

Workforce

Risk Based Workforce Planning: Reducing Recruitment and Retention Risk

Argyll and Bute Council

Background

Argyll and Bute Council serves a diverse geography that includes 28 inhabited islands alongside remote rural and more urban mainland communities, creating a distinctive context for workforce attraction and retention. A workforce profile of over 4,000 people, with 52% working part time, 4% under age 25 and an average age of 47, highlights both the depth of experience within services and the opportunity to strengthen future pipelines. In 2022, evidence from recruitment activity showed that 63% of advertised posts were filled by applicants living locally and the average time to hire was 78 days. This provided a baseline for improvement and a shared understanding of where change would have the greatest impact.

The Council's risk based workforce planning matrix enabled teams to identify, track and respond to recruitment and retention as priority strategic risks from 2022–23 onwards. This ensured that action was targeted to the areas of highest impact. The same analysis surfaced helpful insights surrounding policy outcomes and the varied effects of hybrid and remote working across services, which informed targeted adjustments to the Council's recruitment approach. Together, these insights and actions have shaped a model that makes it easier for people to consider, apply for and start Council careers, supporting long-term improvement in workforce resilience.

Key activities

1. Policy and process reform to reduce recruitment risk

Argyll and Bute Council redesigned its recruitment policy to place greater emphasis on values, future focused skills and inclusive hiring practices. The policy received formal approval at committee and has ensured that the updated framework aligned with the organisation's risk based approach to workforce planning. The end to end pathway from vacancy initiation to advert was also simplified, with the number of pre advert approvals reduced from between 7 and 9 sign offs, down to around 3 or 4.

2. Place Led Talent Attraction

A coordinated, place based attraction strategy presented lifestyle, community and practical relocation support alongside employment. The approach used the #abplace2b narrative and the abplace2b.scot website as a one stop space for people considering a move. The site, developed with partners and featuring a welcome pack, positions applying for a Council role as a natural next step for those choosing Argyll and Bute as a place to live and work. Communications activity complemented this with regular social promotion of diverse vacancies and targeted paid campaigns for higher risk roles identified through workforce planning analysis.

3. A Transparent and Authentic Candidate Journey

The Council refreshed its "Work with us" webpage to articulate benefits, career routes and real employee journeys more clearly, improving how prospective employees understand the offer before they apply.

Employees were treated as brand ambassadors, with staff taken photography used across backdrops and media to provide authentic images of the places and services that define the Council's work. To increase transparency, intranet content was moved to an externally accessible staff website, My Council Works, which includes leadership updates, policies, procedures and colleague news. The approach enables candidates to understand hybrid working expectations and everyday culture before entering recruitment.

4. Targeted pipelines: refugee resettlement alignment and rapid recruitment

Workforce planning needs were mapped to the skills and qualifications of arriving refugees, supported by practical guidance for recruiting managers and qualification equivalence tools aligned to Scottish frameworks. Alongside this, rapid recruitment events were deployed in suitable high volume areas such as catering and cleaning, enabling same day progression through applications and interviews where the model matched local conditions and role types.

Benefits and impact

Improved hiring outcomes and risk trend

Vacancy fill rates increased to 89% in 2025 from 73% in 2022, alongside a reduction in time to hire from 78 to 69 days. This indicated more consistent appointments and quicker movement of candidates through the hiring stages. Streamlined pre advert approvals and the use of rapid recruitment events in suitable high volume services helped shorten stages where applicants previously disengaged, making it easier to move from advert to appointment without avoidable delay. The workforce planning dashboard reflects this progress, showing that recruitment risk has reduced, with the Council continuing to closely monitor it.

Expanded reach and a broader talent pipeline

Place-based outreach and employer branding has widened the audience beyond the existing local labour market. The proportion of local applicants has fallen as more candidates from outwith the area apply. At the same time, the abplace2b.scot platform and refreshed employer content give potential candidates a clear understanding of the area and of Council careers before they apply. Engagement indicators include over 21,000 unique visitors to abplace2b.scot since its 2024 launch and a rise in average monthly visits to the "Working With Us" pages to around 1,700 in early 2026.

Better informed candidates and a more transparent employer offer

Opening sections of the staff intranet site externally and refreshing "Working with us" content have made leadership updates, policies and everyday stories visible to prospective candidates. This transparency helps people understand hybrid working expectations and organisational culture in advance, supporting a better mutual fit at interview and offer stages.

Inclusive pathways matched to workforce need

Linking high risk workforce areas with the skills and qualifications of arriving refugees, supported by practical guidance and qualification equivalence tools, has created additional routes into services that need them most. This alignment enables recruiting managers to navigate credential recognition confidently and convert interest into appropriate appointments.

Learning and reflections

Learning from declined offers

Experience during and after the 2023 housing emergency showed that some successful candidates could

not proceed due to a lack of suitable accommodation or partner employment. The Council is now collecting reasons for withdrawals and declined offers to inform targeted responses with partners and to calibrate support around priority roles. These insights are informing a review of the relocation package, with support being considered for fixed location, higher risk posts aligned to workforce planning risk.

Role clarity, access and suitability

With 37% of applicants assessed as suitable for interview at the time of review, this highlighted the value in sharpening adverts and role specifications. Additionally, in roles where visa sponsorship may be applicable, the Council will make this more transparent in the advert so candidates understand this from the outset. The aspiration following the review is that this process will help to reduce the number of unsuitable applications and help managers focus time where it adds most value.

Balancing immediate needs and future skills through policy and process

Operational pressures can lead to a preference for job ready candidates. At the same time, long term resilience depends on selection that emphasises values, behaviours and skills for the future, which is the focus of the Council's refreshed recruitment policy. In parallel, targeted pipelines broaden access where services face persistent risk, for example, the Council's approach to aligning high risk workforce areas with the skills of arriving refugees. Forthcoming recruitment and onboarding functionality within the new HR and payroll system, alongside updated job descriptions and person specifications, is designed to standardise steps and communications. This will help ensure that values based selection is applied consistently across services.

Targeted mobility support and coordinated delivery

Experience showed that traditional relocation support did not always reach the roles at greatest workforce risk. Applying a workforce risk lens has prompted a review which allows assistance to be directed to fixed location posts that had not previously been covered. Collaboration across communications, resettlement and economic development emerged as a critical enabler rather than a one off input. This helped to reinforce the importance of place-messaging, candidate guidance and hiring processes. The review also reflects learning from candidates who declined offers due to accommodation and partner employment factors, signalling the need to align any mobility support with local housing and partner employment considerations.

The Council's approach to workforce planning shows how aligning place, policy and people can turn recruitment risk into forward momentum. The work has created a shared platform where services, partners and candidates connect with clarity and purpose, and where learning steadily informs the next step. By keeping values at the centre and opening accessible routes into roles, the Council is building a workforce that reflects its communities and is ready for the future. The approach provides a clear, long term direction that brings people, place and service into alignment for Argyll and Bute.

Contact for enquiries

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