

Springing Forward – Strategic Workforce Management – Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council

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Contents

Summary report	
Summary	4
Detailed report	
The Council has a clear vision for its workforce, strengthened by its work with partners	7
The Council has a clear vision for its workforce which continues to be a strategic priority for delivering its Well-being Objectives	7
The Council has a clear workforce planning approach, strengthened by its work with partners. However, it does not have succession plans or identified business-critical roles for all service areas	9
The Council has proactively learnt from others and is developing a broader range of workforce measures	11

Summary report

Summary

What we reviewed and why

- 1 As the world moves forward, learning from the global pandemic, our review looked 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.
- 2 We examined Neath Port Talbot Council's (the Council) overall arrangements and approach in relation to its strategic management of its workforce. We sought to answer the question 'Is the Council's strategic approach strengthening its ability to transform, adapt and maintain the delivery of its services in the short and longer term?' Our focus has been on the challenges highlighted during the pandemic that have exacerbated some long-standing workforce issues.
- 3 When we began our audit work under the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, 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 Well-being of Future Generations 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 This project had had three main aims:
 - to gain assurance that councils are putting in place arrangements in relation to its workforce 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.
- 5 This is important because the Council workforce has the following profile:
 - the Council has nearly 6,400 employees, of which 70% are female;
 - over 40% of its staff work in schools;
 - over 95% of those employed on the lowest band grade 1 are female;
 - only 0.5% of the workforce are under 24, over 50% of its workforce are over 45; and 24% of its workforce are 55 and over;
 - only 1.5% of the workforce identify as Black and/or Minority Ethnic Origin; and
 - number of working days lost to sickness per FTE for 2022-23 was 12.78.

- 6 During 2021 we undertook a local review into the Council's approach to workforce management. Overall, our feedback was positive. Where this work identified strengths and areas of improvement, and these are pertinent to the current context they have also been reflected within this report.
- 7 The project, which forms part of the work contained in the 2021 Audit Plan, will help discharge the 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. It may also inform a study for improving value for money under section 41 of the 2004 Act.
- 8 The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted on the way staff work. This report examines some of these impacts and the way that the Council benefits from the positives and mitigates risks from the negatives when planning future service delivery.
- 9 The project was undertaken through a combination of document reviews, focus groups and interviews with officers and Members. We undertook the review during the period February 2022 to October 2023.

What we found

- 10 Our review sought to answer the question: Is the Council's strategic approach to workforce strengthening its ability to transform adapt and maintain the delivery of its services in the short and longer term?
- 11 Overall, we found that: The Council has a clear vision for its workforce, strengthened by its work with partners.
- 12 We reached this conclusion because:
 - the Council has a clear vision for its workforce which continues to be a strategic priority for delivering its Well-being Objectives;
 - the Council has a clear workforce planning approach, strengthened by its work with partners. However, it does not have succession plans or identified business-critical roles for all service areas;
 - the Council has proactively learnt from others and is developing a broader range of workforce measures

Recommendations

Exhibit 1: recommendations

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

Recommendations

R1 – Workforce planning and delivery

- to ensure there are progression pathways for staff and there is resilience around its business-critical roles, the Council should ensure all services have succession plans and have identified their business-critical roles.

R2 – Workforce governance and monitoring

- to have a better understanding of the impact of its workforce strategy the Council should develop measures that focus on outcomes and impacts in addition to inputs.
- the Council should build on its benchmarking with the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development and consider where there may be opportunities to benchmark its measures and metrics with its peers to ensure it can identify areas of good practice and potential areas for improvement.
- to enable the Council to have a clearer understanding of the progress it is making towards meeting its workforce ambitions the Council should assure itself that the Organisational Delivery Board is providing effective oversight and driving integration across related programmes of work.

Detailed report

The Council has a clear vision for its workforce, strengthened by its work with partners

The Council has a clear vision for its workforce which continues to be a strategic priority for delivering its Well-being Objectives

Strategic workforce vision and strategy

- 13 **The Council was able to effectively mobilise its workforce in response to the pandemic.** Large numbers of its staff moved quickly to working remotely and others were effectively redeployed to other roles to support the Council's response to the pandemic. Whilst it had always been part of the Council's long-term ambition to have a more hybrid way of working, the pandemic accelerated this aspect of its plans for how and where its staff should work.
- 14 **The Council's workforce was a strategic priority during the pandemic.** In November 2021, the Council introduced its Short-Term Resilience Framework to make effective use of its workforce and to minimise the risk of service disruption during the pandemic. The Council also put workforce at the centre of its strategic ambitions, reflecting this focus in one of its three main priorities, which in November 2021 was to 'Protect the workforce'.
- 15 **The Council's workforce continues to be a strategic priority.** Workforce development (People) is one of the key enabling programmes within the Council's Strategic Change Programme (SCP) that forms part of its current Corporate Plan and supports the delivery of its four Well-being objectives. Having this strategic focus on workforce as part of a wider change programme should ensure that its workforce ambitions have sufficient strategic profile.
- 16 **The Council has a clear vision for its workforce.** The Council's Future of Work Strategy 2022-27 (FOWS) (also known as its Strategic Workforce Plan) provides a clear vision for its workforce which is to 'ensure that we have the right people, with the right skills and attitudes, in the right place and at the right level'. The Council developed the FOW Strategy through engagement with a wide range of staff, Trades Unions and Members and it is well integrated with the wider Corporate Strategy. Having a clear vision should ensure that workforce remains a key enabler to delivering the Council's Well-being Objectives.
- 17 **The Council has a good understanding of how the workforce will operate in the future.** Key to this way of working is the Council's Hybrid Working Framework (HWF). The HWF has evolved since it the Council approved it in 2021 and now forms now a key part of the Council's longer-term FOWS. A key focus for the HWF is to empower council managers to make decisions about how work is organised, how services are delivered and to develop hybrid working arrangements to suit the

needs of the services and employees they manage. This approach is a key enabler for shaping the way in which the Council operates, and how services are accessed by its residents. Continuing to evaluate and assess the most effective way that hybrid working is supporting the delivery of its objectives will ensure this evolving approach remains fit for purpose.

- 18 **The Council has a good understanding of workforce needs and how these might be impacted by future trends.** In developing its FOWS, the Council undertook SWOT and PESTEL¹ analysis to consider the key challenges and opportunities around its workforce. This analysis and discussion stretched beyond the 5-year life span of the current FOWS and should help the Council to ensure decisions around its workforce are set in a longer-term context.
- 19 **The Council's FOWS planning horizons do not reflect the longer-term time horizons from its Corporate Plan.** Whilst the current FOWS covers a five-year time horizon, we recognise that many of its areas of change, such as its focus on building leadership capacity and capability, will have a longer-term impact. However, in our view the Council could apply the positive work it has undertaken to establish a twenty-year ambition for its Well-being Objectives within its Corporate Plan to its FOWS. Having a longer-term time horizon for the strategic planning of its workforce will enable the Council to ensure its decision-making delivers value for money over both the short, medium, and longer term and fully support the longer-term time horizons within its Corporate Plan.
- 20 **The Council's approach to strategic workforce management does not clearly define how it is integrated with its other strategic change programmes.** The Council's vision for its workforce is in part dependent on the delivery of its other key Strategic Change Programmes such as 'Accommodation' and 'Digital'. Its plans for how it will organise and manage its office accommodation and how its digital aspirations use technology to support service change will have a significant impact on its current and future workforce. In our view, the Council should clearly describe how these respective programmes are integrated. However, having all three programmes overseen by a single Organisational Development Board (ODB) provides an opportunity for the Council to ensure interdependencies and shared opportunities between these programmes are understood and maximised.

¹ Analysis tools – Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) – Political, Economic, Social, Technological, Environmental, Legal (PESTEL)

The Council has a clear workforce planning approach, strengthened by its work with partners. However, it does not have succession plans or identified business-critical roles for all service areas

Strategic workforce planning and delivery

21 The Council has a clear annual plan for delivering its workforce ambitions.

The Council's FOWS, which is set over a five-year time horizon, is underpinned by a detailed annual delivery plan containing discreet actions with outcomes and measures of progress. However, the Council should refresh the delivery plan to ensure it reflects any additional actions for the coming year. The FOWS and its associated delivery plan form a key part of the Council's Strategic Change programme and is clearly aligned to identifying workforce actions in relations to each of its four Well-being Objectives and its other workforce priorities. In our view defining how its workforce contributes to deliver its WBOs demonstrates the importance the Council places on the role that its workforce has in delivering its ambitions.

22 The Council's workforce delivery plan is supported by a specific central team. Managing the day-to-day delivery of the FOWS delivery plan is a FOW team. We are aware that this team has been without a senior post for some time, which has recently been appointed to. In our view having sufficient dedicated capacity to facilitate the delivery of the FOWS, enhanced by the recent appointment, should enable the Council to increase the momentum with which it has been able to deliver its ambitions for its workforce.

23 Despite the challenging financial climate, the Council has allocated resources to develop its workforce capability and capacity. This resource has largely been drawn from a Council reserve formally earmarked to support voluntary redundancies. However, there is a risk that future financial challenges may mean that it becomes more difficult for the Council to protect the monies allocated to this area against other competing priorities. The Council should ensure that any changes to resources to continue to develop its workforce capacity and capability considers the long-term impacts on service standards and delivery.

24 The Council does not have succession plans for all its services, and its understanding of its business-critical roles is still developing. One of the key risks for the Council, which is reflected in its Strategic Risk Register, relates to recruitment and retention. A key action within its strategic risk register to enable the Council to better understand and manage its workforce risks was the requirement for all services to have succession plans in place by March 2023. As of October 2023, the Council has not achieved this milestone, with approximately 50% of services still to complete this work. It is our view that the Council's current strategic risk rating of medium for recruitment and retention does not adequately reflect the residual risk it faces due to its delays in developing succession plans across all

services and identifying business critical roles. It is also our view that a more complete set of service succession plans and business critical roles should provide both a clearer progression pathway for Council staff and mitigate the risk of it failing to meet service standards due to vacancies in business-critical posts.

- 25 **The Council is putting in place mitigations to respond to key workforce risks around recruitment and retention.** In 2021, the Council set up a Recruitment Taskforce comprising internal and external stakeholders to start to address this risk. Whilst the taskforce has made a positive impact on overall recruitment and retention numbers, recruitment and retention in specific areas such as social care and other specialist roles such as architects remain an ongoing challenge. Until recently its taskforce had an external focus. The Council has now broadened the scope of the taskforce to also consider internal workforce capability/talent development. Having this broader scope to address recruitment and retention challenges by also focusing on developing skills and careers within the Council should help it to further mitigate the risks around recruitment and retention.
- 26 **The Council has been proactively self-reflective in identifying areas for improvement in its approach to workforce management.** The Council is currently using the CIPD People Development Partner scheme to assess its effectiveness across a broad spectrum of workforce related areas. The partnering with CIPD has enabled the Council to benchmark itself against other public sector organisations and to assess and enhance and measure progress on the Council's capability to develop its workforce. This use of external best practice, independent professional assessment and benchmarking has enabled the Council to specifically target areas for improvement within its approach to workforce in areas such as, employee experience, talent management and reward, and it is currently implementing plans to make improvements across these areas.
- 27 **The Council has some good examples of collaborating with partners in managing its workforce.** Examples of this include working with the Regional Partnership Board to run joint recruitment campaigns to increase its pool of paid carers and other social care workers. The Council is also undertaking further regional working in relation to the social care workforce with Swansea Council and Swansea Bay Health Board. This collaborative work remains key to ensure service resilience and succession planning in social services. The work to develop a Recruitment Taskforce Partners Group (repurposed in June 2023) which includes partners such as Department for Work and Pensions, Swansea University, Neath Port Talbot College, Swansea Council, Neath Port Talbot Employability, and managers from across the Council services, further demonstrates the Council's desire to work in a collaborative way. In our view these ways of working are a strength, and the Council should continue to seek opportunities to work with others to develop a more joined up approach to workforce development within the region.
- 28 **The Council has a well-developed approach to working with Trades Unions (TUs).** The Council has established a negotiating framework with the TUs which includes a Staff Council, the Local Government Services Forum, and Directorate Joint Consultative Groups. It uses these forums to discuss, develop and implement

workforce initiatives and has implemented changes to these arrangements in response to TU suggestions. The relationship with TUs has been further strengthened by having a TU officer seconded into the Council's Future of Work team. This approach supports the Council's commitment to working in social partnership with recognised TUs and ensures that the TUs have a clearer understanding of how the Council is seeking to deliver its workforce ambitions.

The Council has proactively learnt from others and is developing a broader range of workforce measures

Strategic workforce governance and monitoring

- 29 **The Council has clearly defined workforce governance and accountability structures, however it could improve its workforce progress monitoring.** The Council has several key layers of governance to oversee its workforce ambitions including the Organisational Development Board (ODB) currently chaired by the Chief Executive, a recently re-established Future of Work Project team – to monitor progress on the FOWS delivery plan, and the Corporate Directors Group which provides strategic oversight. This governance is also underpinned by the various Member focused governance groups which provide both strategic direction/decision making and oversight and scrutiny, such as Cabinet, Cabinet Boards, scrutiny and Governance and Audit Committee and the Personnel Committee.
- 30 **Whilst these various group will have considered aspects of workforce monitoring, the routine monitoring of progress against the Council's FOW Delivery plan has not been as frequent as the Council would have wished.** In part this has been impacted by the fact that, at the time of our review, the ODB has not met for several months. The Council has confirmed that routine monitoring of workforce performance will return to expected levels, supported by the recent appointed a new Director for Strategy and Corporate Services, who has responsibility for HR and Organisational Development and will chair the ODB going forward. Having this additional strategic capacity within the Corporate Directors Group should facilitate a greater focus on monitoring progress and the direction of travel for its workforce ambitions.
- 31 **The Council needs to expand the range of measures it uses to monitor the progress it is making on its workforce ambitions.** Whilst progress on its FOWS delivery plan is monitored through its governance framework describe above, the Council's current suite of measures and milestones do not sufficiently enable the Council to determine if its trajectory towards delivering its workforce ambitions is on track. The current suite of HR metrics is largely traditional and based on activity rather than impact or outcomes. The Council has told us that it has recently appointed to a new post in its HR team which is focused on improving data and monitoring. Its Future of Work Team has also been specifically tasked with

developing a more robust set of measures and criteria for measuring success and progress against the FOWS. This development work should also be strengthened by the Council's proposed use of data visualisation packages, such as Power BI to enhance workforce performance reporting. Building on the positive benchmarking and learning it has already undertaken with CIPD, the Council should explore opportunities to benchmark its measures to determine how it performs against its peers. This will enable it to both identify where there is best practice and where it needs to improve. Our view is that whilst these steps are still at an early stage of development, progressing these quickly will ensure the Council is better placed to determine the speed of its progress towards its workforce ambitions.



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