

Workforce Innovation - how councils are responding to workforce challenges

Best Value thematic work in Falkirk Council 2023-24



Prepared by Audit Scotland

June 2024

Contents

Key messages	3
Scope of the audit	5
Key facts	7
Workforce strategy and priorities	8
Digital technology and the workforce	12
Flexible working and other innovative staff deployment	18
Developing future skills and capacity	20
Joint workforce arrangements across services and partners	24
Measuring the impact of workforce planning	27
Appendix 1	30

Key messages

- 1** In September 2023 the council published its Workforce Strategy and Workforce Plan 2023-27. These are aligned with the priorities and enablers contained within the Council Plan 2022-27. Both the workforce strategy and plan support the enabler within the Council Plan of a 'Valued Sustainable Workforce'.
- 2** In developing the workforce plan, the council considered its financial strategy and also consulted with trade unions, but staff groups were not directly consulted. The Workforce Plan 2023-27 contains a range of demographic workforce data. Service plans report on workforce profile and future requirements, but the level of detail included varies across services.
- 3** The council's Digital Falkirk Strategy 2020-25 is integral to the council's transformation agenda. The strategy did not outline expected resource efficiencies or contain targets linked to the ambitions across the six digital priority areas, but there are a range of digital and data projects underway.
- 4** Digital skills and leadership are key strands of the council's digital strategy. The council recognises the need to increase digital skills capacity across services, but it would benefit from assessment of its current digital skills profile, versus what it requires in the future, and where any gaps exist across services.
- 5** Flexible and hybrid working arrangements are embedded across the council workforce. The council has a hybrid working policy in place and staff have to apply to become a hybrid worker. By April 2024, 1,685 employees have opted to work in a hybrid way, representing 22 per cent of the council's total headcount workforce. The council has not yet reported the impact of these arrangements on productivity or staff wellbeing. Workforce engagement data demonstrates that flexible working is valued by staff.
- 6** The development of the Health and Social Care Partnership (HSCP) Workforce Plan 2022-25 endorsed a partnership approach. The council and the HSCP have introduced a number of initiatives to improve the skills and capacity of its future and existing workforce. There have been no formal evaluations of these programmes and more could be done to demonstrate the overall impact they will have.

- 7** The council shares some posts with other councils but has not implemented joint working on a significant scale. The council collaborates with partners more widely through partnerships such as the Health and Social Care Partnership (HSCP), Community Planning Partnership (CPP), and the Falkirk City Region and Growth deal.
- 8** The temporary workforce has increased since the pandemic and now makes up 12 per cent of total staff numbers. Individual services report on their casual and agency staff costs and this is considered by the Corporate Management Team, but the council does not have comprehensive oversight of total casual and agency headcount or whole time equivalent numbers, which presents a gap in its workforce planning analysis.
- 9** The Workforce Plan 2023-27 contains an action plan that is linked to the six themes from the Workforce Strategy. The council has arrangements in place to monitor progress against its Workforce Strategy 2023-2027. It has identified three key performance measures to assess impact against the strategy. These are incorporated in the council's refreshed performance management framework, Falkirk Performs. The council also utilises employee experience data to assess progress, but there is scope to develop a broader range of measures to assess impact.
- 10** Most service workforce plans do not identify specific performance measures. The council plans to review its workforce plan on an annual basis to support ongoing monitoring and improvement.

Scope of the audit

1. The [2023 Local Government Overview \(LGO\)](#) notes that councils have never faced such a challenging situation. Service demands have increased after the Covid-19 pandemic and funding is forecast to reduce in real terms. Workforce pressures including recruitment in a competitive labour market, employee retention and high sickness absence levels are putting councils under continued pressure.
2. This report sets out how the council is responding to current workforce challenges through building capacity, increasing productivity and innovation.
3. [The Accounts Commission's Strategy \(2021-26\)](#) sets out its priorities to focus on inequalities, funding, communities and recovery. The Code of Audit practice sets out the Best Value work required to report on these priorities.

Code of Audit Practice 2020 Best Value reporting requirements

Best Value reporting – extract from the Code

The Accounts Commission's approach to Best Value involves reporting on individual local government bodies and thematically across the local government sector through performance reports:

- As part of their integrated wider-scope annual audit work appointed auditors use a risk-based approach to assess and report whether the audited body has made proper arrangements for securing Best Value and is complying with its community planning duties, including reporting progress against previous Best Value findings and recommendations.
- The Accounts Commission also requires the Controller of Audit to report to the Accounts Commission on each council at least once over the five-year audit appointment on the body's performance on its Best Value duty. This enables the Accounts Commission to make findings for improvement where appropriate.
- The Accounts Commission reports nationally on thematic aspects of local government bodies' approaches to, and performance in, meeting their Best Value and community planning duties. Local government appointed auditors report locally on any such Best Value thematic work prescribed by the Accounts Commission.

4. This report covers the thematic aspect of the Best Value audit requirements. The Commission has directed auditors to report on workforce innovation and how councils are responding to workforce challenges. In carrying out the work auditors have considered the following questions:

- How effectively are the council's workforce plans integrated with its strategic plans and priorities?
- How effectively has digital technology been used to support workforce productivity and improve service quality and outcomes?
- How effectively is the council using hybrid and remote working and other innovative working practice such as a four-day week to achieve service and staff benefits?
- What innovative practice is the council using to develop its future workforce capacity and skills needs and manage staff reductions in line with its priorities?
- What progress has the council made with sharing roles or functions across its services and/or with other councils and partners?
- How effectively is the council measuring the impact of its workforce planning approach?

5. An improvement action plan is included at Appendix 1 of this report. This sets out audit recommendations in key areas, and the council's planned response including responsible officers and dates for implementation.

6. The coverage of the work is in line with the expectations for council's arrangements for the seven Best Value themes in the [Local Government in Scotland Act 2003, Best Value Statutory Guidance 2020](#).

Key facts



Workforce 2022/23¹

7,807	Number of people working for the council – headcount
6,495	Number of people working for the council – full time FTE
971	Number of temporary staff
11.10%	Turnover of staff in last year
10.88	Days lost due to absence in last year per employee



Age profile

5%	16 to 24
44%	25 to 44
27%	45 to 54
24%	55+

¹ Falkirk Council Workforce Strategy 2023-27 Key facts data

Workforce strategy and priorities

The council has updated its Workforce Strategy and Plan to align with its strategic priorities

7. Falkirk Council (the council) employs 7,807 people at a total cost of approximately £335 million per annum, including pension contributions. Staff costs equate to around 60 per cent of the council's overall expenditure. With 24 per cent of the council's workforce aged 55 or over, an ageing workforce is a challenge for the council. The council also experiences challenges in competing with salaries offered by other public bodies, as well as the private sector.

8. A council focused on achieving Best Value should have a workforce strategy that sets out expectations on how its staff will deliver its vision, priorities and values. Workforce planning involves identifying and addressing future capacity and skills gaps, at operational and leadership levels. The council's Workforce Strategy 2023-27 and accompanying Workforce Plan were approved by Falkirk Council in September 2023. The strategy identifies six key themes ([Exhibit 1](#)).

Exhibit 1: Falkirk Council Workforce Strategy 2023-27 Key Themes



9. Our [Best Value Thematic 2022/23](#) work recommended that the council refresh the financial strategy and workforce plans to align with the council's priorities for 2022-27. The Workforce Strategy and Workforce Plan 2023-27 have now been updated and are aligned with the priorities and enablers contained within the Council Plan 2022-27. The council plan sets out the council's vision, 'Strong communities where inequalities are reduced, and lives are improved' and identifies three overarching priorities:

- Supporting stronger and healthier communities
- Promoting opportunities and educational attainment and reducing inequalities
- Supporting a thriving economy and green transition.

10. The workforce strategy outlines the council's vision for its workforce in alignment with the council's values to be Responsive; Innovative; Trusted; and Ambitious. Both the workforce strategy and the plan support the enabler within the council plan of a 'Valued Sustainable Workforce' as an essential component of delivering against the success measures. The workforce plan sets out the challenges, changes, and opportunities for the council, linked to the council's priorities. It is supported by an action plan containing 33 actions, which focus on realignment of workforce and training and are mapped against the workforce plan thematic areas. Progress will be monitored annually by the council's Human Resources team ([page 31, paragraph 74](#)).

11. The Workforce Plan 2023-27 contains a range of demographic data on the council's workforce profile such as age and gender, as well as data on key measures such as turnover and sickness absence. The council predicts that its workforce will contract over the next three to four years and includes projections for the age profile of the workforce over the next five years. It contains a high-level assessment of the future skills that are needed to deliver the council's priorities ([page 21, paragraph 50](#)).

A partnership approach was taken in the development of the Health and Social Care Partnership (HSCP) Workforce Plan 2022-25

12. Our [2018 report on Health and Social care integration: an update on progress](#) highlights the importance of workforce planning within wider strategic planning for integration authorities. In the Falkirk Health and Social Care Partnership (HSCP) 56 per cent of staff are employed by the council and 38 per cent are employed by the NHS.

13. The Falkirk HSCP Workforce Plan 2022-25 was approved by the Integration Joint Board in September 2022. The development of the HSCP Workforce Plan 2022-25 endorsed a partnership approach across Falkirk council and NHS Forth Valley, where partners, including service managers, staff, and trade unions attended workshops to assess the key challenges for the partnership and how these could be addressed.

14. The plan addresses the makeup of the current health and social care workforce, the challenges facing the partnership and the objectives the HSCP has and contains an action plan with 54 actions. These are based on five pillars – Plan; Attract; Train; Employ; and Nurture. The HSCP monitors progress against the action plan through updates to the HSCP Senior Leadership Team. Falkirk council committee also receives HSCP update reports which includes workforce reporting.

Service workforce plans vary in the level of detail

15. Service workforce plans were developed in December 2023 for each of the council's three service directorates: Children's services; Place services; and Transformation, Communities and Corporate Services. We reviewed each of these and found that they varied in the level of detail provided, with some containing limited detail and vague actions. For example, the Children's Social Work Services workforce plan does not contain detailed analysis of workforce data and the action plan needs more detail. Similarly, the Place Service workforce plan identifies key challenges for the service such as high turnover, but notes that further analysis is needed to understand this trend, and it would also benefit from a more detailed action plan.

16. The more developed service workforce plans contain comprehensive supporting data and assessment of key service challenges such as detailed skills and demand analysis, and consideration of future service requirements arising from central government recommendations and legislation. For example, the Transformation, Communities and Corporate Services workforce plan outlines challenges and gaps for specific teams within the service and contains a detailed action plan. Similarly, the Education Service workforce plan contains more detailed narrative for specific roles across the service. Service workforce plans are to be reviewed on an annual basis, with a review scheduled to begin in the final quarter of this year.

17. The 2022/23 Best Value Thematic Report recommended that the council should develop and publish comprehensive service plans but these have not yet been published. Future service workforce plans should align to the overarching service plans.

Recommendation 1

When reviewing service workforce plans, the council should ensure that these are of a consistent standard to allow for analysis and decision making and that they include measurable actions. These should also be aligned to the renewed service plans which are due to be published.

The council consulted with Trade Unions in the development of the Workforce Strategy, but it did not consult directly with staff on the strategy's development

18. The council has a partnership working agreement in place which supports its ongoing work and consultation with Trade Unions. In the development of the Workforce Strategy 2023-27, the council consulted with Trade Union representatives prior to the strategy being formally issued.

19. Management teams were also involved in the development of the Workforce Strategy, but wider staffing groups were not consulted with during the process. The council engages with staff more broadly through the employee experience survey, pulse surveys and 'Employee Listening' events. It is encouraging that findings from the recent employee experience research, published in November 2023, found that 73 per cent of respondents agreed that Falkirk Council is a good place to work. However, the research also identified areas for improvement, noting an appetite amongst staff for more transparent and inclusive communication. For example, 48 per cent of respondents agreed that they are kept involved about organisational issues and decisions.

20. The council is considering the findings from staff engagement exercises, and is developing an employee engagement strategy, but this work is at an early stage.

Recommendation 2

The council should engage with employees as part of its annual review of the Workforce Plan.

Digital technology and the workforce

The council's Digital Falkirk 2020-25 strategy is integral to its transformation approach, with a focus on a flexible workforce

21. Digital technology has the potential to change how future council workforces look and work. In order to achieve this change, councils need to make good use of digital technology and use the workforce in flexible ways. Digital technology has the potential to re-shape jobs to increase productivity and reduce manually intensive processes while maintaining and improving service quality.

22. Similar to other organisations, the council has accelerated how it utilises digital technology since the Covid-19 pandemic. The council's Digital Falkirk Strategy 2020-25 was developed in May 2019, and agreed by the Executive in September 2020. The strategy is an integral part of the council's transformation agenda, including the Council of the Future (COTF) programme and development of the Target Operating Model (TOM) approach. The Digital and Data strand of the TOM identifies the following principles:

- Principle 7 - Digital self-service is the default means of accessing council services
- Principle 8 - Digital transformation makes our services accessible, responsive, and efficient
- Principle 9 - We use data to better plan, manage and design services.

23. The digital strategy sets out six core strands where the council aims to use technology to deliver improved services, engage more effectively with communities, and reduce operational costs, in the context of delivering financial savings ([Exhibit 2](#)).






Exhibit 2: Digital Falkirk 2020-25

The council's Digital strategy has identified six key priority areas



Digital Leadership & Skills

A digitally skilled leadership team and workforce to drive a digital culture and find new ways to deliver services to communities

	Digital Health and Care	Utilising technology to support the delivery of health and social care services, including technology enabled care and telehealth
	Digital Learning and Teaching	Providing digital tools and channels to transform teaching and learning of teachers, children and young people
	Digital Place	Digital as a route to a more sustainable, smarter, greener, and more resilient and inclusive place, including enhanced public wifi provision and smart-sensor technology
	Digital Council	Redesigning council services and delivering services online through the 'MyFalkirk' platform, and utilising council assets through flexible and hybrid working
	Digital Foundations	Building the council's digital infrastructure to support cloud based services to be scaled up or down in a secure way and provide efficiencies

Source: Audit Scotland and Falkirk Council

24. The strategy outlines the council's ambition for the workforce to be mobile and flexible, utilising fewer buildings. To date much of the council's digital focus has been centred around asset rationalisation and automating day to day council business. The council is exploring how to make best use of its assets through its Strategic Property Review. It is also embedding its approach to hybrid working through utilisation of the Anytime, Anywhere Policy ([page 18, paragraph 40](#)).

The digital strategy does not outline expected resource efficiencies or targets to measure success, but there are examples of where the council has evidenced positive benefits from utilising technology

25. In April 2024, the council reported its first full assessment against the strategy's six priority areas to the Scrutiny committee, and established a Digital, Technology and Innovation Board in August 2023. Prior to this, the council reported on specific elements of the strategy. The move to a more comprehensive reporting structure is a positive step in supporting oversight of

the council's digital strategy. The update reflects the range of digital and data projects carried out and others underway. Examples of progress include the use of PowerBI to provide management information, automated processes, and provision of over 60 end-to-end online council services.

26. To support the council's ambition for a 'Digital Council', it is working with service designers to identify areas where council services could operate more efficiently. Service designers engage with services to understand the main objectives for the service and identify where efficiencies can be developed by removing previously manual and time intensive tasks.

27. Our 2021 report [Digital progress in local government](#) highlighted that it is important for councils to develop a benefits-realisation approach, including financial and non-financial benefits for staff, citizens and communities. At the outset of the council's Digital Falkirk strategy, the council outlined the broad improvements it hoped to achieve in outcomes for the people of Falkirk, but it did not contain an action plan with indicative timescales for achieving the strategy's ambitions across the five-year period. It also did not map out projected cost and workforce efficiencies for each of the six key priority areas, or associated targets to measure success against the ambitions. The digital strategy is due to be refreshed in 2025 and should incorporate detail around the expected benefits for each of the six digital priority areas, including success measures.

Recommendation 3

The council should identify targets linked to the digital strategy ambitions for assessing progress against its digital priorities. Future iterations of the digital strategy should be supported by a detailed action plan.

28. The council has demonstrated some financial, and non-financial benefits in specific areas of its programme of digital transformation, such as in education to support pupil attendance ([case study 1](#)). Other examples include:

- **Digital Communities project** – this project aims to ensure that communities are digitally enabled, allowing the council to provide services online and prioritise face-to-face interactions for the most vulnerable citizens. As part of its Council of the Future (COTF) programme, the council has identified savings for 2024/25 of £0.325 million through projects such as fully automating the blue badge programme, using CCTV technology, and digitising processes.
- **Connected Learning** – across the council's eight secondary schools, 84 pupils completed prelims for five virtual courses with a 68 per cent pass rate across all courses. Virtual pupil scores compared with those who attended in person indicated that there isn't a detrimental impact on those joining virtually.

29. The council monitors the impact of online council services through the MyFalkirk analytic suite of data. This allows services to track the number of

services and transactions being delivered online. Since December 2016, the platform has processed 1.5 million transactions. The council has seen the benefits of digital services in areas such as household waste, where citizens can request a recycling permit online, prior to attending a waste centre. This has increased staff availability at recycling premises as well as improved waste management, and the service has received a high satisfaction rating from citizens. The council has also attributed fewer calls to its contact centre service to the digital rollout of 'self-serve' council business. However, actual contact centre performance had fallen due to capacity challenges and difficulties with recruiting call handlers. This has since improved in line with increased capacity in the call centre.

30. As the council progresses its digital agenda, it should continue to assess the extent of potential workforce benefits, financial savings, and outcomes for citizens.

Case study 1: Pupil absence and attendance dashboard

The council has developed a dashboard to monitor pupil absence which is supporting teachers to identify solutions

Pupil attendance rates have declined nationally. The council has recently launched a live pupil attendance data tool to support head teachers in schools to review pupil attendance at any point in time, which then allows them to target improvement or solutions immediately.

Collaborative approach

The council has worked in partnership with providers - Community Brands, SEEMiS and Sword Group to develop the OneSource 'Pupil Absence and Attendance' PowerBI dashboard. It was developed in collaboration with head teachers which aims to support teachers to monitor pupil attendance using an interactive dashboard.

Supporting improved outcomes

Addressing pupil attendance is a focus for the council, particularly for vulnerable groups of children. The initiative is aligned to the council's vision of "strong communities where inequalities are reduced, and lives are improved". It allows teachers to view data across the region and across specific demographics, such as Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD decile), those in receipt of free school meals, and care-experienced children and young people.

Workforce efficiencies

The council have indicated that the dashboard has significantly reduced the amount of time to generate pupil absence and attendance rate reports. This used to be a time consuming task, but staff can now promptly access this information and take action.

Source: Audit Scotland and Falkirk Council

31. The current five-year digital strategy is due to be refreshed in 2025, where it will be superseded by a future Digital Falkirk strategy that reflects the post-pandemic environment. The council is starting to explore the development of the refreshed strategy. It plans to take a whole council approach, linking to other

strategic plans and strategies, and intends to engage with services to gather views on the opportunities for digital in the future.

The council is working to support digital inclusion of services and develop digital skills across the workforce, but services would benefit from assessment of their digital skills profile

32. As councils continue to utilise technology and build on new working practices that emerged during the pandemic, they must also consider the skills required, maintaining service quality, and the needs of people experiencing digital exclusion. Attracting people with digital skills is a challenge for the council due to digital and ICT roles being in demand more widely, with private sector organisations offering more competitive salaries. Digital skills and leadership are a core element of Digital Falkirk ([Exhibit 2](#)).

33. Digital inclusion is a key focus of the Digital Falkirk strategy. The ‘Digital Place’ priority highlights the importance of digital inclusion for all. The council has taken action to support this priority through actions such as providing access to digital technology at libraries, including drop-in support from Virgin-Media staff within libraries, to help citizens access digital services. Digital inclusion is being supported across the education service through the provision of digital devices to pupils and robust wi-fi rollout across schools. The council has also employed a digital and ICT graduate to support staff across the council embed a digital approach.

34. The Digital Strategy 2020-25 commits to supporting leaders and staff to develop their digital skillset in order to deliver on the ambition to become a digital council. The council recognises the need to increase digital skills capacity across its workforce and upskill existing staff, but it would benefit from an assessment of its current digital skills profile, versus what it may require in the future, in line with the need for the council to quantify the skills profile of its workforce more broadly ([page 21, paragraph 50](#)).

35. Some services have assessed digital skills gaps and requirements within their workforce plans, but others are less detailed. Findings from the employee experience show the following in relation to digital²:

- 49 per cent agree “I need digital skills training to keep my skills up to date”
- 36 per cent agree “The council is modern”
- 46 per cent agree “The council is digital”
- 43 per cent agree “The digital systems I work with, enable me to carry out my work efficiently and effectively”.

36. The council has offerings in place to support staff with digital learning and skills development. For example, it provides support to staff through delivering

² The percentages shown are a total of survey respondents who agree and completely agree with statements, based on a five-point scale which ranges from completely disagree to completely agree.

online and in-person training courses to explain new systems that are developed. A dedicated training officer has also been appointed within IT to deliver training sessions to staff.

Flexible working and other innovative staff deployment

Flexible and hybrid working arrangements are embedded across the council workforce

37. During the pandemic councils needed to make the best use of their existing workforce while continuing to monitor employee wellbeing. Councils continue to look to new ways of working to improve job satisfaction and reduce sickness absence and staff turnover.

38. Home-working and hybrid working (a combination of office and home-based working) have now become commonplace and some councils are also considering more radical working practices. Whatever the working practice, employers need to ensure that service quality and productivity are maintained. Across the council, 57 per cent of staff work on a full-time basis, and 43 per cent are employed on a part-time basis. The council is supportive of flexible working arrangements, but also recognises challenges that can be encountered.

39. The council introduced a mobile and flexible working policy, “Anytime, Anywhere” prior to the pandemic. This was introduced to allow staff to strike a better work / life balance by enabling them to work flexibly. The ethos behind the policy was “it’s about what you do, not where you do it”.

40. During the Covid-19 pandemic, the council agreed to review the flexible working policy to reflect the new ways of working. It consulted with Trade Unions and reflected suggested changes in the new policy. The Hybrid working policy was introduced in October 2022 which contained four simplified workstyles: hybrid, office-based, frontline and home-worker. Services were asked to identify which roles could be allocated as suitable for hybrid working, and employees in these roles were able to apply if they wished to work as a hybrid worker. As at April 2024, 1,685 employees have opted to work in a hybrid way, out of a total of 1,897 identified posts. This represents 22 per cent of the council’s total headcount workforce.

The council has not carried out a formal assessment of the impact of hybrid working in terms of productivity, budget savings or services. It uses employee experience data to gauge the impact of hybrid working

41. The council has not carried out a formal assessment of the impact of hybrid working on workforce productivity, savings, or service outcomes. A less formal approach to measuring the impact of hybrid working is adopted where individual

team managers have oversight of how well hybrid working is working for their teams and associated service outcomes. Trade Unions advised that the policy is being used by staff and it seems to be working for those who want to use it. Service workforce plans also include an action on supporting hybrid working, which should allow for monitoring of its use. Service workforce plans are due to be reviewed later this year ([page 10, paragraph 17](#)).

Recommendation 4

The council should review the effectiveness of the hybrid working policy, and service workforce plan reviews should incorporate the impact of hybrid working. This should capture the benefit of hybrid working for staff, and any savings achieved or improvements to services.

42. The council commissioned external organisations, The Skills Collective and Brand Oath, to carry out a series of employee engagement events, including a survey, in-depth interviews and focus groups. The purpose of this engagement was to gain insight into the experiences of employees of the council and to inform future projects. The survey received a 23 per cent response rate, representing 1,752 staff from across the council. The results indicated that 46 per cent of employees agreed they knew where to find information on flexible working options and how to apply for these, 36 per cent of employees disagreed with this statement. Out of the focus groups of 31 employees who volunteered to take part in this format, 25 chose the range of flexible working arrangements as a benefit that is of value to them.

Developing future skills and capacity

The council has introduced a Future Leaders programme as part of its succession planning

43. Councils need to find innovative ways to ensure they have the workforce capacity and skills they need to deliver services in the future. Training and development opportunities can help to attract and retain employees and ensure skills needs are met.

44. Succession planning is also important to help develop future leaders. The council identified that it has an ageing profile amongst management roles across the council and introduced the Future Leaders Programme as a way to support and develop future leaders. Heads of Service are responsible for identifying employees in roles such as coordinators, team leaders and senior professionals who display the council's RITA values (Responsive, Innovative, Trusted and Ambitious) to be put forward for the programme each year.

45. Employees are selected for the programme through discussions with managers and using the Good Conversations process, which is the council's performance review system. Three to four candidates are selected through a shortlisting process for the cohort, and participants will undertake an extensive training programme. This is a tailored process to support professional development, and participants will receive mentoring from senior leaders. The first cohort of the Future Leaders programme began in early 2024, therefore it is too early to conclude on the success of the programme.

The council makes use of grow-your-own programmes to support workforce development. Modern apprenticeships and a graduate programme are utilised to attract a younger workforce

46. The council's graduate programme was introduced in 2019 and was designed to provide graduates with an opportunity to develop a career in local government. Graduates are offered a dedicated graduate induction to the council and receive monthly in-person networking and development sessions, alongside a monthly one-to-one with a graduate supporter from the HR & OD teams. Since 2019, the council has taken on 86 graduates, with 23 graduates currently going through the programme, and 33 graduates have been retained from previous years in roles across the council.

47. The council has a modern apprenticeship programme in place and there is evidence that this is used in services across the council. For example, ICT take on modern apprentices for one to two years with the objective of them achieving a SVQ Level 6 or above qualification, as well as developing the skills needed to

work in ICT. To date, they have trained 18 modern apprentices, nine of which are still working for the council in ICT roles.

48. Other services are exploring the modern apprenticeship route to support recruitment. Social Work Adult services are currently in the process of reinstating the HSCP modern apprenticeship programme. The initial focus will be on the provision of two-year apprenticeships within Care Homes. Part of the development of the programme is to try and offer permanent positions at the end of the apprenticeship, rather than directing successful apprentices to the casual pool, which is the current approach, and can lead to apprentices being offered permanent employment in the private sector.

The council has not carried out any organisation wide skills assessment of the workforce or impact of workforce development programmes

49. The council has not carried out a skills assessment of the wider workforce. The Workforce Plan 2023-27 identifies where future skills and expertise are needed to support delivery of its priorities, but this analysis does not include detail specific numbers in terms of skills that the workforce currently holds, and what will be required in the future. Some service workforce plans do take account of future skills and demand needs, but this is not consistent across all service plans ([page 10, paragraph 16-17](#)), and those that do contain an assessment is based on more qualitative information. Digital skills assessments have also not been carried out ([page 17 paragraph 36](#)).

50. The council has undertaken limited evaluation of the impact and successes of the workforce development programmes it has in place, such as modern and graduate apprenticeships and future leaders programme.

Recommendation 5

The council should assess the skills profile of the current workforce in line with its future workforce requirements. This should include a digital skills assessment.

The Council and HSCP have developed a number of initiatives in response to ongoing sector recruitment and retention challenges, but these approaches have not yet demonstrated an impact on recruitment

51. Our [2022 Social Care briefing](#) underlined the substantial workforce challenges facing the sector, with an ageing workforce and poor terms and conditions. The Council and HSCP have been active in trying to mitigate against ongoing risks. A Social Work Recruitment and Retention Working Group was set up in May 2021 initially to respond to the challenges being faced in recruitment and retention of registered Social Workers. The group organised a benchmarking exercise with comparative and neighbouring local authorities in relation to terms and conditions, social work sponsorship programmes, and pay and grading structures. This evidenced that Falkirk Council and HSCP was not

a preferred choice for prospective employees in comparison to other areas that offer a higher annualised salary taking account of hours worked.

52. The Recruitment and Retention Working Group carried out an options appraisal in response to identified challenges in social work, where it was found that social workers were leaving the organisation for a range of reasons. This included limited opportunities for career progression if not interested in promotion into management positions. The options paper proposed creating two new roles to address some of the issues identified. The Advanced Practitioner role aims to support capacity across the service in managing more complex cases and prepare for the introduction of the national Advanced Practitioner Framework. The Assistant Team Manager role aimed to provide capacity in leading the service and provide management experience.

53. Whilst the Council and HSCP have been responsive to the ongoing challenges in social care, further work is needed to assess the impact of this initiative on workforce planning and service capacity. The council note that this has supported several external appointments in both Social Work and Occupational Therapy. Occupational Therapists are more difficult to attract reflecting the current national position. However, the council has not demonstrated the wider impact of this role on existing staff retention, which was a key objective of the initiative.

54. In response to recruitment and retention issues in social care, the HSCP has also enhanced its marketing approach by launching a new recruitment campaign, “A Career that Cares”. The campaign uses social media to advertise careers in social care. Drop-in events were also arranged to support recruitment, with the first drop-in event bringing 130 applicants to apply to social care roles as a result. The other two events have not been as successful, and the team is looking at ways to relaunch the events. The original campaign was specific to social care roles, but the brand “A Career that Cares” has been extended to include the whole of the partnership and has been incorporated into all materials across the partnership.

A social care retraining programme has been developed as part of the redeployment process to help with the social care recruitment issues, but this has had limited success to date

55. As part of the work to attract people to work in social care, the HSCP developed a process and guide for how staff can retrain for a social care role within Social Work adult services, linked to the council’s redeployment policy. The retraining programme is available to any council employee, and particularly those in the redeployment process. The council has developed a resource pack for candidates which sets out information on job profiles and case studies of social care roles. To date no employees have participated in the retraining programme, suggesting that evaluation of this process is required.

The council has not identified detailed options for reducing its workforce to meet future savings targets

56. The council's Revenue Budget 2024/25 and Financial Strategy was presented to committee in February 2024. It references workforce planning as one of the council's key enablers and highlights that a smaller workforce is required to ensure financial sustainability. The budget document outlines savings options for individual services, where workforce reductions are outlined as contributing to the savings identified. Workforce reductions are identified through methods such as vacancy management and voluntary severance. However, the council has not set out the detail of specific workforce reductions in relation to the projected savings.

Joint workforce arrangements across services and partners

The council shares some posts with other councils but has not implemented joint working on a significant scale

57. Collaborative working between councils and partners can support public bodies to make best use of existing workforces and plan for the particular workforce and demographic needs in their areas. Our [Local government in Scotland: Overview 2023](#) highlighted that shared services and shared professionals can help to address recruitment pressures and skill shortages, whilst offering efficiencies, but only a few councils are successfully sharing services.

58. Sharing services provides an opportunity to widen access to resources and to meet workforce challenges in areas where recruitment and retention of suitably skilled staff are difficult. One such example is that the council has an agreement in place with Forth Valley Health Board to provide shared placements for Occupational Therapy students. This is helping the council to address the shortfall it is experiencing in occupational therapists across its social work services.

59. The council has some shared arrangements in place where it works with other public bodies and has demonstrated benefits such as collaborative working, and financial savings, albeit these are not significant in scale, examples include:

- **Internal audit** - the council provides Internal Audit services to several other bodies such as Clackmannanshire Council, Central Valuation Joint Board and Strathcarron Hospice. The council is compensated financially for providing this service but it can be challenging at times due to the pressures it can place on the council's Internal Audit department.
- **Procurement** - the council is actively involved in projects through the Improvement Service which is exploring how to bring services together such as procurement and teachers' payroll.

60. However, the council is not sharing resources on a larger scale as an effective way to enhance service delivery against a climate of workforce challenges.

61. Barriers to implementing shared services at scale across the council are in part due to such arrangements being resource intensive to establish. Shared working arrangements also require a shared vision, with appropriate

governance arrangements. The council may benefit from exploring opportunities for shared working to support sustainable service delivery going forward.

The council collaborates with partners more broadly through established strategic partnerships

62. The council is actively involved in partnership working to deliver services and improvements for the people of Falkirk. These include:

- **Falkirk Health and Social Care Partnership** - The council works in partnership with Forth Valley Health Board to deliver health and social care services to the people of Falkirk. Each body employs their respective employees who deliver the services on behalf of the health and social care partnership. The partnership has a workforce plan in place ([page 10, paragraph 14-15](#)).
- **Falkirk Community Planning Partnership** - The council is a member of the Falkirk Community Planning Partnership. This is a collection of public, private, third and community sector organisations who provide services for the benefit of the local community. Key bodies in the partnership include Police Scotland, NHS Forth Valley, Scottish Fire and Rescue, Forth Valley College, Falkirk Health & Social Care and Scottish Enterprise among others. The partnership is working collaboratively to deliver the shared priorities in the Falkirk Plan 2021-2030.
- **Falkirk Growth Deal** - The Falkirk Growth Deal was agreed in December 2021 by the UK and Scottish Governments, Falkirk Council and Scottish Canals to create an Investment Zone for Falkirk and Grangemouth. The deal brings an £130.8 million investment in infrastructure and related measures to deliver sustainable, inclusive growth for the area over the 10 year period covered by the Deal.

Temporary and agency workers form an important part of the council's workforce. The council should continue to monitor the cost against the benefits of this staffing group

63. Temporary workers are an important part of the council's workforce, making up 12.4 per cent of the total workforce. Whilst temporary contracts can offer the council, and employees, a degree of flexibility, this work is often less desirable for applicants than longer-term employment. The cost of temporary staff can also be higher than the costs of permanent employees. Fixed-term posts have been utilised in roles such as temporary supply teaching staff, registrar officers, and catering and cleaning support staff.

64. Services monitor temporary staff numbers through internal workforce dashboard reports which also go to the CMT. The workforce plan states that each service is undertaking a review of its longer term temporary contracts to rationalise these. The council note that this is an ongoing process, with reviews taking place as part of broader service reviews.

65. Service dashboard reports also record casual and agency staff spending. Casual and agency workers are utilised by the council to support hard-to-fill

roles, such as in health and social care and children's social work. The council's Workforce Plan published in September 2023, outlines that the cost of agency workers had risen by 44.9 per cent, compared with 2020, and the cost of casual workers increased by eight per cent during this period. The council does not yet have systems in place to monitor agency and casual worker numbers and usage. This presents a gap in the council's workforce planning analysis and means the council will not have a comprehensive oversight of how many agency and casual staff are currently utilised. The council note that work is ongoing by the Staffing and Recruitment team to introduce a new system for requesting and recording agency work. The cost v benefit of casual and agency staff, and temporary staff more generally, should be monitored and reported.

Measuring the impact of workforce planning

The council has established monitoring arrangements to support oversight of the Workforce Plan. Workforce measures are included as part of the refreshed performance management framework

66. Councils should monitor the impact of their workforce planning and delivery approaches. This should include cost, service quality and productivity benefits as well as employee wellbeing. This in-turn should inform their workforce planning approach. Councils and their partners should also understand the wider impact of their employment practices on the local economy.

67. The Workforce Plan 2023-27 contains an action plan that is linked to the six themes from the Workforce Strategy. There are 33 actions in total across the six themes. Each action has a timescale and responsible person, with responsibility for the measures being delegated to various teams across the council, including HR, Corporate Management Team (CMT), service managers, and the communications team. The council's HR directorate has responsibility across a number of actions and tracks progress. Each action also has 'planned outcomes' which are based on areas such as employee experience, improved recruitment processes and staff retention, and the diversity profile of the workforce.

68. The council updated its performance management framework in 2023. The council's 'Falkirk Performs' dashboard reports publicly on the Local Government Benchmarking (LGBF) indicators, alongside some of the council's own indicators, linked to the Council Plan 2022-27. The council also report six-monthly performance reports against the council plan to the Scrutiny Committee, setting out success measures, mid and end of year performance, and targets. Workforce performance reporting is contained as part of this assessment, where the council report progress on three key performance indicators (KPIs) which are linked to the enabler of a 'Valued sustainable workforce' within the council plan:

- Sickness absence - non teacher: 7.4 per cent (4 per cent target)
- Sickness absence - teacher: 3.8 per cent (4 per cent target)
- Staff turnover – 8.9 (13.6 per cent target)

69. There is corporate oversight of sickness absence across the council, with reports being taken to CMT in November 2023 and February 2024. Reports highlight high rates of sickness absence and support ongoing monitoring of

actions to reduce sickness absence. For example, the council has resources in place to support staff wellbeing and utilises employee absence data to assist with absence management. Managers also monitor sickness absence at a service level through Power BI dashboards.

70. Following the publication of the council’s refreshed workforce plan and workforce strategy in September 2023, the council identified four further measures to report on progress against the council plan. It now incorporates measures from the Employee Pulse Survey as part of its quarterly performance reporting, in addition to the three KPIs that were identified from the workforce strategy (paragraph 70). It is positive that the council has incorporated measures on employee experience within its workforce plan monitoring, however there is room for improvement across these measures. Of the four indicators identified, none of these are currently on track as at quarter three 2023/24. In addition, targets for some of the pulse survey indicators are low. For example, for the measure “I feel involved in making change happen where I work”, a 50 per cent target has been identified.

There is room for improvement in the council’s approach to measuring the impact of workforce planning and innovation. The core workforce Key Performance Indicators are limited

71. The corporate workforce measures have limited scope to effectively capture the impact of the broader range of activity that takes place through workforce planning. Further work is needed to develop a broader range of measures to assess impact of workforce recruitment and retention initiatives. For example, the council does not have established measures in place to assess the impact of recruitment initiatives across the health and social care ([page 22, paragraph 54](#)). The council’s graduate and modern apprenticeship schemes are also an integral part of its workforce planning approach, and whilst the council tracks the outcome of these programmes, it does not include this data within public performance reporting.

72. There is also scope for the council to improve how it monitors the impact of workforce planning at service level. Most service workforce plans do not identify specific workforce performance metrics. The Place Services workforce plan identifies some measures which are accompanied by targets, such as: Vacancy rate; Graduate training scheme retention rate; and Good Conversations Implementation Rate. Other services may wish to include similar in the future.

Recommendation 6

The council should evaluate and report on specific programmes it has introduced to improve recruitment and retention. It should consider developing a broader range of workforce performance measures and incorporate measures to service workforce plans.

The council plans to review its workforce plan on an annual basis

73. The council plans to review its workforce plan on an annual basis to support ongoing monitoring and improvement. It intends to provide an annual report to CMT to support an annual assessment of progress and outcomes. The council has also indicated that it will consider the usefulness of the performance indicators that are currently in place as part of its ongoing review, and plans to incorporate employee experience results as part of service workforce plan reporting. Regular review of the council's workforce planning approach is a positive step in ensuring that the council can reflect on its ongoing approach to supporting its strategic objective of having a valued and sustainable workforce.

Appendix 1

Improvement Action plan

Issue/risk	Recommendation	Agreed management action/timing
<p>1. Service workforce plans</p> <p>Service workforce plans vary in consistency and the level of detailed analysis.</p>	<p>The council should ensure service workforce plans are of a consistent standard to allow for analysis, decision making and that they include measurable actions. These should also be aligned to the renewed service plans which are due to be published.</p>	<p>Management action: All Services are due to review their workforce plans. The recommendations from Audit Scotland will be built into this review and workforce plans will be submitted to CMT to ensure oversight and consistency.</p> <p>Date: By December 2024</p> <p>Responsible officer: All Directors with support from HR</p>
<p>2. Employee engagement</p> <p>The council did not engage directly with staff in developing the workforce strategy.</p>	<p>The council should engage with employees as part of its annual review of the Workforce Plan.</p>	<p>Management action: As part of the review of the Workforce Plan, engagement will continue to be undertaken with Trade Unions on the content. In addition, the Plan will be made available to all employees to submit views and comments prior to submission for approval. We will also look at Service based focused groups to discuss Service Workforce Plans.</p> <p>Date: By March 2025</p> <p>Responsible officer: Tracey Gillespie supported by Service Directors</p>
<p>3. Digital</p> <p>The Digital Falkirk 2020-25 strategy does not contain an action plan with expected resource efficiencies, and</p>	<p>The council should identify targets linked to success measures for assessing progress against its digital priorities. Future iterations of</p>	<p>Management action: Workshops with all Services will take place to ensure the refreshed Digital strategy meets service delivery</p>

does not contain targets linked to the strategy's ambitions.

the digital strategy should be supported by a detailed action plan.

requirements and supports successful delivery of the Council Plan priorities.

Date: By the end of 2024

An action plan and success measures will be built into the final draft of the strategy which will be submitted to Committee for approval.

Date: By summer 2025

Responsible officer:
Amanda Templeman

4. Hybrid and flexible working

The council has not assessed the impact of the hybrid working policy on staff productivity, service outcomes, or savings.

The council should review the effectiveness of the hybrid working policy, and service workforce plan reviews should incorporate the impact of hybrid working. This should capture the benefit of hybrid working for staff, and any savings achieved or improvements to services.

Management action:

Information on hybrid working as assessed by each Service, will be incorporated into the review of workforce plans by each Service.

Date: By December 2024

A survey to fully assess the impact of hybrid working from an employee and manager perspective will be undertaken.

Date: By March 2025

Future workforce plans will incorporate any actions flowing from the survey of employees on hybrid working.

Date: By autumn 2025

Responsible officer: Tracey Gillespie with support from Directors

5. Skills assessment

The council has not carried out a skills assessment to identify the skills profile of the workforce now, against what it may require in the future.

The council should assess the skills profile of the current workforce in line with its future workforce requirements. This should include a digital skills assessment.

Management action: An assessment of good practice on skills assessments will be undertaken to inform the development of this work.

Date: By the end of 2024

An assessment will be made of the desired future workforce profile to meet the future strategic needs of the Council.

Date: By spring 2025

A mechanism will be put in place to assess the current skill profile of the workforce relative to the future profile.

An assessment and action plan will be developed to support a transition of skills across the workforce to bridge any gaps identified.

Date: By the end of 2025

Responsible officers:
Tracey Gillespie and Allan Stewart

6. Measuring Impact

The council has not assessed the impact of recruitment initiatives and does not routinely report on modern apprenticeship or graduate programmes. Its workforce KPIs are limited.

The council should evaluate and report on specific programmes it has introduced to improve recruitment and retention.

It should consider developing a broader range of workforce performance measures and incorporate measure to service workforce plans.

Management action: A review of the various new techniques to improve recruitment and retention will be undertaken and reported to CMT.

Date: By the end of 2024 and ongoing as new techniques are introduced.

Workforce performance measures will be assessed, taking into account emerging themes from the latest employee experience survey and incorporated into workforce plans and the Councils public performance reporting tools.

Date: By Q2 of the new year of public performance reporting (due early 2025)

Responsible officer: Tracey Gillespie with support from Directors

Workforce innovation - how councils are responding to workforce challenges

Audit Scotland's published material is available for download on the website in a number of formats. For information on our accessibility principles, please visit:

www.audit-scotland.gov.uk/accessibility

For the latest news follow us on social media or [subscribe to our email alerts.](#)



Audit Scotland, 4th Floor, 102 West Port, Edinburgh EH3 9DN
Phone: 0131 625 1500 Email: info@audit-scotland.gov.uk
www.audit-scotland.gov.uk