

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

Bridgend County Borough Council

April 2026

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Audit snapshot

What we looked at

- 1 We looked at the recruitment and retention challenges Bridgend 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 The Council is taking action to address its recruitment and retention challenges, but it does not have all the information it needs to make sure this action is well-informed. It also does not assess the value for money of its approaches.

What we recommend

- 6 We make four recommendations. These focus on better understanding and reporting of recruitment and retention challenges, assessing value for money, and working collaboratively.

Our findings

Understanding the challenges

The Council does not have a comprehensive understanding of its recruitment and retention challenges

- 7 The Council has some knowledge of where its recruitment and retention challenges are. For example, officers know which roles are hard to fill in their services, but the Council does not keep a central list of these posts. This means the Council does not have oversight of hard-to-fill posts across the Council. Similarly, officers are aware of why certain posts are hard to fill within their services, but this insight is not gathered together or analysed across the Council.
- 8 If the Council does not identify which posts are hard to fill across its services, or understand the reasons why, it may focus its actions in the “wrong” areas and reduce value for money.
- 9 The Council uses a range of data to help it understand its current recruitment and retention challenges. Quarterly workforce reports to the Corporate Management Board (CMB) provide data on:
 - headcount trends;
 - age profiles;
 - recruitment activity;
 - working patterns;
 - sickness;
 - starters/leavers; and
 - retention.

- 10 The Council also uses exit surveys to understand the reasons why people leave but the completion rate for these is low. The Council does not use data to forecast future recruitment and retention trends. This increases the risk of the Council not spotting problems early and increases the risk of short-term solutions that are not effective over the longer term.
- 11 The Council understands how it is using workforce management approaches to help address recruitment and retention challenges. These include fixed term contracts, agency staff, market supplements and honorariums. For example, the Council follows policies, such as the Council's Agency Worker Guidelines, and the South East Wales Technical and Professional Services (SEWTAPS) procurement framework when employing agency workers. The Council has also reduced reliance on agency workers in its Children's Services department.
- 12 The Council has clear policies on market supplements and honorariums. The Council also takes steps to manage the impact of recruitment freezes and vacancies. For example, the Council has used redeployment, vacancy management forms, and temporary staff to limit their impact.
- 13 By understanding the impact of different 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.

Addressing the challenges

The Council is taking action to address its recruitment and retention challenges, with some success

- 14 The Council has taken various actions to attract candidates, with some success. For example, the Council uses many channels to advertise vacancies including;
 - it's website;
 - social media;
 - careers fairs;
 - specialist recruitment websites; and
 - targeted job alerts to prospective candidates.
- 15 It also has some examples of successful targeted recruitment campaigns, such as recruiting international candidates into its Children's Services team. By using a range of ways to recruit people, the Council increases the likelihood of attracting the talent it needs.
- 16 The Council has begun to use technology to improve how it onboards new staff. This includes automating some tools and processes to speed up onboarding. However, the time taken to onboard new staff varies considerably across services, mainly due to the time needed for references and safeguarding checks. The Council also does not measure the time it takes to hire new staff across service areas. This makes it difficult to track the effectiveness of its approach.
- 17 Having efficient onboarding processes can help the Council to ensure successful candidates take up their posts as well as giving new starters the best start in the organisation. This can help to reduce turnover and avoid the costs of recruiting and training replacements.

- 18 The Council has taken steps to help ensure that it recruits from the full diversity of the community. For example, it has sought to reduce bias in recruitment and help retention through:
- staff networks for groups sharing protected characteristics;
 - mandatory e-learning for managers on fair and equitable recruitment and retention practices; and
 - using inclusive language when recruiting to attract a wider pool of applicants.
- 19 By having arrangements to recruit from the full diversity of the community, the Council can increase its potential talent pool. It can also help it to deliver its wider objectives, for example in relation to equalities.
- 20 The Council has taken action to establish itself as an employer of choice. For example, it promotes a range of wellbeing and reward offers, such as:
- flexible working;
 - employee assistance programme;
 - occupational health service;
 - wellbeing events;
 - salary sacrifice schemes; and
 - Real Living Wage status.
- 21 Offering different wellbeing and reward options can improve staff wellbeing, productivity and engagement, making it easier to hire and keep staff.
- 22 The Council also provides learning and development opportunities for staff, including a mandatory e-learning module on recruitment and retention for managers. It has also developed “grow your own” initiatives, such as career grade posts and apprenticeship schemes in some services. By supporting employee development, staff may be more motivated and work more effectively. This may also help staff retention.

- 23 The Council does not regularly engage with its workforce to address recruitment and retention challenges. However, the Council has recently reviewed its approach to improve future engagement with staff. Following this it has updated its approach to surveying staff, which it intends to use for its next staff survey. By not involving employees in developing its approach to recruitment and retention challenges, the Council may miss ideas and struggle to introduce solutions successfully.
- 24 Senior leaders are provided with a range of information to help them have oversight of recruitment and retention challenges. Quarterly workforce reports are considered by the CMB which has key workforce metrics on absence, appraisals, and recruitment activity. Workforce issues such as restructures or use of market supplements are also discussed at the Council's Heads of Service Group and CMB.
- 25 The Council's Cabinet Committee, Equalities and Employee Relations, also receives quarterly reports on workforce issues, as well as annual updates on apprenticeships, graduate schemes, and organisational development. Recruitment and retention are also included as a risk on the Council's corporate risk register. However, by the time some workforce data is reported to senior leaders it is out of date, which makes it less useful.
- 26 By ensuring senior leaders have timely oversight of recruitment and retention challenges the Council reduces the risk that they are not identified and addressed.
- 27 The Council does not typically seek to resolve longstanding recruitment or retention challenges through partnership working. By not collaborating with partners, the Council may miss opportunities to share resources, expertise, and good practice to resolve these challenges.
- 28 The Council uses technology to ease recruitment and retention challenges. Examples include use of technology to speed up and simplify job application and onboarding processes. It also uses digital platforms to help support hybrid working and for providing wellbeing resources for staff. Making effective use of technology can help the Council to reduce costs and improve both the efficiency and effectiveness of its recruitment processes.

Reviewing value for money

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

- 29 The Council does not assess or monitor the value for money of its recruitment and retention approaches. It has also not clearly set out who has responsibility for monitoring this. The Council sometimes reviews the costs of initiatives and puts in place cost control measures. For example, for its external job advertising, its vacancy management process, and its contractor procurement framework (SEWTAPS). However, by not considering the cost and effectiveness of all its approaches it is unable to determine if they provide value for money.
- 30 The Council has taken steps to improve its approach to recruitment and retention. For example, the Council has:
- redesigned adverts for care roles;
 - enhanced wellbeing and flexible working arrangements; and
 - introduced a managed agency team approach in social care.
- 31 However, the Council does not have arrangements to ensure that it always learns from its different approaches. Whilst it engages in informal professional networks and peer discussions, the Council does not formally benchmark its approaches to recruitment and retention. Similarly, whilst learning is shared internally within the Council through informal discussions, it does not have a mechanism to ensure that learning is always captured and shared.
- 32 By not consistently identifying and sharing lessons learned the Council risks missing opportunities to improve value for money.

Recommendations

- R1 The Council should ensure it has the information that it needs to fully understand current recruitment and retention challenges and potential future trends. This should include ensuring it involves the workforce as part of its evidence base to address challenges. **(Paragraphs 9, 10 and 23)**
- R2 The Council should ensure that information on recruitment and retention challenges is reported in a timely way to senior leaders to enable effective and timely oversight and scrutiny. **(Paragraphs 24, 25 and 26)**
- R3 The Council should develop an approach to assessing the value for money of its approaches to recruitment and retention and sharing lessons learned from this. **(Paragraphs 29 and 31)**
- R4 The Council should ensure that, where appropriate, it explores opportunities to work collaboratively to resolve recruitment and retention challenges whilst securing value for money. **(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.

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. 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 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.

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