

Springing Forward – Strategic Workforce Management – Bridgend County Borough Council

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This document is also available in Welsh.

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Summary report

What we reviewed and why

- 1 We reviewed the Council's arrangements for managing its workforce with a primary focus on how well the Council strategically plans the use of its workforce, how it monitors the use of its workforce assets and how it reviews and evaluates the effectiveness of its arrangements.
- 2 Like many other councils, Bridgend is experiencing significant workforce challenges, and years of continued service restructures and staffing cuts to deliver savings are impacting on its ability to plan and maintain service performance.
- 3 We delivered this review as the world moves forward, using the experiences from the global Covid 19 pandemic, to look at how councils are strengthening their ability to transform, adapt and maintain the delivery of services, including those delivered in partnership with key stakeholders and communities.
- 4 We have delivered this project at all councils as part of our 2021 audit plans to help discharge the Auditor General's duties under section 17 of the Public Audit (Wales) Act 2004 (the 2004 Act) and section 15 of the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015. The project had three main aims:
 - to gain assurance that councils are putting in place arrangements to transform, adapt and maintain the delivery of services.
 - to explain the actions that councils are taking both individually and collectively to strengthen their arrangements; and
 - to inspire councils and other organisations to further strengthen their arrangements through capturing and sharing notable practice examples and learning and making appropriate recommendations.

What we found

- 5 We found that the Council is taking action to respond to its significant workforce issues, but needs to develop a corporate workforce plan shaped by the sustainable development principle, to address these challenges and strengthen its resilience
 - The Council lacks an up-to-date workforce strategy underpinned by the sustainable development principle and needs capacity to effectively shape solutions for its significant workforce challenges in the medium to long term
 - The Council has focussed on addressing short term critical workforce pressures particularly in Social Services, but in the absence of a strategic WFP to guide and inform approaches to managing these challenges we have emerging concerns about the Council's resilience to continue to respond to critical issues
 - The Council has arrangements to monitor workforce issues and it has not yet developed a framework to effectively benchmark, measure success and affordability of its future services delivery model but has acted on lessons learned.

Recommendations

Recommendations

Strategic workforce planning

- R1 The Council needs to urgently develop its strategic workforce approach, embedding the sustainable development principle at its core, to enable it to address the significant workforce issues it faces. For example:
- Integrating with its workforce planning and with other key strategies and business planning;
 - Reflecting longer term service demand; and
 - Considering how it can maximise benefits from collaboration with other organisations.
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Monitoring and review arrangements

- R2 The Council should develop a suite of strategic quantitative and qualitative measures to enhance its ability to understand the impacts and affordability of its workforce plans and actions.
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Monitoring and review arrangements

- R3 The Council should also explore opportunities to benchmark its own performance over time and its arrangements with other bodies to provide a different dimension to its performance management data. Whilst also offering an insight to how other bodies are performing and discovering notable practice elsewhere.

Detailed report

The Council is taking action to respond to its significant workforce issues, but needs to develop a corporate workforce plan shaped by the sustainable development principle, to address these challenges and strengthen its resilience

The Council lacks an up-to-date workforce strategy underpinned by the sustainable development principle and needs capacity to effectively shape solutions for its significant workforce challenges in the medium to long term

Why setting a clear vision is important:

- 6 A clear strategy for its workforce and well-developed delivery plans are important to ensuring an efficient and effective workforce over the short and longer term. It is also important to identify how the workforce strategy aligns and is integrated with other relevant strategies including, asset management, digital and carbon reduction. Learning from the changes brought about by the global Covid-19 pandemic, can help Councils strengthen their ability to transform, adapt and maintain the delivery of services.

We found that:

- 7 The Council's workforce plan 2017-18 to 2020-21 has expired. The supporting action plan was updated in early 2021 to reflect changes in operational activity necessitated by the pandemic, such as working from home and the need to manage staff wellbeing.
- 8 We noted that the Council planned to put in place arrangements to embed workforce planning into service business plans and place further responsibility on managers to manage their own workforce plans. However, some delays have been caused in embedding this process across the organisation due to limitations in capacity arising from managing the pandemic with already stretched resources.
- 9 It follows that at the time of this review future workforce plans were in their initial stages of development for 2022-23. These plans, combined with the outputs from the Council's engagement with staff and trade unions, will improve the Council's understanding of the skills and capacity needed for its future service delivery model requirement.
- 10 The Council is also in the process of developing its high-level Human Resources Strategy 2022-2025 which is intended to support the delivery of its corporate workforce plan. It is titled Supporting the Delivery of the Council's Future Service Delivery Model which emphasises its key focus. As the Council has not yet determined its future operating model this draft strategy has not yet been considered by members. The draft strategy covers a relatively short time horizon and as such could be improved to demonstrate long-term thinking and

consideration of longer-term trends likely to influence its existing and future workforce.

- 11 The Council needs to ensure its future strategic approach to its workforce is shaped by the sustainable development principle. For example,
 - by embedding long-term thinking and consideration of longer-term trends within its existing arrangements;
 - identifying how the workforce strategy aligns and is integrated with other relevant strategies; and
 - exploring opportunities with partners to collaborate on workforce arrangements and develop regional solutions to regional challenges.
- 12 We found that the Council's strategic capacity to effectively plan in the short, medium, and long term was stretched. Before the pandemic, our corporate assessment in 2016 and later 2017 follow up report found that both sickness absence and recruitment remained long standing challenges for the Council. Senior officers we spoke to as part of our recent review said they had little 'space' to think and reflect on developing strategy.
- 13 The pandemic has exacerbated the workforce challenges placing significant strain on the workforce. For example, like other bodies, the Council is experiencing difficulties recruiting and retaining HGV drivers, legal and ICT staff. Workforce challenges in social services are particularly significant due to increasing and more complex workloads, and recruitment and retention issues.
- 14 After many years of managing austerity, the Council has restructured services and functions, and reduced posts to deliver savings. As a result, the Council has a lean management structure, spreading the span of strategic responsibility among fewer staff. For example, the Communities Directorate has one of Head of Operations supporting the Corporate Director. This directorate has five Group Managers and one Manager who oversee a diverse range of functions such as Planning and Development, Strategic Regeneration, Corporate Landlord, Highways and Green spaces, Waste, Economy and natural resources. We understand that the Council has experienced recruitment and retention problems among technical staff in this directorate further diminishing resilience such as surveyors, estates officers and planners. Some of these issues pre-date the pandemic and are longstanding.
- 15 The Human Resources and Organisational Development service has been under considerable pressure to help support staff during the pandemic, when the workforce is undergoing substantial change while also facing unprecedented issues in the employment market.
- 16 Our review of the Council's arrangements to become a 'Digital Council' also found that the Council had not determined the resource (people or financial) requirements needed to deliver its digital strategy. We have since found that there have been some delays in progressing the Council's digital plans due to staff shortfalls.

- 17 In addition, the level of sickness absence across the Council is increasing. The Council's 2020-21 overall level of sickness absence was 9.2 days per FTE, which was higher than the Welsh average of 8.4 days. The Council's 2021-22 overall level of sickness absence increased to 12.36 days per FTE.
- 18 These challenges are not unique to Bridgend, but officers told us they 'felt' that the Council's resilience had become critical with significant resource pressures emerging in some services as mentioned above.
- 19 Our financial sustainability report published in September 2021 found that the Council continues to have a strong financial position and its levels of useable reserves continue to be at a comparatively high level. Given the current workforce challenges and concerns about resilience, it is vital that the Council fully understands the scale of these challenges and affordable solutions.

The Council has focussed on addressing short term critical workforce pressures particularly in Social Services, but in the absence of a strategic WFP to guide and inform approaches to managing these challenges we have emerging concerns about the Council's resilience to continue to respond to critical issues

Why effectively managing the delivery of planned changes to workforce is important

- 20 It is important that workforce plans deliver the intended outcomes efficiently and effectively so that actual expenditure is as close to the levels planned as possible and councils meet their statutory duties. Effective collaboration with other organisations and involving communities about their needs can improve the services delivered to residents. Where councils do not have the range of skills, knowledge and expertise to effectively manage both ongoing asset management and deliver strategic changes, this may reduce the ability to deliver the intended outcomes.

What we found

- 21 During the pandemic staff worked differently, with large numbers working from home or being redeployed to other roles. We recognise that this was an extremely challenging time for the Council having to make swift changes to re-prioritise service delivery according to Welsh Government lockdown rules and set up emergency governance arrangements.
- 22 Building on these experiences the Council decided to introduce a new 'blended' operating model for those staff who can continue to work from home. This is intended to help relieve capacity issues and make savings through more efficient working practices and use of assets. To manage and oversee progress the Council has set up a Future Services Delivery Board chaired by the Chief Executive Officer and workstreams to oversee this.

- 23 The Council has maintained regular engagement with trade unions and staff during the pandemic. Responses from staff surveys have been largely positive about how the Council managed the rapid transition to working from home, and adaptations for those who can't. The Council recognises that it needs to involve service users and stakeholders more generally to understand future demand for services and what this may mean for business and workforce planning. It also needs to further explore opportunities to collaborate with partners in addressing workforce challenges and delivery of bodies' well-being objectives and national well-being goals.
- 24 The Council recognises workforce as a corporate risk. Its corporate risk register includes the following risk: 'The Council is unable to attract, develop or retain a workforce with the necessary skills to meet the demands placed upon the authority and its services.' Our review has found that the Council is focused on dealing with the 'here and now,' trying to find solutions to some of its critical workforce challenges. The solutions adopted include the following:
- payment of real living wage to all social care staff;
 - regrading of front-line social workers;
 - introduction of market supplement policy to direct salary increases as appropriate based on business case in areas where it is difficult to retain and recruit staff; and
 - a significant increase in 'grow your own' activity to increase the number of apprentices and graduate placements.
- 25 Further the Council has endeavoured to bolster management capacity in Social Services with the appointment of a deputy head of children services
- 26 In acknowledging the severity of the systemic workforce challenges in Social Services, the Chief Executive chairs the children social care improving outcomes board which also includes an independent advisor. This Board is set up to oversee progress, given its limited capacity, in achieving its two highest priorities: retention and recruitment of domiciliary care and children's social care workers. The Council is now actioning a critical response plan.
- 27 We understand that the pandemic will have slowed down improvement activity as staff were redeployed and redirected to manage the crisis, but we remain concerned about the Council's resilience to respond to critical issues and free up the time necessary to develop and deliver strategic plans to provide solutions to these challenges in the medium and longer term.

The Council has arrangements to monitor workforce issues, it has not yet developed a framework to effectively benchmark, measure success and affordability of its future services delivery model but has acted on lessons learned

Why effectively reviewing the workforce is important:

- 28 Councils should use data to monitor whether they are achieving their intended outcomes effectively and efficiently over the short and longer term. Using benchmarking data can provide useful insight into Councils individual performance and can identify opportunities for learning from other organisations.

We found that:

- 29 In its MTFS 2022-26, the Council has estimated that it will deliver £3.3 million savings and £630,000 managed service reductions under the Council's well-being objective 'smarter use of resources.' The Council's MTFS sets out that the Council intends to achieve these savings through further reducing its workforce. It has set out that it will do this through continued vacancy management, redeployment, early retirements, and voluntary redundancies. It has not ruled out needing to make some compulsory redundancies
- 30 As stated above, the Council last updated its forward-looking workforce plan in 2019, before the pandemic. The Council needs to prioritise developing its corporate workforce plan setting out how it plans to address its workforce challenges over the short, medium, and long-term with metrics against which to measure success and affordability. This should be embedded into existing performance management arrangements while ensuring close alignment with Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) and that the sustainable development principle is integral to its thinking.
- 31 The Council should also explore opportunities to benchmark its own performance over time and with other bodies to provide a different dimension to its performance management data. Offering an insight to how other bodies are performing and discovering notable practice elsewhere.
- 32 Workforce is one of the highest rated risks on the Council's corporate risk register. We can see that workforce issues have been considered at Cabinet and Corporate Management Board (CCMB) meetings, which aren't open to the public.
- 33 Given that the workforce related risk is one of the highest rated risks on the Council's Corporate Risk Register, we would expect this to be a key topic for members and for them to be challenging progress to address this risk. We are aware that Cabinet and Corporate Management Board receive detailed reports highlighting workforce issues. Although we recognise there will be some limitations due the potential sensitivity of some workforce information, we have not seen evidence of mitigating actions being discussed and challenged in a formal public committee such as the Governance and Audit Committee. As such we have

concerns that this committee is not being used effectively to address and monitor how well this particular risk is being mitigated.

- 34 During our review, officers also acknowledged weaknesses in the quality of its workforce data relating to vacancies. For instance, the Council does not know the numbers of vacant posts that are being/have been deleted as part of staff restructures at any given point in time. It is important that the Council has robust workforce data to inform its planning and decision-making.
- 35 During the pandemic In July 2020, each Directorate completed a corporate questionnaire ('COVID-19 Service Recovery Planning Assessment') that was designed to identify lessons learnt from each of its services areas during 'COVID-19 Lockdown' that would assist the Council to plan to ensure that services are better prepared should another Lockdown situation arise.
- 36 It is positive that the Council commissioned an external review of its wellbeing resources engaging with a range of staff (including school staff) at workshops and focus groups. The key themes and focus of the review were very much about changing the culture of the Council as an employer to provide support to staff to improve their wellbeing and mental health. In response to this review the Council has since appointed a Wellbeing Officer to support the roll out of this initiative.



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