

Springing Forward – Workforce – Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council

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Summary report

Summary

What we reviewed and why

- 1 We reviewed how the Council strategically plans for its workforce requirements both now and in the future, how it monitors its workforce and how it reviews and evaluates the effectiveness of its arrangements.
- 2 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.
- 3 When we began our audit work under the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 (the Act), we recognised that it would take time for public bodies to embed the sustainable development principle, but we did also set out our expectation that over the medium term we would expect public bodies to be able to demonstrate how the Act is shaping what they do. It is now approaching seven years since the Act was passed and we are now into the second reporting period for the Act. Therefore, we would now expect public bodies to be able to demonstrate that the Act is integral to their thinking and genuinely shaping what they do.
- 4 Under the Act, councils must carry out sustainable development in accordance with the sustainable development principle. To do something in accordance with the sustainable development principle requires the Council to act in a manner which seeks to ensure that the needs of the present are met without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. To act in that manner, the Council must take account of the five ways of working: long-term, integration, involvement, collaboration, and prevention. Statutory guidance on the Act emphasises the importance of applying the sustainable development principle to seven core organisational activities, including workforce planning.
- 5 This 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 as well as further embed the sustainable development principle; 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.
- 6 We undertook the review during the period November and December 2021, reviewing key council documents and speaking with officers and elected members of the Council.

7 At the end of March 2021, the Council employed almost 10,000 people. In terms of full time equivalents (FTE), the Council employs 33.6 FTEs for every 1,000 residents which is greater than the 32.4 average for all Welsh Councils.

What we found

8 Our review sought to answer the question: Is the Council's strategic approach to its workforce effectively helping the Council to strengthen its ability to transform, adapt and maintain the delivery of its services in the short and longer term?

9 Overall, we found that: the Council has sound arrangements for managing its workforce, but needs to put the sustainable development principle at the heart of its considerations as it updates its workforce strategy. We reached this conclusion because:

- the Council has a clear vision and effective planning arrangements for its workforce but as it renews its workforce strategy will need to ensure this is shaped by the sustainable development principle;
- the Council has made good progress delivering its current workforce strategy, has a good understanding of the current challenges and is dealing with the impact that the pandemic has on its workforce; and
- the Council has arrangements to monitor and review its workforce and whilst it does engage with other organisations to share knowledge and experience, examples of active and meaningful benchmarking are few.

Recommendations

Exhibit 1: recommendation

The table below sets out the recommendation that we have identified following this review.

Recommendation	
R1	Extend existing workforce management data to include comparative benchmarking with other organisations to inform planning and strengthen the assessment of workforce initiatives.

Detailed report

The Council has sound arrangements for managing its workforce, but needs to fully embrace the sustainable development principle as it updates its workforce strategy

The Council has a clear vision and effective planning arrangements for its workforce but as it renews its workforce strategy will need to ensure this is shaped by the sustainable development principle

Why setting a clear vision is important

- 10 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.
- 11 We found that:
- the Council established a solid base for workforce planning when it set out a clear vision and priorities for its workforce within its Human Resources (HR) Strategy 2017-22. The current HR Strategy has two strategic pillars: People and Performance; and Organisational Development. The strategic pillars are underpinned by five key themes for action:
 - developing a flexible and agile workforce that shares organisational knowledge;
 - recruiting and retaining the best talent to create a diverse workforce;
 - leadership and management development ;
 - enabling a high performing engaged and committed workforce; and
 - supporting health and wellbeing to maximise attendance.
 - the Council also has a clear Workforce Plan 2017-22 which was last reviewed in 2020. The Workforce Plan provides clear links with the priorities of the HR Strategy and actions have been allocated to officers.
 - like other public sector bodies, the Council has been focusing on responding to the pandemic and on maintaining the delivery of key services. The pandemic has had an unprecedented and immediate impact on the Council's workforce as the Council had to quickly enable over 3,000 previously office-

based staff to work from home. The pandemic has accelerated operational plans with staff moving to more agile forms of working.

- during the pandemic, the Council has engaged its staff to understand their responses to home working, their wellbeing and how the Council could support its staff, and more recently their working arrangements preferences.
- the Council has a well-embedded annual service self-evaluation process, which will help shape the Council's planning. This process enables the Council to gain a clear understanding of: current workforce demands and pressures; the extent and potential impact of future challenges; and the actions and resources to mitigate those challenges.
- the Council's existing five-year HR strategy and workforce plan will need to be reviewed this year. The Council has not developed longer-term plans for its workforce as it has understandably been prioritising the immediate challenges of the pandemic. The Council accepts that its planning horizon has become shortened to the immediate need since the COVID-19 pandemic but intends to resume extending its workforce planning towards five to ten years.
- as it considers its strategic approach to its workforce, the Council needs to ensure that these considerations are shaped by the sustainable development principle. For example by:
 - embedding long-term thinking and consideration of longer-term trends within its existing arrangements. For example, the Council's self-evaluation process could be strengthened by extending the immediate future challenges to also explicitly require consideration of the longer term. These longer-term considerations for service arrangements then need to inform its strategy development.
 - ensuring that its longer-term workforce planning is integrated fully with the Council's other developing strategies for assets and digital;
 - exploring opportunities with partners to collaborate on workforce arrangements and develop regional solutions to regional challenges.
- the Council has engaged well and acted upon that engagement with its workforce in recent times, examples being:
 - receiving over 2,000 responses to a home working survey of staff in May 2020 – with 78% wishing to work from home at least 50% of the time and 2% not wanting to work from home at all;
 - receiving 2,200 responses to a wellbeing survey in December 2020 – where in response the Council issued greater guidance and support to its operational managers, and began exploring greater support for staff experiencing trauma and long COVID-19 symptoms; and
 - 1,500 responses to a working arrangements survey in December 2021 – 81% of participants would prefer to work from home always or often. The Council response was to continue with staff working from

home where possible; reviewing the suspension of the flexible working policy; and begin introducing a Council- wide booking system for meeting rooms to enhance collaborative working.

- the Council needs to continue to effectively engage with its workforce as part of the process of renewing its HR Strategy.

The Council has made good progress delivering its current workforce strategy, has a good understanding of the current challenges and is dealing with the impact that the pandemic has on its workforce

12 In reaching this conclusion we found that:

- the Council responded swiftly to the rapidly changing challenges and environment of the COVID-19 global pandemic. The lockdown in March 2020 required 3,000 previously office-based staff to work from home. This has understandably resulted in operational plans and new arrangements being implemented at greater pace than previously planned.
- the Council has effective arrangements in place to manage its workforce and to react quickly to new ways of staff working. The Council uses its annual service level evaluations to assess the workforce-related challenges it has and will face in the short term and offers proposals for improvement.
- the Council has made good progress to deliver its current workforce strategy and key themes:
 - in September 2021, the Council introduced the staff well-being system, Wellbeing with Cari. Staff using the system can self-assess their own wellbeing using the artificial intelligent tool and can be signposted to relevant supportive resources. Overall data is also available from the system that enables the Council to monitor and assess its value and impact.
 - the Council's quarterly performance report to its Cabinet in November 2021 reported increasing levels of sickness absence across all parts of the organisation. A key theme of its workforce strategy is to maximise workforce attendance. The Council's arrangements enable both measurement and management of sickness absence through the Council's Vision system. This ICT system highlights issues to enable effective workforce management. In addition, the Council's specialist Occupational Health and Human Resources teams can provide tailored support for individuals to reduce sickness absence. The Council's sickness data is regularly monitored by its senior managers and Cabinet.
 - the Council's quarterly performance report to its Cabinet in November 2021 reported increasing levels of staff turnover. This is not unique to

the Council. A key theme of its workforce strategy is to recruit and retain its staff. As part of this, it is:

- developing apprenticeships schemes;
- redesigning its organisational structure to one that encourages staff retention and succession planning, and provides staff with a clear career path; and
- in January 2022 the Council increased its rate of pay to the Real Living Wage for all social care workers, both directly employed by the Council and for those externally employed.

The Council has arrangements to monitor and review its workforce and whilst it does engage with other organisations to share knowledge and experience, examples of active and meaningful benchmarking are few

Why effectively reviewing the workforce is important

- 13 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.
- 14 In reaching this conclusion we found that:
- the Council uses its annual service level evaluations to monitor and review workforce-related challenges. The Council's Chief Executive leads pan-Council assessment and challenge to these evaluations that result in a good, broad understanding of workforce issues. The Senior Management team also consider workforce issues and challenges.
 - the Council's Cabinet receive quarterly performance reports that provide elected members with details of the Council's performance both from a financial and operational perspective. The report includes detailed information on staff turnover, sickness absence and strategic risks.
 - the Council's arrangements demonstrate its awareness of workforce pressures. The Council's strategic risk register, reported to its Governance and Audit Committee in November 2021, contained workforce-related concerns on staff recruitment and retention in Children's Services.
 - Council officers meet with other Human Resources directors across the Welsh public sector to share knowledge and experience.
 - the Council does contribute data to the annual workforce survey that is managed by the Welsh Local Government Association but does not contribute to workforce-related performance data comparison.

- whilst Council officers acknowledge the potential value of benchmarking the Council's workforce metrics with other councils, examples of active and meaningful comparison with other organisations are few, thereby limiting the potential value of performance assessment, learning and improvement.



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