the value for money of its approaches, it risks not getting the best value for money from its resources.

Recommendations

R1 At the time of our audit the Council was refining its arrangements to assess the value for money of its recruitment and retention activity

Once implemented, the Council should evaluate its arrangements to ensure they enable it to assess and monitor if recruitment and retention activity is efficient, economic and effective (**paragraph 27**).

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.

We completed the fieldwork for this audit in December 2025 and January 2026.

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 assessed the Council's arrangements by answering the above audit questions. To help us do that, we developed a set of audit criteria which explains 'what good looks like'. We 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 was informed by a combination of our knowledge, experience and research into this topic. It was 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 interviewed senior officers from three Council services that have faced recruitment and retention challenges and Human Resources Business Partners.

We also reviewed a range of documents relevant to the audit questions we were seeking to answer.

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