# Workforce Innovation - how councils are responding to workforce challenges

**Best Value thematic work in North Ayrshire Council 2023-24**

# Contents

# Key facts



## Workforce

| 7,604 | Number of people working for the council – headcount as at 30 April 2024 |
|---|---|
| 6,484 | Number of people working for the council – full time equivalent as at 30 April 2024 |
| 1,302* | Number of casual staff |
| 646 | Number of temporary staff |
| 11.9% | Turnover of staff in last year |
| 12.8 | Days lost per FTE during 2023/24 due to absence |



## Age profile

| 4.1% | 16 to 24 |
|---|---|
| 18.5% | 25 to 34 |
| 35.8% | 35 to 49 |
| 41.6% | 50 and over |

Sources: North Ayrshire Council – Power BI extract – 30/4/24. Casual report extracted from Payroll System on 6/06/24. Number of temporary staff was live data provided by North Ayrshire Council on 12/6/24

* 399 casual workers have other employment with the council and 903 are employed as casual only.

# Key messages

1   North Ayrshire Council employs just over 7,600 members of staff, almost 42 per cent of whom are aged 50 or over. Staff costs equate to around 49 per cent of the council's overall revenue budget.

2   The council has set out a clear vision for workforce planning in its Council Plan 2023-28. It takes a structured and comprehensive approach to workforce planning at service level but its corporate-level approach requires strengthening.

3   There are positive relationships between the Trades Unions and the council. Trades Unions feel they are consulted with appropriately and their views are considered.

4   The council's Voluntary Early Release Programme, completed in 2023/24, is projected to save £2.4 million in recurring savings from the reduction of 85 staff. An assessment of the impact on service delivery was considered before the release of staff was approved. The Medium-term Financial Plan projects that its workforce will reduce by 79.5 Full Time Equivalent posts (FTEs) through natural attrition, vacancy management, redeployment and voluntary early release.

5   The council is using digital technology to increase workforce productivity and improve services, mainly through the automation of processes. It has established the workforce benefits and productivity gains of its digital technology improvements but there is scope for more of these to be quantified. It is considering how to further enhance the digital skills and knowledge of its workforce.

6   Agile working has been promoted by the council for a decade and was strengthened in 2021. The council has gathered feedback on wellbeing and productivity in relation to agile working and recognises that further engagement with its workforce would be beneficial.

7   The council has adopted a wide range of approaches to improve the skills and capacity of its existing and future workforce. It has a well-established modern apprenticeship programme, demonstrating positive outcomes.

8   There is scope for the council to explore further where it can work together with partners to share services and increase collaboration. The council shares its Corporate Fraud Team with East Ayrshire Council and resources

are allocated to support the demands from both councils. Joint arrangements are also in place in relation to a Pan-Ayrshire Occupational Health contract with East and South Ayrshire.

**9** The council could improve how it monitors the effectiveness of its workforce planning practice by regularly reporting progress against workforce planning priorities. The council has a rich source of available data in relation its workforce and would benefit from developing a performance dashboard to provide a user-friendly overview of the impact of its workforce planning. This could help to inform future workforce planning.

# 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.

# Workforce strategy and priorities

**The council has set out a clear vision for workforce planning in its Council Plan 2023-28. It takes a structured and comprehensive approach to workforce planning at service level but its corporate-level approach could be strengthened.**

**7.** North Ayrshire Council employs just over 7,600 members of staff, almost 42 per cent of whom are aged 50 or over. Staff costs equate to around 49 per cent of the council's overall revenue budget.

**8.** Workforce planning involves identifying and addressing future capacity and skills gaps, at operational and leadership levels. It requires strategic thinking, comprehensive workforce data and ongoing consultation and engagement with staff and trades unions.

**9.** A council focused on achieving Best Value will have a workforce strategy that sets out expectations on how the local authority's staff will deliver its vision, priorities and values.

**10.** To be effective, workforce planning must be integrated across the organisation. Workforce strategies need to support the council in achieving its strategic priorities. They must support other key plans including financial, asset, digital and transformation planning. They need to be under-pinned with detailed workforce plans within services.

**11.** In 2022/23 we reported in our Best Value thematic work that clear alignment (of workforce plans) will continue to be needed with the council's Sustainable Change Programme in order to ensure they adhere to the council's priorities over the medium and longer-term and maintain a synergy between workforce, service, financial and digital plans.

## The council sets out a clear vision for workforce planning in its Council Plan 2023-28

**12.** The council has four strategic aims, one of which is to be a sustainable council - *A Community Wealth Building Council that is efficient and accessible, maximising investment and focusing resources towards our priorities*. One of the activities the council has placed under this strategic aim is: *Effective workforce planning ensuring that we have the right skills/resources to deliver priorities*. It is working towards the outcome: *The shape of our workforce is planned and resourced to deliver our priorities, ensuring our employees are supported to develop, perform and thrive*.

**Clear linkages between effective workforce planning and addressing the council's funding gap are made in the council's financial plans**

**13.** The council discusses the importance of workforce planning in helping it address its budget gap in its financial outlook papers approved in December 2023 and in its revenue budget papers from February 2024. The council notes that its estimated funding gap for the next three years is £48 million and as employee costs represent 49 per cent of the council's gross expenditure budget, if future savings proposals impact on staff proportionately to their share of the budget, then there would be a significant impact on staffing levels. The council concludes that a more integrated, whole systems approach to workforce planning is required.

**14.** The council's current plans to address this include the Voluntary Early Release (VER) programme that ran in 2023/24 (paragraphs 42-45) supported by further service re-design across the council as part of wider strategies supporting transformation.

**The council's Workforce Strategy 2023-28 requires strengthening to provide clear links between its vision for its workforce and workforce planning at service level.**

**15.** The council set out its approach to workforce planning in 2018 and this was agreed by its Executive Leadership Team. This approach was centred on workforce planning at service level being reviewed every six months. Due to the launch of the council's VER programme in 2023/24 (paragraphs 42-45), the council decided to build on this approach to produce the Workforce Strategy 2023-28 in August 2023. However, the strategy requires strengthening as it still reads more like an approach than a strategy.

**The Workforce Strategy 2023-28 sets out the council's approach to workforce planning but does not articulate what its strategic workforce priorities are or include a corporate-level action plan.**

**16.** The Workforce Strategy 2023-28 sets out the links between workforce and financial planning, describes the use of PESTLE (political, economic, sociological, technological, legal and environmental analysis) as a self-assessment tool and provides a link to live workforce data. The council does not set out what the council's strategic workforce planning priorities are and does not include a corporate-level action plan for actions that may be applicable across all services, eg reducing the use of casual staff or recruitment times. The strategy was considered by the council's Staffing and Recruitment Committee.

## Recommendation 1

The council should establish corporate workforce planning priorities and develop a SMART action plan to allow progress in delivering these priorities to be measured.

**The Workforce Strategy 2023-28 is not aligned to the council's other key strategies and plans and does not include an analysis of council-level workforce data.**

**17.** The Workforce Strategy 2023-28 states in its introduction that it '*sets out how our workforce will support the delivery of the council's ambitions within the available financial resources*'. A section in the Workforce Strategy 2023-28 sets out three of the council's four strategic aims and another section sets out its strategic future workforce approach. The strategic aim that includes references to workforce planning and its desired outcome – A sustainable council – is not mentioned in the Workforce Strategy 2023-28.

**18.** In addition, although the council has developed comprehensive, real-time workforce data that is discussed with services every six months – and an internal link is provided to this in the Workforce Strategy 2023-28 - this is not analysed or referred to at council level at a point in time in the strategy. For example, there is no analysis of the age profile of the council's workforce or the number of casual staff used included in the strategy that then underpins corporate priorities. Indicators of staff wellbeing or indicators related to skills and learning needs are also not included or discussed.

## Recommendation 2

The council's workforce strategy should be updated to align with all four Council Plan 2023-28 priorities and with other key strategies and plans. It should include an analysis of council-wide workforce data and set out what the required skills, learning and development needs of its staff are.

**The council has a structured and comprehensive approach to service-level workforce planning.**

**19.** Since 2018, the council has adopted a structured and comprehensive approach to workforce planning at service level. Every six months meetings take place between HR and Heads of Service across all 14 services to discuss and update service workforce plans.

**20.** All the service workforce plans use a standard template and include:

- a PESTLE analysis that considers the political, economic, social, technological, legal and environmental factors facing the service

- people implications analysis. This requires the service to consider succession planning, its talent pipeline, the composition of its workforce, demographics and areas of growth or disinvestment. It also draws out actions supporting transformation.

- a change planner that records the creation, deletion or regrading of posts, associated savings or additional costs and the anticipated impact of the changes

- an action plan split by short, medium and long-term timescales. This sets out the action owner, details any support required and the timescale.

**Real-time service-level workforce data is provided to services to assist with workforce planning.**

21. At the six-monthly workforce planning meetings between HR and Heads of Service, detailed, service-specific real-time workforce data, presented using Power BI, is also discussed. The council has developed a wide-ranging suite of user-friendly data, using infographics, in conjunction with Heads of Service. HR have full access to the full dataset in Power BI while chief officers and senior managers have access to data related to their own areas. The council plans to develop a managers' toolkit which will initially focus on hosting workforce data in a more user-friendly way and aims to commence this development work later in 2024. The workforce data generated is extensive and includes:

- headcount and FTE

- breakdown of contract type

- percentage of employees by age

- length of service by grade

- analysis of leavers: turnover percentage, reason for leaving, gender split, type of contract, age

- analysis of new starts: age of new start, type of contract, male or female

- number of employees who live in each SIMD classification (1-10) and average salary in each classification

- employee location

- grade progression (number of employees who have progressed to a higher grade).

# Digital technology and the workforce

**The council is using digital technology to increase workforce productivity and improve services, mainly through the automation of processes. It has established the workforce benefits and productivity gains of its digital technology improvements but there is scope for more of these to be quantified. The council is considering how to further enhance the digital skills and knowledge of its workforce.**

**22.** The LGO notes that digital technology will make councils' future workforces look and work quite differently. To achieve the change required, councils need to make good use of digital technology and use the workforce in flexible ways.

**23.** Digital technology has a strong bearing on a council's workforce needs. It can be used to re-shape jobs to increase productivity and reduce back-office functions while improving service quality. Technology solutions include online services, customer relationship management systems, mobile digital devices and more recently, artificial intelligence (AI) applications.

**24.** Councils need to be innovative in their use of technology and build on new working practices that emerged during the pandemic. In doing so, they must also consider service quality and the needs of people experiencing digital exclusion.

## The council consulted extensively with both its workforce and citizens when developing its Digital North Ayrshire Strategy 2023-28

**25.** The council's digital strategy – Digital North Ayrshire 2023-28 – was approved by Cabinet in May 2023. It emphasises that digital is as much about people as it is technology: *It is about how people engage with and utilise technology to enable new ways of living, learning, and doing business* and sets out its vision to embrace digital and reimagine the work that it does for a digital age.

**26.** As we reported in our Best Value thematic work in 2022/23, an action plan has been included in Digital North Ayrshire 2023-28 to provide the initial baseline of activity as well as a monitoring framework that will enable progress to be tracked across the life of the Strategy. The first follow-up on actions is due to be presented to ELT in August 2024.

**27.** When developing Digital North Ayrshire, the council undertook an extensive programme of engagement with a range of staff and citizens via

online surveys and face to face meetings. Within the council the team undertaking the work engaged with elected members, Executive Leadership Team, Heads of Service, staff groups and modern apprentices who were asked their views on new ways of working already implemented, what barriers they were experiencing and ideas for the future. Citizens were asked about the extent to which they accessed council services online, reasons for not using online and what would encourage them to use online. One of the key messages emerging from the engagement was that people wanted to shift from face-to-face engagement to doing more online.

**The council is using digital technology to increase workforce productivity and improve services mainly through the automation of processes.**

**28.** The council's priority in terms of its customers is to support them to become more digital, designing services that are quick and easy to use making digital the preferred choice. Examples of where it has introduced digital improvements include:

- the Streetscene service. This service deals with graffiti, abandoned vehicles, fly-tipping, litter, dog fouling, litter bin inspections, play park inspections and grounds maintenance. The council has introduced an online form for issues to be reported by members of the public that requires them to pinpoint on a map the location of the issue. This information is then passed to Streetscene workers via an App using map coordinates within 30 minutes. This has increased efficiency, replacing a paper-based system whereby jobs would be issued the day after they were reported.

- digitisation of more than 40 licensing forms including taxi licenses, alcohol premises licences and public procession notices. To obtain these licences in the past, customers would have to fill in a form and then telephone the council to pay. Officers had to manually match the payment to the form. Payments are now made online when submitting the form and officers can see that payment has been made.

- the introduction of a new Contact Us process, using online forms, on the council's website. Online forms are intended to replace the contact us email address monitored by customer services. This has significantly cut down on the workload for Customer Services and has enabled the queries that customers do make to go directly to the service they are trying to contact, which also enables a quicker response for the customer.

**The council has established the workforce benefits and productivity gains of its digital technology improvements but there is scope for more of these to be quantified.**

**29.** The council has used digital technologies to improve the efficiency of local residents' interactions with services, and to assist staff working out in the community. The council has set out the workforce benefits and productivity gains by the introduction of digital in many of these areas but there is scope for more to be quantified and savings calculated. For example:

- the introduction of the new Contact Us process has led to the number of contacts coming into services from the website to reduce by 78 per cent since June 2023. This has resulted in a reduction of one FTE no longer being required to manage and direct service requests.

- online interactions have increased from 24 per cent in 2021 to 38 per cent in 2023.

- the introduction of a web assistant / chat bot in late 2023 has led to over 200 requests every week being answered by the chat bot.

## Recommendation 3

The council should build on the work it has done to date to demonstrate and quantify what workforce benefits and productivity gains have been made through its use of digital technology.

**The council is considering how to further enhance the digital skills and knowledge of its workforce.**

**30.** The pandemic led to an increase in the use of digital technology by the council's workforce. The council conducted a digital engagement survey in March 2021 to inform its digital strategy; *Digital North Ayrshire*. One of the barriers identified by staff as part of this engagement was lack of digital skills. The council's digital priority in relation to its workforce is: *We will develop our workforce to ensure it is empowered, enabled and inspired to realise the benefits of digital*. The council has supported the development of digital skills and knowledge of its workforce but has acknowledged that there is scope to further enhance this.

**31.** The council introduced its Digi Guru initiative in 2018 with the aim of providing interested members of staff with key digital skills and knowledge that they could then pass on to colleagues if required. Before the Covid-19 pandemic this proved to be very successful with 400 members of staff becoming Digi Gurus. Since the pandemic the council has acknowledged that this model has operated in a different way as individuals are working within different locations (home/base office or other location). As a result, employees are supporting each other utilising digital methods such as Teams chats, Teams calls and screen sharing for support. The council has committed to reconsidering the Digi Guru Initiative and is considering other ways of informing and upskilling its employees' digital skills.

## Recommendation 4

The council should consider conducting another digital skills survey to inform the support it provides for improving the digital skills and knowledge of its workforce.

# Flexible working and other innovative staff deployment

**Agile working has been promoted by the council for a decade and was strengthened in 2021. The council has gathered feedback on wellbeing and productivity in relation to agile working and recognises that further engagement with its workforce would be beneficial. The council's Voluntary Early Release Programme in 2023/24 is projected to save £2.4 million in recurring savings. A positive relationship exists between the council and Trades Unions.**

**32.** 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.

**33.** Home-working and hybrid working (a combination of office and home-based working) have now become commonplace. Some councils are also considering more radical working practice such as a standard four-day working week. However, whatever the working practice, employers need to ensure that service quality and productivity are maintained.

**Agile working has been promoted by the council for a decade. It was relaunched in 2021 when workstyles were assigned to every post.**

**34.** The council created an Agile Working Guide in 2014 which contained four different workstyles: in building, mobile, flexible and home. At this point workstyles were not aligned to posts.

**35.** In August 2020, as part of Our Future Working Environment Project, a staff homeworking survey was carried out, and 69 per cent of respondents stated their preference was to continue working from home. As a result of this survey, and due to the new ways of working during the pandemic, the council reviewed and updated its Agile Working Guide. The council consulted with Trade Unions and Heads of Service / Senior Managers.

**36.** In July 2021, the workstyles guide was relaunched with a slight change to the wording of the original workstyles. This time the council also assigned one of four working styles to each post with the council. Emails were issued to staff who had been working in a different way to confirm their new workstyle. 2,068 emails were issued, and from this, four employees asked for their workstyle to be amended. A Visible Leadership Guide was published to

provide guidance and support to managers on being visible and engaging and communicating with their teams.

37. The four revised workstyles are as follows, with the number of posts as at April 2024:

- Agile – 2,225 (25.1 per cent)

- Home – 10 (0.1 per cent)

- Mobile - 1,845 (20.8 per cent)

- In building – 4,771 (53.1 per cent).

**The council has gathered feedback on wellbeing and productivity in relation to agile working through various channels during the past few years. A council-wide employee engagement survey has not been conducted since 2019/20 due to resource limitations driven by financial constraints.**

38. The council would benefit from gathering further feedback on the impact of agile working on employee wellbeing including work-life balance, and productivity. Trades Unions report that they have received very few calls from their members about agile working, suggesting there are no major issues.

39. The council has a Livewell programme that supports workforce wellbeing. A workforce wellbeing update is presented to the 1st tier Joint Consultative Committee on a six-monthly basis and provides an update on absence along with supports available such as occupational health and Livewell. The council has not carried out an employee engagement survey since 2019/20 due to reduced resources driven by financial constraints.

40. Some aspects of the impact of agile working is captured through the council's 'Our Future Working Environment Project' that realised savings of £0.5M from staff travel, office supplies and property related costs. In addition, a Property Rationalisation Programme is currently progressing to support agile working and the financial challenges.

**The Child Poverty and Cost of Living Board provides an example of the benefits of agile working.**

41. An example of the positive impact of agile working is the Child Poverty and Cost of Living Board. It meets every six weeks for one hour and relies on the Leader of the Council, Executive Directors, Heads of Service, Senior Managers, third sector partners and the NHS including Public Health to inform its strategic approach. Agile working has enabled the coordination of discussions through Teams and due to diary availability is likely to have resulted in more frequent decision-making and a quicker response than scheduled in person meetings – directly supporting the wellbeing of residents.

## Recommendation 5

The council should consider gathering further feedback from staff on the impact of agile working on wellbeing and productivity.

**The council completed a Voluntary Early Release programme in 2023/24, resulting in 85 employees leaving.**

**42.** In May 2023 the council launched a Voluntary Early Release programme to help address the financial challenges it was facing. Employees were invited to submit an application to request to leave the council. An assessment of the impact on service delivery and associated costs of exit for those staff who volunteered for consideration was undertaken.

**43.** The programme was led by the HR team, who developed targeted communications, a Frequently Asked Questions document and an online form for people to complete in order to create a structured, automated process. Applications were assessed by service managers and heads of service, with final decisions being made by a VER Scrutiny Panel at the end of October 2023.

**44.** Eighty-five employees left the council as part of the programme at the end of March 2024. Savings from the programme amounted to £2.4 million. To achieve these savings, 75 per cent of the vacant post had to be put forward as a saving, with the remaining 25 per cent being reinvested in the service.

**45.** In 2024/25, in its Medium-term Financial Plan the council projects that its workforce will reduce by 79.5 Full Time Equivalent posts through natural attrition, vacancy management, redeployment and voluntary early release.

**The council is currently reviewing its use of casual workers**

**46.** The council employs just over 1,300 casual workers. Of these, approximately 400 have other employment with the council and 900 (just over ten per cent of its workforce) have solely casual status. The council is currently reviewing its use of casual workers. HR staff liaised directly with services to determine their use of casual workers and how they are managed, and what systems are being used to manage casual workers.

**47.** A survey was sent out to all casual staff. The survey included questions on whether they wished to remain on the casual register, whether they were interested in a contracted role and the reasons why they preferred a casual contract. These surveys were due to be returned by the end of April and the results will be analysed and included in a report to ELT in September 2024.

**A positive relationship exists between the Trades Unions and the council.**

**48.** There are positive relationships between Trades Unions and the council. Trades Unions feel they are consulted with appropriately and their views are considered. Trades Unions were engaged with when the workstyles were re-

launched in 2021 through their membership on the council's Future Working Environment Working Group. Trades Union representatives meet with HR monthly and with the Chief Executive quarterly.

# Developing future skills and capacity

**The council has adopted a wide range of approaches to improve the skills and capacity of its existing and future workforce. It has a well-established modern apprenticeship programme, demonstrating positive outcomes.**

**49.** Councils need to find innovative ways to ensure 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 are in place. Many councils work with their partners to offer apprenticeship schemes or vocational qualifications. Succession planning is also important to develop future leaders and ensure that essential skills are in place.

**50.** Jobs can be re-designed to optimise the workforce and improve services. For example generic roles across health and social care disciplines. Leaders need to engage with staff and trade unions over fundamental workforce reform. This is particularly challenging in an environment of potential job losses.

## The council has adopted a wide range of approaches to improve the skills and capacity of its existing and future workforce

**51.** The council has adopted a wide range of approaches to improve the skills and capacity of its existing and future workforce including modern apprenticeships, graduate apprenticeships, its Leadership Academy, its Skills for Life programme and care at home recruitment work.

## The council has a well-established modern apprenticeship programme, demonstrating positive outcomes

**52.** The council has had a modern apprenticeship programme in place for 14 years. The programme is well embedded across services and the council sees it as a practical solution to attracting young people into the council workforce.

**53.** The council has a good track record with modern apprentices. Since 2019/20 it has recruited 232 people to the programme. Of these:

- 129 have gone on to secure jobs (104 with the council)

- eight have gone on to attend university or college

- 75 are currently continuing with their apprenticeship

- of the remaining 20, the majority of these were linked into other employability services the council offers with the support of a key worker.

**54.** The council aims to take on 45 apprentices each year, and this year plan to take on a higher volume of 12-month placements. Of these placements, the council has a commitment to ringfence 20 per cent of places for care experienced or disabled young people.

**55.** Education Scotland highlighted the council's modern apprenticeship programme in youth work as highly effective practice. The programme has developed over the years and is now delivered entirely within the Community Learning and Development service, with staff members having been upskilled to become qualified assessors.

**56.** The programme provides employment opportunities for young people in the authority from age 16-19 providing training and upskilling of the young workforce. The modern apprentices are involved in delivering youth work across 40 groups and help to deliver various large-scale events, such as Joint Cabinet meetings and Youth Conferences. Many of the modern apprentices have stayed on as sessional workers after they complete their qualification, as well as progressing onto positive destinations. As at September 2023, 110 modern apprentices had completed their qualifications with the service.

**57.** Like other councils, the council may have to consider reducing the number of modern apprentices it takes on because of financial constraints as a result of changes to the Fair Work Conditionality (requirement to pay the living wage). At present a limited exception has been approved to continue to pay modern apprenticeships at the National Minimum Wage Rate however this may or may not continue beyond 31 March 2025 and is at the discretion of the Scottish Government.

**Graduate apprenticeship programme**

**58.** The council introduced its graduate apprenticeship programme as a workforce development opportunity and a way to grow its own talent. It developed a strategic partnership with the University of the West of Scotland (UWS) to develop the programme. The programme started in 2023/24 with a cohort of eight employees providing support to each other.

**Leadership academy**

**59.** The council operates a Leadership Academy which provides structured development programmes to develop essential leadership skills across all levels of management throughout the council.

**The council offers a programme, Skills for Life, that helps people develop appropriate skills for the workforce**

**60.** The council's employability service offers a programme called Skills for Life which offers individuals work experience that helps them develop skills in areas which might otherwise prevent them from being offered an interview. Individuals are matched to different roles in the council, such as in facilities management, care at home or business administration. This year the council

launched opportunities to develop classroom assistant experience which will then enable people to apply for future vacancies, as one of the essential criteria of this role is experience which is difficult to gain.

**61.** Seventy individuals have been involved in the programme, all with positive outcomes. Thirty have moved into vacancies within the council and the other 40 have gained employment in third sector or anchor organisations to the council. Those involved in the programme also have access to the council's redeployment programme. At 13 weeks into the placement, the individual can get access to any redeployment vacancies, rather than waiting until the end of the programme before being able to gain employment.

**The Health and Social Care Partnership has introduced alternative methods to recruit to care at home posts**

**62.** Since 2020 the Care at Home service has been looking at alternative methods to support recruitment activity to care at home posts. The level of applications for frontline care at home posts was often very low, with high levels of applicants dropping out at various stages of the recruitment process.

**63.** The service decided to devise a new campaign and introduced face-to-face recruitment events, where individuals could come along to receive advice and guidance on applying for vacant posts. This also include support to complete application forms, advice on interview techniques and general information on working in social care. Interviews are also offered on the day with an aim to reduce the level of withdrawal from the recruitment process.

**64.** This initiative has had a level of success with the events being well attended. Over 230 people have attended events since November 2023 and there has been a 16 per cent reduction in frontline care at home assistant vacancies.

# Joint workforce arrangements across services and partners

**There is scope for the council to explore further where it can work together with partners to share services and increase collaboration. It currently shares its Corporate Fraud Team with East Ayrshire Council and has a Pan Ayrshire contract with East and South Ayrshire in place in relation to Occupational Health.**

**65.** Councils should look to work collaboratively with their partners to make the best use of their existing workforces and plan for the particular workforce needs in their areas. They should also work across traditional service department roles within councils to deliver improved services and outcomes.

**66.** Examples of this include generic working across health and social care, professional posts or functions shared between councils, and services delivered through empowered communities.

**The council shares its Corporate Fraud Team with East Ayrshire Council and has a Pan Ayrshire contract with East and South Ayrshire in place in relation to Occupational Health.**

**67.** A Corporate Fraud Team (CFT) for North and East Ayrshire, to investigate fraud and share learning and information, has been in place since August 2016. It is delivered by North Ayrshire Council but is jointly funded by both councils. The arrangement was initially in place for three years but has been extended on numerous occasions, with it most recently being extended until March 2025. The CFT work deals with referrals of fraud around Council Tax, Business Rates, Scottish Welfare Fun, Discretionary Housing Payments, Blue Badges and Housing Tenancies, and acts as the first point of contact for the National Fraud Initiative. The benefits of a shared CFT include shared learning, freeing up internal audit resources, and being a single point of contact for employees and the community.

**68.** North Ayrshire Council, East Ayrshire Council and South Ayrshire Council have contracted jointly for Occupational Health Services since 2015. This arrangement enables the councils to tender for occupational health services together allowing them to obtain a more competitive package of services rather than each council contracting separately. The current contract has been in place since August 2019 and is due to be re-tendered in 2024.

**69.** Since 2019 the three councils have worked jointly to manage the contractual relationship through regular contract management meetings with the provider and by utilising a balanced scorecard approach to assess contract performance. By working collaboratively, they have been able to

leverage further supports and initiatives from the Occupational Health provider, for example the introduction of an online portal for referrals to enable managers to do this themselves. This has also enhanced working relationships between HR colleagues which have had wider benefits in terms of the ability to collaborate on other HR related matters over the years.

## Recommendation 6

The council should explore further where it can work together with partners to share services and increase collaboration.

# Measuring the impact of workforce planning

**The council could improve how it monitors the effectiveness of its workforce planning practice by regularly reporting progress against workforce planning priorities. The council has a rich source of available data in relation its workforce and would benefit from developing a performance dashboard to provide a user-friendly overview of the impact of its workforce planning.**

**70.** 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 practice on the local economy.

**The council reports on workforce planning through Council Plan progress updates and an annual ELT workforce planning update.**

**71.** The council set out in its Workforce Strategy 2023-28 its intention to monitor progress in workforce planning through its Council Plan progress reports with service-level workforce planning being monitored through updates to its Executive Leadership Team.

**72.** The council reports on its Council Plan 2023-28 every six months. While these updates are informative, providing updates on workforce planning initiatives, they do not provide a clear sense of whether the council has progressed in workforce planning at the pace intended. In January 2024 the Council Plan mid-year progress report included a section on workforce planning. It discussed the intake of modern, graduate and craft apprenticeships, referred to the six-monthly workforce planning meetings at service level having taken place and noted that the VER programme would conclude in March 2024.

**73.** The Council Plan progress report sets out performance across 26 performance indicators. None relate directly to workforce planning. It also contains an action tracker that includes one action related to workforce - *Effective workforce planning ensuring that we have the right skills/resources to deliver priorities*. This action was deemed to be on track but it is not clear how progress against this action is being measured. The council would benefit from developing a performance dashboard to track progress in the delivery of the workforce strategy.

**74.** Once a year the council's Executive Leadership Team considers a workforce planning update. The most recent update was considered in February 2024. It contains a wealth of information but it is does not clearly set out what the workforce planning priorities are for the council as a whole.

**75.** In the ELT update, for each of the council's four directorates, a summary is provided of the PESTLE analysis from the service workforce plans, the people implications (setting out good news stories and challenges) and the directorate's priorities. The priorities are split into short, medium and long-term. For two of the four directorates, the priorities listed were not workforce specific. For the two directorates that did set out workforce-specific priorities these tended to be lacking in detail and it was not clear what success would look like. For the HSCP examples of the priorities include:

- growing capacity in critical services (short term)

- skills mix and entry roles (short term)

- succession planning (medium term)

- fair work across services (medium term)

- National Care Service (long term). The council has detailed service-level workforce action plans. It needs to develop a corporate-level workforce action plan against which progress can be monitored.

**76.** The council has developed detailed service-level workforce action plans, updated every six months, as described in paragraph 19. However, as noted in paragraph 16, the council's Workforce Strategy 2023-28 does not set out the council's corporate workforce planning priorities or include a corporate-level action plan. This means it is not possible to track the council's progress in achieving its workforce planning priorities.

## Recommendation 7

In addition to providing general workforce planning updates, the council should regularly report its progress against its workforce planning priorities to elected members through its Council Plan updates or other means.

**There is scope for the council to draw upon the information it already collects to develop a performance dashboard to provide a user-friendly overview of the impact of its workforce planning. This could help to inform future workforce planning.**

**77.** As described in paragraph 21, the council has developed a wide-ranging suite of user-friendly, real-time data using Power BI for services to use. It also publishes employee statistics such as the age breakdown of its employees and absence rates across various publications, including its equality mainstreaming report and the LGBF. Bringing the council-level workforce data together into one place and providing commentary on this could provide

a useful overview for elected members and other interested parties as well as helping the council provide an assessment of overall impact of workforce planning. There is also more scope for the council to be more explicit about what success will look like.

**78.** The Improvement Service publishes tools to help councils with their workforce planning. The council may wish to use these to help capture the effectiveness of its approach. The LGA workforce planning maturity matrix is a table for councils to use to measure their current capability and maturity in relation to different aspects of workforce planning. It can provide a framework for organisations to improve their workforce planning capabilities.

## Recommendation 8

The council should develop a performance dashboard to provide a user-friendly overview of the impact of its workforce planning. This could help to inform future workforce planning.

# Appendix 1
## Improvement Action plan

| Issue/risk | Recommendation | Agreed management action/timing |
|---|---|---|
| 1. **Corporate workforce planning priorities and action plan**<br><br>The Workforce Strategy 2023-28 sets out the council's approach to workforce planning but does not articulate what its strategic workforce priorities are or include a corporate-level action plan.<br><br>**Risk –** There is a risk that the council's approach to workforce planning is not strategic and progress cannot be measured. | The council should establish corporate workforce planning priorities and develop a SMART action plan to allow progress in delivering these priorities to be measured. | **Management response**<br><br>The Workforce Strategy will be updated to include corporate workforce planning priorities and an action plan to allow progress to be measured.<br><br>**Responsible officer**<br><br>Fiona Walker<br><br>**Actioned by**<br><br>31 March 2025 |
| 2. **Alignment of workforce strategy to key strategies and plans and inclusion of data**<br><br>The Workforce Strategy 2023-28 is not aligned to the council's other key strategies and plans and does not include an analysis of council-level workforce data.<br><br>**Risk –** There is a risk that the council is not clear about the way in which workforce planning can help deliver its strategic priorities and it may not be using the council-level workforce data it has to full effect. | The council's workforce strategy should be updated to align with all four Council Plan 2023-28 priorities and with other key strategies and plans. It should include an analysis of council-wide workforce data and set out what the required skills, learning and development needs of its staff are. | **Management response**<br><br>The Workforce Strategy will be updated to ensure alignment to all Council Plan priorities, other key strategies/plans and include an extract of council-wide workforce data.<br><br>**Responsible officer**<br><br>Fiona Walker<br><br>**Actioned by**<br><br>31 March 2025 |
| 3. **Measuring the impact of digital technology improvements** | The council should build on the work it has done to date to demonstrate and quantify what workforce benefits and | **Management response**<br><br>Further work will be undertaken to capture and |

The council has established the workforce benefits and productivity gains of its digital technology improvements but there is scope for more of these to be quantified.

**Risk –** There is a risk that the council does not fully understand the workforce benefits from digital technology improvements to inform future decision-making.

productivity gains have been made through its use of digital technology.

quantify efficiencies from digital improvements and for this work to be incorporated within the Council's Medium-Term Financial Planning

**Responsible officer**

Mark Boyd

**Actioned by**

31 March 2025

## 4. Improving digital skills

The council is considering how to further enhance the digital skills and knowledge of its workforce.

**Risk –** There is a risk that the council does not focus its digital skills training in the right areas because it does not know what its employees' digital learning needs are.

The council should consider conducting another digital skills survey to inform the support it provides for improving the digital skills and knowledge of its workforce.

**Management response**

A digital skills survey will be conducted to inform future development interventions.

**Responsible officer**

Fiona Walker

**Actioned by**

31 March 2025

## 5. Gathering feedback on the Impact of agile working

The council has gathered feedback on wellbeing and productivity in relation to agile working through various channels during the past few years. A council-wide employee engagement survey has not been conducted since 2019/20 due to resource limitations driven by financial constraints.

**Risk –** There is a risk the council is not aware of the impact of agile working on wellbeing and productivity.

The council should consider gathering further feedback from staff on the impact of agile working on wellbeing and productivity.

**Management response**

Further feedback will be gathered from those employees who are deemed an agile workstyle to gauge continued benefits on wellbeing and productivity.

**Responsible officer**

Fiona Walker

**Actioned by**

31 March 2025

## 6. Joint workforce arrangements

There is scope for the council to explore further where it can work together with partners to

The council should explore further where it can work together with partners to share services and increase collaboration.

**Management response**

The Medium-Term Financial Planning process for 2025/26 to 2027/28 will include the exploration of further

share services and increase collaboration.

**Risk –** There is a risk the council may not be utilising opportunities for shared services and collaboration opportunities across partner organisations.

opportunities for sharing services and collaboration across partner organisations.

**Responsible officer**

Mark Boyd

**Actioned by**

31 March 2026

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7. **Measuring the impact of workforce planning**

The council could improve how it monitors the effectiveness of its workforce planning practice by regularly reporting progress against workforce planning priorities.

**Risk –** There is a risk that the council's workforce planning arrangements are not supporting the delivery of the strategic priorities in its Council Plan.

In addition to providing general workforce planning updates, the council should regularly report its progress against its workforce planning priorities to elected members through its Council Plan updates or other means.

**Management response**

Workforce planning updates and progress against priorities will be regularly reported through Council Plan updates and other means.

**Responsible officer**

Fiona Walker

**Actioned by**

31 March 2025

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8. **Measuring the impact of workforce planning**

There is scope for the council to draw upon the information it already collects to develop a performance dashboard to monitor and inform future workforce planning practice.

**Risk** – There is a risk that the workforce planning information the council already collects is not being used to full effect.

The council should develop a performance dashboard to provide a user-friendly overview of the impact of its workforce planning. This could help to inform future workforce planning.

**Management response**

A performance dashboard will be developed to monitor and inform future workforce planning.

**Responsible officer**

Fiona Walker

**Actioned by**

30 September 2025

# Workforce innovation - how councils are responding to workforce challenges

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