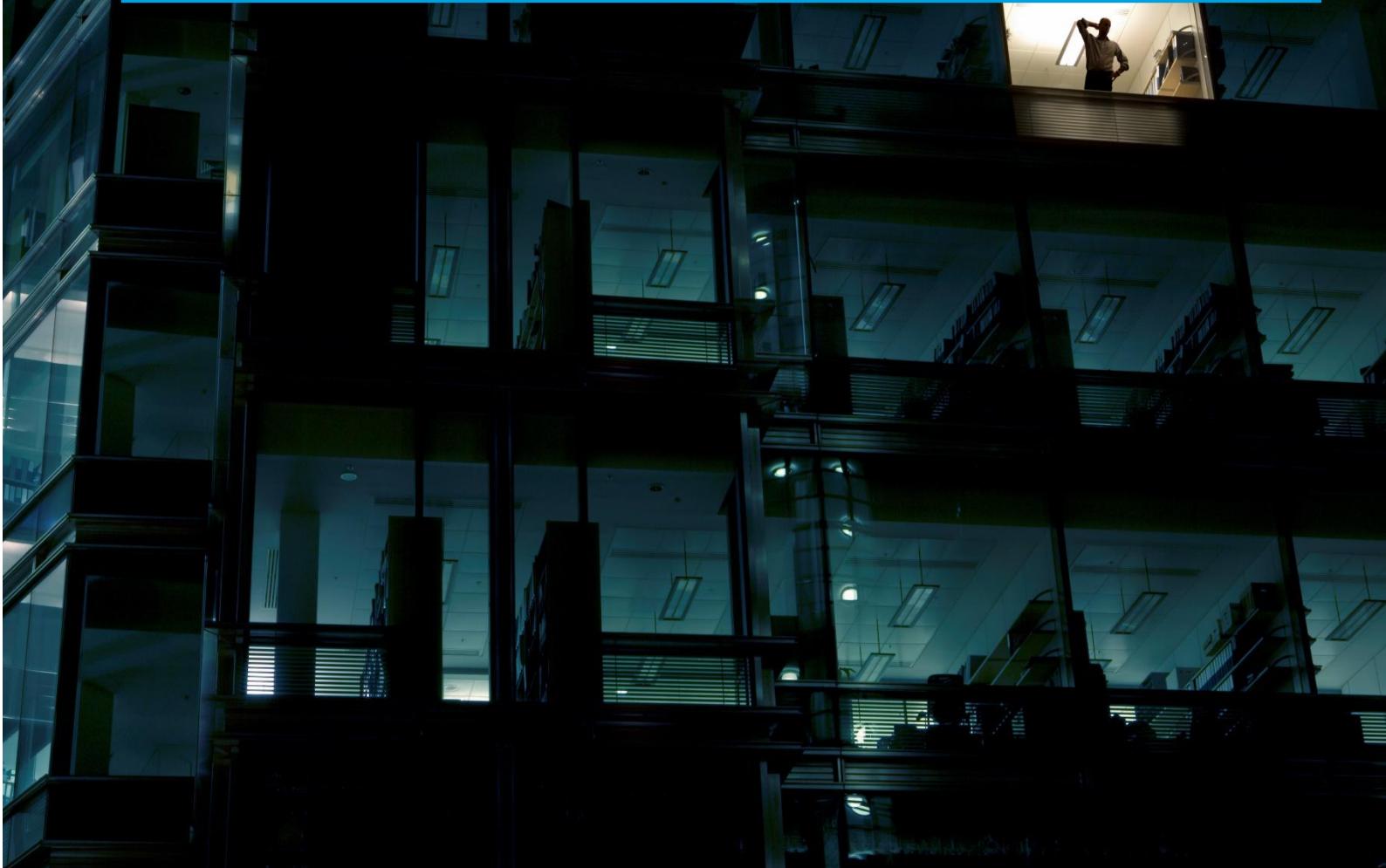


Recruitment and Retention in Local Government in NI



**Report for the Local Government Staff Commission
for Northern Ireland**

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Introduction

Local government across the UK is operating within an increasingly complex and constrained workforce environment. Demographic change, labour market competition, rising service demand, and evolving expectations of work are placing sustained pressure on Councils' ability to recruit, retain, and develop the skills required to deliver essential services. At the same time, Councils must operate within highly regulated employment frameworks, fixed pay structures, and intense public and political scrutiny, limiting their flexibility relative to other sectors.

Against this backdrop, the Ulster University Economic Policy Centre (UUEPC) has been commissioned to undertake a robust, evidence-based assessment of workforce challenges within Councils in Northern Ireland (NI), to understand the local position in terms of recruitment, retention, and skills capacity. To this end, the report seeks to understand recruitment challenges, the underlying drivers of workforce pressures, how these pressures are experienced in practice, and what remedial actions can realistically be taken within the constraints of local government.

The report adopts a mixed-methods approach, drawing together three complementary strands of evidence. First, a literature review examines national and international research, policy analysis, and best practice relating to local government workforce challenges. This enables the subsequent NI findings to be situated within a wider evidence base. Secondly, a quantitative survey of NI Councils provides a systematic overview of vacancy levels, recruitment and retention challenges, skills gaps, workforce demographics, and current workforce practices. This sets out the scale and distribution of workforce pressures across roles and service areas. Thirdly, in-depth qualitative consultations with senior leaders and HR practitioners in selected Councils provide contextual insight into the experience behind the survey results, exploring organisational culture, systemic constraints, and strategic priorities.

Together these strands enable evidence to be compiled from a range of sources, ensuring that conclusions are not based on isolated data points but reflect a detailed understanding of workforce dynamics across the local Councils.

The remainder of this report is structured as follows. Chapter 2 presents the literature review, setting out relevant research, policy context, and best practice in workforce planning, recruitment, and retention within local government and comparable sectors. Section 3 presents the findings from the quantitative survey, supplemented by qualitative consultation insights where appropriate. Section 4 draws the evidence together, presenting overall conclusions and a

set of practical, evidence-based recommendations to support Councils in addressing recruitment challenges and strengthening workforce resilience and sustainability.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

There are 11 Local Government Districts in NI with the respective Councils employing over 9,000 FTE staff, responsible for delivering essential public services across the region. Workforce capacity and the ability to recruit into the sector is key to the delivery of these services but this is not without its challenges. Indeed, wider research suggests that, as with the public sector more generally, there are systemic and multi-layered issues in terms of recruitment and retention of staff. These issues have been exacerbated by significant job losses in the local government sector, estimated at a reduction of around 32% in the UK between 2012-23 (PWC & CCN, 2024), which has had a knock-on effect on the sector's attractiveness as an employer (APSE, 2021). This literature review synthesises the relevant literature to explore the multidimensional challenges with regards to recruitment and retention in local government more generally, which will also be pertinent to the NI context.

2.2 Skills Shortages

Skill shortages arise when organisations are unable to recruit staff with the required skills in the accessible labour market and at the ongoing rate of pay (Quintini, 2011) resulting in recruitment difficulties and unfilled vacancies. They are distinct from skills gaps which reflect the difference between the skills that an organisation demands from its internal workforce and the skills that that workforce offers (Schwalje, 2011). Although the two terms are often conflated, skill shortages are particularly common to the public sector with recent research suggesting that while skills shortages are endemic across all sectors they are more acute in the public sector (NI Assembly, 2024).

The OECD (2021) highlight that most governments find it difficult to recruit candidates with specific skills, particularly in IT or Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths-related fields (STEM). They suggest that it's because these skills are in high demand in the private sector. The CIPD also reports that senior and skilled positions remain the most difficult to recruit in the public sector, although around one fifth of organisations also report challenges in attracting low-skilled candidates (Hogarth and McCartney, 2024). Indeed, at the local government level recruitment challenges go beyond technical and senior roles. A UK-wide survey conducted by APSE found that one in three local authorities were unable to recruit sufficient staff with the right skills to deliver core services. These shortages were particularly apparent in digital functions, project management, and environmental health. But the report also highlights shortages for roles in

driving, construction related workers, catering, cleaning and social care (APSE, 2021). A more recent 2024 survey of the local government workforce in England (LGA, 2025) reveals that almost all Councils (94%) said they were experiencing at least one recruitment and/or retention difficulty. The roles facing the greatest recruitment difficulties were social workers, educational psychologists, planning officers and legal professionals. In NI recurring recruitment and retention difficulties were also identified for drivers, procurement, planning officials, environmental health, and waste collection and management (NI Audit Office, 2024a). Beyond occupational shortages, the CIPD (2022) also reports that the skills employers find most lacking in applicants are technical skills followed by soft/employability skills such as problem solving, planning and organisation, and communication skills.

Recruitment difficulties are more pronounced in certain regions, particularly rural and coastal areas, where attracting skilled professionals is more difficult due to housing availability, connectivity, and social infrastructure (Owen, Li and Green, 2013). The limited labour pool in rural areas and lower skills mix can also create difficulty for public sector employers recruiting for specialist roles (North et al., 2004) while poor transport and longer travel times in rural areas increases the hidden costs for employees (Pragmatix, 2022). This is further exacerbated where local government cannot match pay to either market rates or the NHS, resulting in recruitment issues and staffing gaps. The rise in remote working post-pandemic has further had a direct impact on local authorities in rural areas which have been losing staff to higher paying private sector jobs that can be done remotely (PWC & CCN, 2024).

The impact of such shortages extends beyond recruitment. Skills shortages can have a detrimental impact on existing workers, with increased workloads leading to problems with morale and well-being in particular. Evidence from the Open University Business Barometer indicates that 78% of public-sector workers experience heavier workloads due to vacant posts compared to a UK average of 68%. But there are also additional organisational impacts, such as reduced activity or output, an inability to achieve organisational goals (The Open University, 2024) and disruption to services (LGA, 2023). For example, Solace reports that 33% of council chief executives and senior managers in England did not have enough skilled staff to run services to an acceptable standard (House of Lords Public Services Committee, 2022).

Reported shortages and problems filling vacancies could be due to the wage and working conditions being offered, workforce characteristics or the effectiveness of the recruitment process, rather than to the lack of suitable candidates among job seekers (Brunello and Wruuck, 2021). The CIPD (2022) reports that recruitment difficulties are higher in the public sector than

the private sector. Furthermore, more than half of hard-to-fill vacancies are due to skills shortage vacancies i.e. where employers cannot find applicants with the appropriate skills, and 45% due to labour shortages i.e. where there is an insufficient number of applicants for the role.

Research in the US points to the fact that recruitment into the public sector is problematic because the labour pool willing to work in the sector is shrinking due to changes in the preferences of job seekers (Collins, 2008). There is a suggestion that job seekers self-select into the public sector because of intrinsic rewards such altruism and the value of public service as well as motivations such as job security (Rainey and Bozeman, 2000) but that the number preferring to work for government is decreasing over time (Lewis and Frank, 2002). Indeed, while job security was previously seen as a benefit within local government, recent financial uncertainty within the sector has reduced trust in them as a secure employer. Traditionally, lower pay in the sector was seen as a trade-off for job security but this is no longer the case, with the workforce more willing to go 'where the money is' (APSE, 2021).

Economic cycles intensify the recruitment problem; when the labour market is tight, as it has been post-Covid, employers may be forced to adjust their hiring standards downward to cope with difficulties in recruiting skilled labour, which increases the incidence of under-skilling and of lower quality matches. Meanwhile job seekers may be less willing to accept less desirable jobs due to the competition for labour (Brunello and Wruuck, 2021). Private sector competition intensifies these issues for the public sector with the ability to offer higher salaries and flexible packages. In fact, to address recruitment shortages Councils have responded by relying more heavily on underqualified staff and agency workers which increases costs, and reduces institutional knowledge (APSE, 2021). For example, some Councils' payments to recruitment and employment agencies have increased by sevenfold over the last five years, with much of this spend on social care staff (Watterson, K, 2025). In NI an Audit Office report also highlights that Councils spent £38m on agency staff in 2022-23. This represented 9% of staff costs, although across Councils the spend on agency staff ranged from 0% to 29%, with two Councils – Mid and East Antrim and Causeway Coast and Glens – both spending over 20% on agency staff in 2022-23 and consistently spending more than 14% since 2016-17 (NI Audit Office, 2024a). Many Councils have also attempted to introduce new schemes to improve recruitment, but around one third of Councils report that their corporate position is that they are not permitted to vary existing recruitment processes (APSE, 2021).

Addressing Skills Shortages Case Study 1: Poaching and skills shortages in food inspection were problems in local authorities in the East Midlands. In 2007 a higher-level certificate in food premises inspections was developed with Nottingham Trent University to increase opportunities for local people to gain a qualification directly relevant to the job and career opportunities with local employers (Kelly, K. 2008).

Addressing Skills Shortages Case Study 2: London borough councils faced a shortage of qualified food safety officers, with vacancy rates varying from 19-53%, which affected their ability to meet performance targets. Recruitment events were unsuccessful, and the Association of London Environmental Health Managers and London Chartered Institute of Environmental Health recognised that a strategy was required to tackle the recruitment problem in London and create career pathways for existing staff. A traineeship programme has now been created as part of that strategy. Recruitment is undertaken locally and individuals with a background in the catering industry are particularly encouraged to apply because of their experience with food. Existing employees can also apply to increase their skills and provide themselves with opportunities for career progression (Kelly, K. 2008).

2.3 Skills Gaps

Skills gaps arise in an organisation due to internal under-preparedness: employees have roles filled but lack competencies to perform effectively especially in new, technical, or interdisciplinary functions. Skills gaps exacerbate recruitment issues by increasing pressure on other staff to upskill or overperform. This can lead to overwork and burnout, and exacerbate staff turnover and retention issues (House of Lords Public Services Committee, 2022). Combined with limited training and development, it can also lead to dependence on short-term external hires, which weakens internal learning and makes roles less attractive due to insufficient internal support structures.

Evidence from the 2022 Employers Skill Survey (IFF Research, 2023) shows a higher incidence of skills gaps in the public administration sector with 21% reporting employees lack of skills proficiency compared to a UK average of 15%. The LGA Workforce Survey (LGA, 2022) found 90% of Councils reported at least one capability skills gap among its managers or management teams,

and 83% a capacity gap¹. Almost three fifths of Councils reported a managerial capability skills gap in managing change, people management, and supporting commerciality, with 57% also citing gaps in understanding equalities and diversity, and supporting digitalisation. Around half cited skill gaps in managing organisational performance and assessing environmental impact. More generally in the public sector there is also thought to a lack of leadership development training, resulting in public service workers not being effectively prepared when taking on leadership positions nor able to access relevant training once in the role (House of Lords Public Services Committee, 2022).

Meanwhile a report released by the County Councils' Network shows that workforce capacity is 'one of biggest challenges' facing local government in England which has been made worse by over a decade of funding challenges and has been exacerbated in recent years by post pandemic trends including increased demand for services (PWC & CCN, 2024). Furthermore, skill shortages and skill gaps can lead to higher staff turnover due to the workload pressure on existing staff. Given the extent of both issues within local government, staff retention is therefore also a challenge. Amongst Councils in England, retention of children's social workers (80%) and adult social workers (61%) are most problematic (LGA, 2025a).

The skills gaps in Councils vary by function. LGA evidence (LGA, 2018) emphasises that Councils' main skills gaps with regards to technology and digital tools are commercialisation, digital transformation, and change/performance management. While a 2022 CEDOS review, specifically focusing on local economic development services in local Councils, found them lacking in specialist capabilities, including evaluation, data analytics, innovation, energy/green transition, and commercial skills. These roles require interdisciplinary proficiency and an ability to manage evolving policies such as net-zero initiatives (CEDOS, 2022). A survey focusing on planning departments reports that 97% have planning skills gaps with more than half saying the size of the gap had increased in the past year. The planning skills gaps that were most commonly reported were in ecology and biodiversity (72%), masterplanning and design codes (63%), and urban design and architecture (54%). Almost 90% of those with planning skills gaps also reported gaps in broader skills beyond planning, with digital skills being the biggest gap (51%), followed by assessing environmental impact (44%). Persistent gaps were noted in project management,

¹ Capability gap is defined as 'the council has managers but they require additional training and development/support to close the skills gap'. Capacity gap is defined as 'the council has managers with these skills but they have no capacity to utilise them effectively'.

performance management, ICT skills, and corporate awareness required for planning functions (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2025).

Recent technological developments have also widened skills gaps as current employees lack the skills needed to meet evolving demands. This is particularly the case in digital literacy where, as the use of digital tools increase in public services, staff need to be able to use them and understand where they can be used (House of Lords Public Services Committee, 2022). Although over three quarters of workers believe that technology and automation will have a positive impact on their local government career, constrained funding means there are limited finances to identify and develop the type of skills needed (CCN and PWC, 2024). Indeed, a recent survey showed that only 58% of public service staff met the baseline for digital skills (Lloyds Bank, 2021) while a recent APSE survey (APSE, 2021) also highlights that just over a third of local government respondents felt they did not have the climate change and green skills to meet future service needs, with just 21% stating that they did.

There are a number of ways organisations can address recruitment challenges, and skills shortages and gaps; the CIPD (2022) separates them into those who take a strategic approach and those who do not. Those taking a strategic approach are said to invest in upskilling staff; tap into underutilised pools of labour for recruitment; build their talent pipeline via work placements, hire apprentices and graduates; and invest in labour saving technology. The lack of funding in the public sector for training, and an ambivalence in terms of its value or need is, however, a challenge. Another cultural obstacle to accessing training is the concern that high staff turnover discourages service providers from investing in employee development (House of Lords Public Services Committee, 2022).

‘Grow your own’ schemes are one method of building the talent pipeline whereby Councils identify and train existing employees to support their career progression. According to the LGA (2025a) 90% of Councils have at least one of these schemes, with planning (67%), finance (49%), legal (46%) and environmental health (46%) the most common occupational schemes. Apprenticeship schemes have also been used as solutions to workforce shortages, particularly in terms of attracting wider groups, though uptake and outcomes remain mixed with a recent decline in their use (Foster and Williams, 2023). APSE (2018) report that around 46% of local authorities have had apprenticeship schemes in place for over ten years. They are also being used to upskill existing staff in project management and leadership and management, with around 60% predicting an increase in the number of existing staff that will undertake an apprenticeship in the next three years and half predicting that the number of managers undertaking them will

increase. They are said to also help widen the talent pool available to the public sector with greater uptake from communities who may not be able to access such careers through more traditional academic routes (House of Lords Public Services Committee, 2022).

CCN also reports an increasing trend towards a skills-first approach to hiring and people management to address recruitment and skills challenges, with organisations advertising a core set of skills rather a job profile. But in order for this, and the other strategic methods to work, robust workforce planning must be in place to identify the skills and capabilities required (CCN & PWC, 2024). Other survey evidence, however, shows that most organisations lack skills development plans with just 20% of public sector organisations having a written skills plan for 2024 and a similar share stating that their skill needs are changing too rapidly to have a plan (The Open University, 2024). In NI the lack of workforce data was also highlighted as an issue in terms of adequately gauging workforce capacity and capability, with the need for better quality management information seen as crucial for effective workforce planning (NI Audit Office, 2024a).

Addressing Skills Gaps Case Study 1: Buckinghamshire Council's Talent Academy is a central component of their workforce strategy. It co-ordinates career pathways, training programmes, apprenticeship schemes, and succession planning across the organisation. It was founded to strengthen internal capability, promoting structured development from entry-level roles through leadership trajectories, aiming to fill critical skills gaps and retain internal talent through a 'grow your own' approach. The Academy approach addresses technical gaps, helps build a leadership pipeline, reduces recruitment dependence and supports retention and progression (Buckinghamshire Council, 2024; PWC & CCN, 2024).

2.4 Recruitment Challenges: Workforce Demographics

One of the most consistent themes in the literature is the ageing workforce in local government which has major implications for the long term, particularly in the UK due to the already reduced headcount and increased service demands – which in itself will only increase due to the ageing population. According to the Local Government Association (LGA, 2025b), over two thirds of council staff in England are aged 40-64 and a further 4% are aged 65+, with less than 5% under the age of 25. The ageing workforce is seen to be the main risk in terms of recruiting and retaining

staff, with 86% of UK Councils believing it to be a high to medium risk, which is above the 80% citing low pay as the main risk (APSE, 2021).

The ageing workforce is not just an issue for the UK and its challenges are well recognised. For example, findings from Australia show how historical policy decisions significantly contributed to the age profile imbalance. Colley (2011) documents how the abolition of youth-focused recruitment schemes in the 1970s-1980s shifted hiring toward older, qualified candidates, reducing junior entrants. As a result of these dynamics the risk was a sharp loss of institutional knowledge and leadership capacity, especially where succession planning was weak or informal. Likewise in the Republic of Ireland the ageing workforce in local authorities is said to be a function of recruitment freezes post the 2008 financial crash. As a result, around one third of staff were likely to retire in the following decade. Again, the loss of corporate knowledge was highlighted as a resulting challenge (Boyle and O'Riordan, 2013).

Workforce ageing also features prominently in terms of why employees leave council jobs, with more than one third stating retirement, early retirement and redundancy as the main reason, second only to higher pay being offered in other sectors (APSE, 2021). The same survey also reports that the ageing workforce profile may also be related to the issue of pockets of poor physical ill-health amongst employees, as highlighted by two-thirds of Councils.

The low share of young employees in the local government workforce is further compounded by the fact that 28% of those aged 18-34 anticipate working in local government for up to four years only (PWC & CCN, 2024). Providing more reasons for young people to stay in the sector is therefore critical but the nature of council workforce structures can make this problematic. Career progressions are typically viewed vertically and while flattened organisational structures increase the span of responsibility for many managers it reduces the opportunities for promotion for those lower down the organisation. It has been suggested that this has created a less favourable impression among younger people about career progression opportunities in local government. When added to the difficulties in getting a first post, it is thought to be unsurprising that other sectors become more attractive propositions (Kelly, 2008).

Notably, however, young people are thought to have differing attitudes to work and careers than other generations. Henstra and McGowan (2016) identify strong "public service motivation" among millennials, driven by civic duty and compassion, but factors such as flexible contracts, autonomy, healthy work-life balance and rapid career progression remain important for attracting and retaining such workers. Motivational differences are also pronounced, with 64% of young workers prioritising meaningful work over salary, while 65% expect employers to view skills

development as crucial to employees' well-being (Grayce, 2024). Indeed, young people aged 18-34 were more likely than older people to agree that the values and culture experienced whilst working in local government align with their personal values. It is therefore thought that local government has the potential to offer Gen Z the type of mission-led work that they seek but that the sector has not fully harnessed this (PWC & CCN, 2024) while wider needs are also often unmet in the public sector. Furthermore, 44% said they would avoid a career in the sector due to concerns about funding cuts (Grayce, 2024). Gen Z perceptions of government work as "bureaucratic" and "unresponsive" also deters applications, with young people seeking dynamic and innovative working environments. In the US just 18% of young people expressed an interest in local government careers and only 38% stated that they knew how to get a job in local government (Kosek, 2022).

Addressing Workforce Demographics Case Study 1: *In 2002, as part of the government initiative to build capacity and modernise the sector, the first National Graduate Development Programme (NGDP) for local government was set up. This has now been rebranded as Impact but remains the same. It is a two-year graduate development programme with graduates completing a minimum of three placements across different services, they also undertake a learning and development offer. It gives councils the opportunity to build capacity and to nurture and develop their own talent, while providing an opportunity for talented graduates to fast track their local government career. As a Times Top 100 graduate employer, it attracted over 4,500 applications in 2024 (LGA (n.d.).*

2.5 Recruitment Challenges: Attracting a Diverse Workforce

Equity deficiencies persist throughout hiring systems and despite efforts to promote inclusion, ethnic minorities, disabled people, and women remain under-represented in many local authorities, while exclusion is increased when there is intersectional diversity. Ethnic minorities face severe under-representation, comprising just 3.7% of senior roles despite accounting for 13% of the working-age population. Women are also under-represented holding just 39% of senior roles which also reflects issues in promotional pathways (Green Park, 2019). Indeed, in England many Councils report zero Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) representation in the top 5% of earners, and disabled representation in that cohort is also often 0% (LGA, 2025a).

The workforce a Council can attract is shaped by the local population. In areas such as NI, which is less diverse, “like-for-like” representation is harder and requires sustained work to avoid persistent under-representation, and diversity and succession risks. But marginalisation in recruitment and promotion processes can be systemic in an organisation and result from a range of factors: negative perceptions about the skills of certain groups; the requirement for formal qualifications and previous board experience; and use of professional language or jargon in recruitment processes (Equality Commission NI, 2018). Furthermore, practical recruitment barriers such as lack of accessible buildings, interview formats, rigid criteria like “must drive” and slow adjustments can screen out disabled applicants.

Data collection on various under-represented groups is also irregular resulting in critical information gaps which limits evidence-based interventions (Solace 2023). The Solace review found that while publication is improving, data completeness and comparability vary widely; ethnicity pay data is still rarely published and is not mandated in Great Britain as yet which makes it harder to target interventions and track progress.

The Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED) requires GB Councils to consider equality in decision-making, and Wales adds specific duties (such as publishing workforce and pay information annually), which supports more systematic data than in many English districts (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2022). Similarly, Section 75 of the NI Act 1998 places statutory equality duties on public authorities (including Councils) across nine categories (e.g., religious belief, political opinion, racial group, disability, sex, age, dependants, marital status, sexual orientation). Fair Employment Legislation also means that recruitment processes must satisfy community-background and sex monitoring (Equality Commission, n.d.), but gaps remain. For example, there's no routine requirement for NI district Councils to publish workforce ethnicity data, making it harder to benchmark or target actions on ethnic diversity (Solace, 2023). An understanding of under-represented groups is said to be crucial to attracting them to the public sector workforce as well as knowing “where to look” for such candidates, and personalising recruitment to them (House of Lords Public Services Committee, 2022).

Nevertheless, Councils with inclusive recruitment strategies, such as anonymous shortlisting, flexible working, and community outreach have seen improvements in representation. Hackney Council embedded diversity and equality into communications strategies to build trust and connection with a diverse community. Initiatives included blind applications, revised role descriptions, and creative use of social media and tailored external organisations to promote roles more widely (LGA, 2019). Coventry's anonymous recruitment system, which removed

names and other personal details from applications to improve diversity in its recruitment process, resulted in a 117% increase in the number of BAME candidates (Armstrong, 2021).

Addressing Workforce Diversity Case Study 1: Since 2020, Hillingdon Council has hosted Project SEARCH, a supported internship programme for around twelve young people with learning disabilities or autism each academic year. Interns complete three ten-week work placements within the council, guided by qualified job coaches, enabling them to develop transferable skills, gain practical work experience, and take their first steps into employment. The programme also challenges misconceptions by showcasing the strengths, and abilities of young people with special educational needs and disabilities to council staff. Since its launch, Project SEARCH has contributed to a positive cultural shift within the local authority, with many graduates securing roles in departments across the council. For those who require additional help to sustain employment, ongoing support is provided by an embedded support worker, funded through the Access to Work scheme (LGA, 2023c).

The programme also breaks down misconceptions and demonstrates to our staff the enthusiasm, strengths and abilities of young people with special educational needs and disabilities.

2.6 Recruitment Challenges: Pay and Conditions

Local government salaries often lag behind equivalent roles in the private sector and central government (APSE, 2021). This is particularly problematic in high-cost areas where public sector salaries do not reflect local living costs and in rural areas where geography has a greater impact on the labour market (PWC & CCN, 2024). Pay gaps between the public sector for professionally qualified jobs in areas such as accountancy, law and planning mean fierce competition with the private sector, leading to recruitment difficulties where pay does not compete with the higher salaries offered elsewhere (APSE, 2021).

Competition is not limited to the private sector, however, with evidence showing that when Councils pay more for the same job type or grade, staff do move, often to neighbouring or higher-paying authorities, and pay is frequently the top reason given for leaving. Most Council staff in England, Wales and NI, are on the National Joint Council (NJC) for Local Government Services. The NJC sets a national spine of pay points; each council builds local grades from that

spine and can add local allowances. In the most recent government survey of local authority planning capacity, two-thirds (66%) of planning departments said staff had left to work for a different local authority, compared with almost half (47%) reporting staff going to the private sector, and the most common reason cited was “better pay and conditions” (58%) (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2025). A similar finding was reported for social workers in English local authorities with a national unified approach seen to be the only way to prevent issues around poaching and bidding wars amongst Councils which currently enables agency social workers to “go elsewhere because other local authorities pay more” (Department for Education, 2023). Regional pay protocols/price caps and “cool-off” rules have been adopted to dampen such pay-led movement and stabilise teams (Department for Education, 2024).

Bach & Bordogna (2011) also argue that pay restraint in the public sector, particularly post-austerity, has further undermined its competitiveness in the labour market with real-terms wage stagnation, particularly in specialist positions (Blanchflower & Bryson, 2010). Evidence from the Unite union indicates that local authority staff have seen their pay devalued by an average of 25% since 2010, with 63% stating they are financially worse off over the previous 12 months and 56% who said they were considering leaving their role to find work in other sectors (Unite, 2025). Meanwhile around 40% of Councils report that retention of staff became a particular issue post-pandemic, especially in lower paying jobs, with staff taking a different outlook on life and in some cases opting for early retirement (APSE, 2021). Meanwhile due to the recent tight labour market in the UK, prospective employees are said to be drawn to better paid and less demanding roles in retail, hospitality or administrative work (Unite, 2025).

In order to address the disparity with private sector pay the majority of Councils in England provide market supplements (LGA, 2025a). These are typically provided to the occupations facing the greatest shortages such as social workers, planning officers, and legal and engineering professionals. In terms of other benefits, after pay, local government pension, flexible working hours and opportunities for hybrid/remote working were cited by employees as the most important rated employment benefits. Notably, for younger employees (aged 18-34), flexible hours and remote working featured as more important than the pension, whereas the opposite was the case for older workers (CCN and PWC, 2024). While public sector pensions are seen as generally appealing in attracting employees, there is also concern that they are inflexible and difficulties with transferring them can act as a barrier to those who might otherwise move into the sector (House of Lords Public Services Committee, 2022).

The ability to offer enhanced pay in local government is restricted due to financial constraints, while there is also difficulty in offering “golden hellos” that some companies can offer (House of Lords Public Services Commission, 2022). Performance-related pay in the sector is also rare. A study of UK public employment found that only 7% of public-sector staff receive performance-related pay compared to 27% in the private sector (Bryson, Forth & Stokes, 2017). Pay is also a factor in terms of employee retention. When asked what would encourage them to stay in local government, pay was the biggest factor for all employees with 55% stating that improved pay would motivate them to continue their career, more than double the share (22%) that stated flexible/hybrid working (PWC & CCN. 2024). Despite this, evidence from the CIPD (2024) shows that public sector organisations were less likely to improve pay and benefits to improve their employer brand, and more likely to promote their values. Offering better pay or benefits to address recruitment difficulties was also less likely in the public sector (27%) compared to the private sector (46%).

Flexible working which encompasses remote/hybrid working, job shares and flexible hours is suggested as a significant benefit that could be offered within the public sector to compete with the private sector. It is also thought to widen the talent pool by appealing particularly to women and disabled workers, while flexible retirement may also help with the ageing workforce allowing those approaching retirement to work part-time (House of Lords Public Services Committee, 2022).

Along with pay, the long-term effects of austerity, including workforce reductions and service cuts, have eroded the appeal of local government careers. Staff shortages have led to increased workloads, further reducing job satisfaction and retention, with 41% of council workers saying they regularly worked beyond their contracted hours and 51% reporting feeling regularly stressed (Unite, 2025). The Institute for Government (2022) highlights how a decade of fiscal restraint has damaged morale and perceptions of local government as a stable employer. Indeed, while 56% of local government employees said they were proud to work in local government, and 73% said they would recommend working in local government to their friends and family, almost two thirds (64%) said that they believed local government was not perceived as an attractive employer to those outside the sector (PWC & CCN, 2024).

Addressing Pay and Conditions Challenges Case Study 1: *South Cambridgeshire District Council pioneered a 15-month trial of a 32-hour full-pay, four-day work week, aimed at tackling chronic recruitment, retention, and morale challenges. The results were that staff turnover fell by 39%; the council received 53% more applications for roles advertised externally and they recruited 134 more staff, including in some of the hard to fill roles such as drivers and planners. The initiative saved the council £371,500 annually by reducing reliance on agency staff and reduced turnover of staff (Smith, 2024).*

2.7 Recruitment Challenges: Recruitment Processes

The time taken to recruit staff is a key indicator of the efficiency of an organisation's recruitment process. The public sector often faces criticism for slow, inflexible recruitment processes due to procedural constraints in public personnel systems, the political and bureaucratic environment, and excessive formalisation (Sievert, Vogel and Feeney, 2022). As an example, civil service recruitment takes an average of 99 days from advertising the job to completing basic pre-employment checks. For candidates requiring the highest level of security clearance, it can take an additional 171 days on average (House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts, 2024). Rainey & Bozeman (2000) discuss the "red tape" effect, where excessive procedural requirements discourage dynamic recruitment strategies. Indeed, these bureaucratic barriers can deter high-quality candidates accustomed to faster private-sector processes.

Application processes in the public sector are also often overly formal and contain procedural hurdles including requirements for submitting extensive and costly documents. Research shows that public job advertisements written in legal or technical language can reduce applications by up to 25.15%, even among people with high motivation to work in the public sector (Sievert, Vogel and Feeney, 2022). The authors suggest that a high degree of formalisation in an advertisement can signal that bureaucracy will overshadow the job.

The CIPD (2022) also report that more than four fifths of public sector organisations look for specific qualifications when recruiting, particularly degree-level qualifications, but that this can reduce employment opportunities and contribute to ongoing skills gaps. It disadvantages applicants with relevant experience who do not have the relevant qualifications, which is more of a problem for older workers.

The public image of local government is another significant barrier. As previously outlined, it is often perceived as bureaucratic, underfunded, and lacking innovation, which affects its ability to attract younger, tech-savvy professionals. The Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA, 2024) stresses the need for improved public sector branding to break down some of the negative publicity and disillusionment towards the sector in order to enhance recruitment appeal, particularly in financial and digital roles. McMillan (2024) also highlights the importance of 'Employer Brand' for attracting and retaining talent. Factors influencing this at the council level include positive and negative experiences with the council as constituents, and news coverage. He states that Councils should differentiate their value proposition to potential employees and communicate shared values, particularly with younger workers, such as community impact, stability and job security, work-life balance and diverse opportunities.

Recruitment into the public sector is also thought to still rely on largely traditional methods, typically advertising on single sites thus limiting the talent pool. In order to reach young people, in particular, and boost their awareness of public services careers a multichannel approach is required, reflecting shifts in their media consumption (House of Lords Public Services Committee, 2022). Leveraging technology for online advertising and streamlining application processes is also said to be imperative for Councils to stay competitive (McMillan, 2024). Post-COVID, there is increasing use of digital platforms for recruitment. However, digital transformation in local authorities remains inconsistent. SOCITM (2023) reports that while some Councils have modernised their recruitment systems, many still rely on outdated HR technologies. Many Councils are now also centralising departmental recruitment and adopting modern applicant tracking systems enabling them to hire more efficiently (LGA, 2023b).

Addressing Recruitment Processes Case Study 1: Camden Council has established a local talent pool to recruit residents who possess both strong knowledge of their community and personal experience with council services. The council helps these individuals secure local public service roles, offering support such as CV writing. Where possible, job vacancies are first advertised to the talent pool before being opened to the wider public. It is suggested that initiatives like this could expand career entry opportunities for people with lived experience of using public services (House of Lords Public Services Committee, 2022).

Addressing Recruitment Processes Case Study 2: Dorset Council faced declining application numbers, particularly for hard-to-fill roles, which risked service delivery and increased staff workloads. In response, the council overhauled its recruitment strategy by appointing a dedicated employer brand lead, introducing inclusive and human-centred practices, producing authentic employee-led videos, and expanding outreach through social media platforms like TikTok and YouTube. They launched an Early Careers strategy, held career fairs, reduced reliance on external recruitment agencies, and implemented an advanced Applicant Tracking System to streamline hiring. These changes delivered significant results: a 400% increase in applications for hard-to-fill roles, a 62% reduction in recruitment advertising spend, a 26% faster time-to-hire, and approximately £50,000 in internal cost savings over six months. Internal recruitment also surged, with 77 roles filled in one quarter and improved success rates from trained hiring managers. The council's turnover of new starters dropped to 8%, reflecting stronger retention (LGA, 2023b).

2.8 Summary and Conclusion

This literature review summarises the main recruitment and retention issues as experienced by local government in the UK. Although largely focused on the experiences of Councils in England, due to a lack of data and research available for NI, the findings are highly relevant to NI, reflecting the commonality of recruitment issues across the public sector and internationally.

Skills shortages occur when employers cannot recruit people with the required skills at prevailing pay rates, leading to persistent vacancies. These shortages are particularly acute in the public

sector, affecting both specialist and front-line roles, such as STEM professionals, social workers, and planning officers. Skills gaps, by contrast, exist when current employees lack the competencies needed to perform effectively. Common gaps in local government include digital literacy, project management, environmental expertise, and leadership skills.

Recruitment challenges stem from multiple factors. Labour market pressures, such as competition from higher-paying private sector jobs, have intensified shortages in technical and professional roles. Regional disparities further exacerbate the problem, with rural and coastal areas facing issues related to housing, transport, and smaller talent pools. Changing worker preferences have reduced the appeal of public sector careers, with younger generations prioritising flexibility, meaningful work, and career progression over job security. Pay and conditions remain a key barrier, with salaries often below market rates and limited financial incentives available. In addition, slow and bureaucratic recruitment processes, high qualification requirements, and weak employer branding deter potential applicants.

Workforce demographics add further pressure. Local government has an ageing workforce, with over two-thirds of employees aged 40–64 and fewer than 5% under 25. This creates risks for succession planning and the retention of institutional knowledge. Younger workers, while motivated by purpose and public service values, are often discouraged by perceived bureaucracy, limited advancement opportunities, and funding uncertainty. Under-representation of ethnic minorities, women, and disabled people, particularly in senior positions, remains a persistent challenge.

The consequences of shortages and gaps are significant. Staff face increased workloads, leading to declining morale and well-being. Service delivery suffers, and organisations become more dependent on agency staff, increasing costs and eroding institutional knowledge.

Some Councils have adopted strategic responses. These include upskilling existing staff, expanding apprenticeships, running “grow your own” talent schemes, targeting under-utilised labour pools, and adopting a skills-first approach to recruitment. Modernising recruitment through simplified processes, multi-channel outreach, and improved employer branding can help attract new talent. Inclusive recruitment strategies, such as anonymous shortlisting, diversity targets, and community engagement, have improved representation and strengthened workforce resilience in some areas.

In conclusion, the public sector, particularly local government, faces deeply interconnected challenges of skills shortages and skills gaps, driven by structural, demographic, and market

pressures. While shortages are often the result of external competition and pay disparities, gaps tend to reflect underinvestment in training, limited leadership development, and insufficient workforce planning. These challenges are compounded by an ageing workforce, outdated recruitment systems, and persistent negative perceptions of public sector work. To remain competitive, Councils must modernise hiring practices, strengthen their employer brand, and invest in robust workforce strategies that prioritise skills development, flexible working, and inclusive recruitment. Building strong internal talent pipelines and promoting clear career progression pathways will be essential to sustaining service delivery, retaining institutional knowledge, and attracting the next generation of public service professionals. Without decisive action, both workforce sustainability and the quality of local services will remain at risk.

3 Recruitment and Retention Survey Analysis

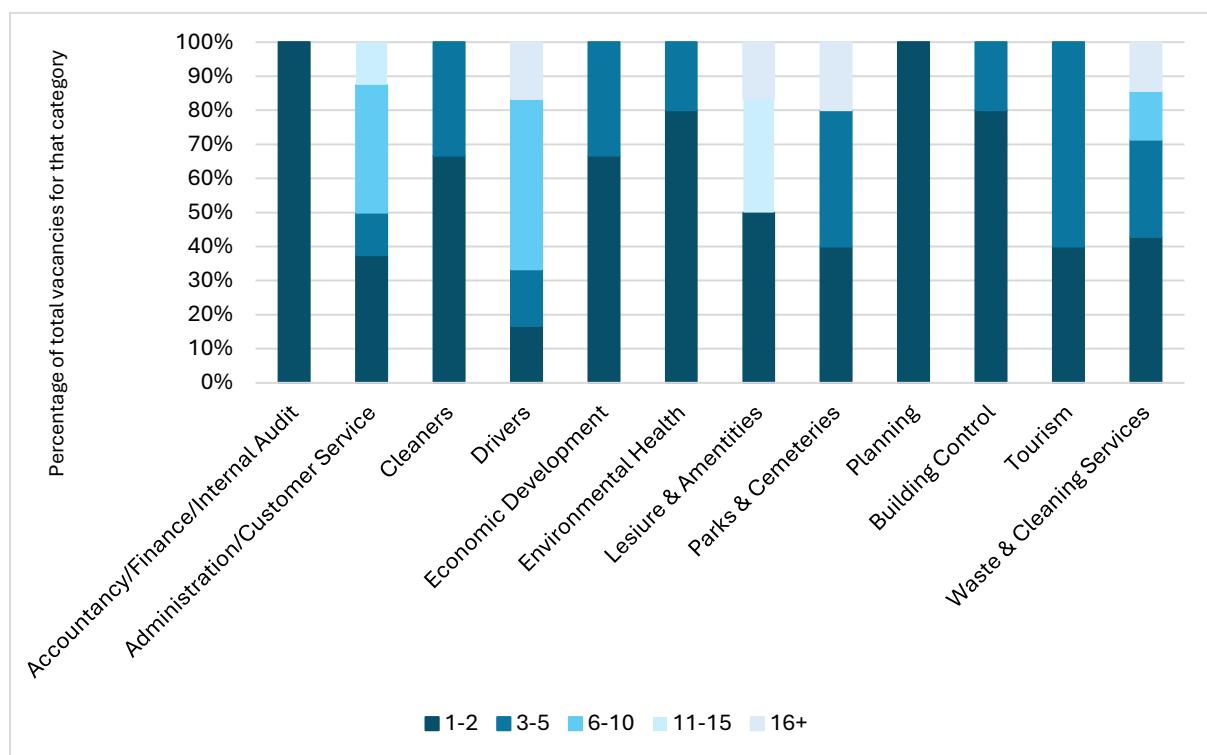
3.1 Introduction

Due to the limited availability of NI specific evidence on recruitment and retention within Local Government, a primary data collection exercise was required to inform this analysis. While existing literature and published case studies provide partial insight, they do not offer sufficient detail on current practices, experiences, or perceptions within the local workforce. A survey was therefore undertaken to address this evidence gap, enabling the capture of quantitative and qualitative data directly from Human Resource (HR) respondents within the Councils. The survey questions were informed by findings from the literature review and the survey itself was undertaken over an 8-week period from Oct-Dec 2025. There was a 91% response rate to the survey. This was supplemented by consultations with three of the Councils to extract and explore some of the issues. Between the survey and consultations there was 100% coverage of all Councils in NI. The results presented below summarise the key findings of the survey analysis and consultations and provide an empirical basis for the conclusions and recommendations that follow.

3.2 Recruitment Challenges

All respondents to the survey indicated that they currently have vacancies however the distribution of vacancies varies across various council job roles. Around half of respondents had vacancies in administrative and professional roles such as Accountancy/Finance, Customer Service, Communications, Community Planning, Digital/IT and Planning but these were typically 1-2 vacancies per Council (see Figure 3.1). Operational and frontline roles, including Drivers, Technical/Plant, Leisure & Amenities, and Waste & Cleaning Services, tended to have higher vacancy ranges, with Leisure & Amenities in particular reaching 11–15 in a few Councils and more than 16 in one. With the exception of Drivers and Parks and Amenities, very few other roles exceeded 16 vacancies indicating that extreme staffing shortages are uncommon although do obviously present in some areas. Other vacancies, not listed, were in Procurement, Project Management and Democratic Services although again, small in number terms. Overall, the data suggests that while administrative roles generally have manageable vacancy levels, operational services face greater staffing pressures.

Figure 3.1: Top vacancies across councils and extent of vacant roles

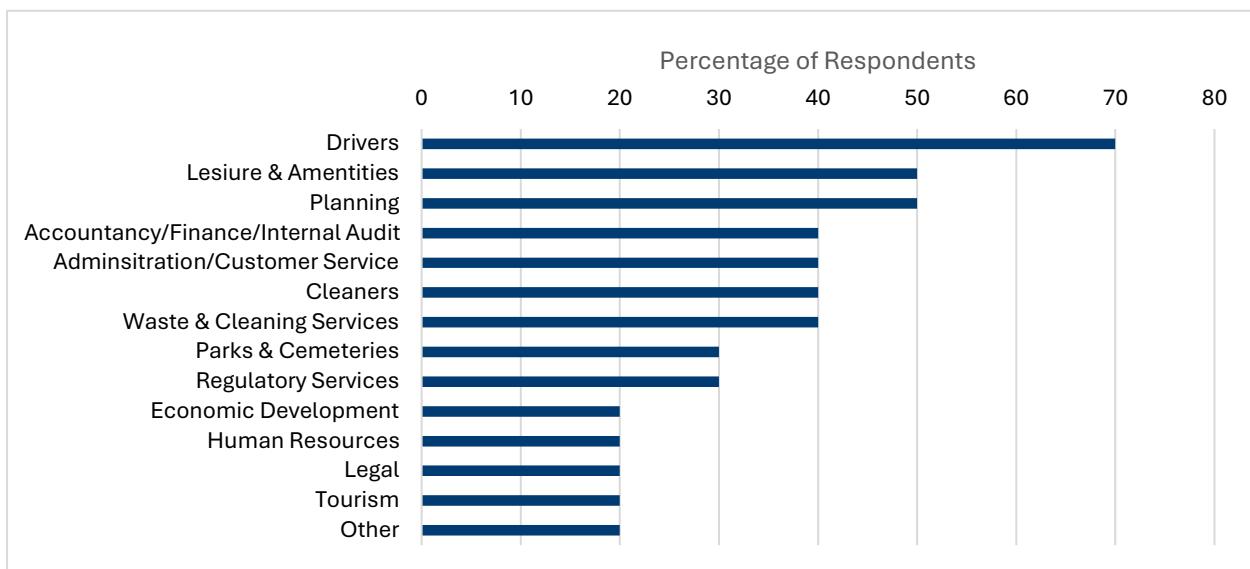


Note: Due to space limitations, vacancies are only shown for those roles whereby 50% or more respondents indicated they have vacancies in these roles.

Source: UUEPC Recruitment and Retention Survey

Recruitment difficulties appear to be systemic, with all respondents indicating they had difficulties in the previous 12 months. Figure 3.2 shows the most intense shortages were for Drivers, with 70% of respondents experiencing difficulties recruiting. Leisure and Amenities, as well as Planning, followed closely behind with half of respondents citing recruitment issues in these roles. A broad range of areas, including Finance, Administration, Cleaners and Waste Services each attracted 40% of responses, suggesting that recruitment strains are impacting both professional and labour-intensive occupations.

Figure 3.2: Difficulties in recruitment in past 12 months

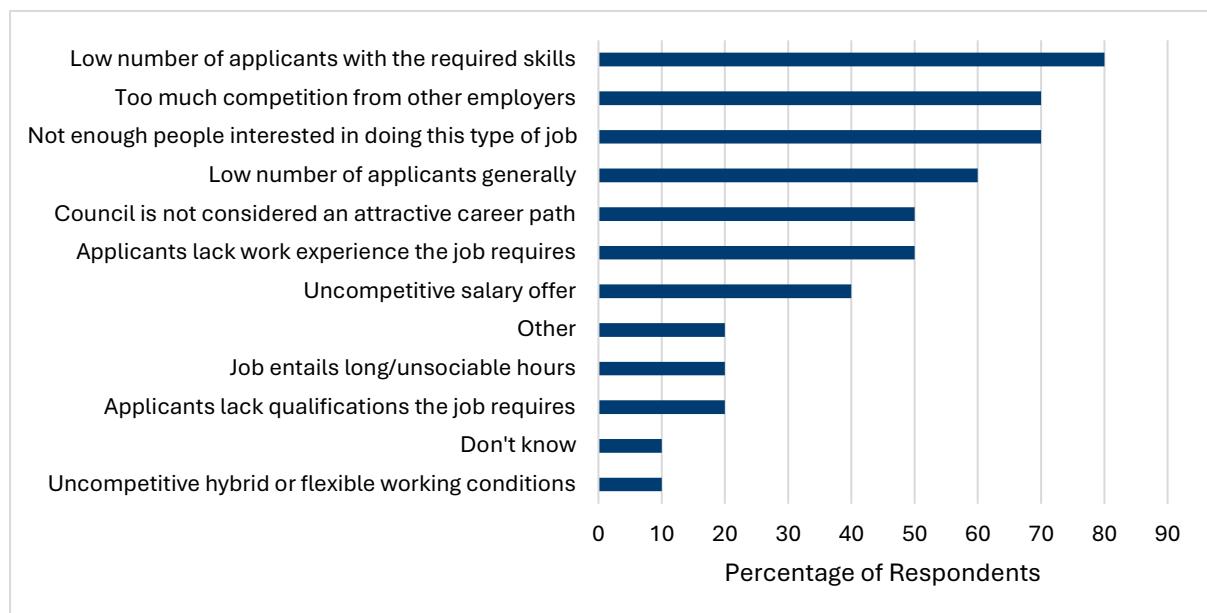


Source: UUEPC Recruitment and Retention Survey

Drivers again ranked top when respondents were asked to identify the *most* difficult role to recruit for, followed by Accountancy, Finance and Audit, and Environmental and Regulatory Services. Assessing the impact of this on the council, half of respondents indicated that the most difficult to recruit for role had a moderate impact, although 40% indicated a severe or extremely severe impact. The role second most difficult to recruit for also had a varied impact, again 40% indicated it would be severe/extremely severe but the remainder suggested a low/moderate impact.

Respondents did identify several factors driving recruitment difficulties (Figure 3.3), with the most common relating to applicant capability and wider labour market pressures. Four fifths identified a low number of applicants with the necessary skills, and 70% equally reported limited interest in the job, and strong competition from other employers. A general shortage of applicants was identified by 60% while half said applicants lack relevant work experience and the same share said that local government is not viewed as an attractive career path. Overall, the data shows that Councils face a constrained talent pool and significant competition from other sectors, which together limit their ability to attract suitable candidates.

Figure 3.3: Reasons for hard-to-fill vacancies



Source: UUEPC Recruitment and Retention Survey

Despite having recruitment difficulties, some of which cause significant impact, none of the respondents reported that they follow up with applicants for feedback after their hiring process. The data (survey and consultations) suggests that the Councils are perhaps missing a key opportunity to understand applicant's experiences. The qualitative feedback indicates that, although many candidates initiate applications, a sometime significant proportion do not finish them, as the process is time-consuming and often perceived as disproportionate to the role itself. The lack of follow-up reduces the ability to address issues that may make the process more effective or more appealing to candidates.

“Our process for applying for some roles is quite cumbersome... challenging for some people and then maybe just giving up.”

Figure 3.4 shows that most widespread impact of hard-to-fill vacancies was difficulties in meeting workload demands, reported by all respondents. Linked to this, increased workload for other staff and low staff morale and satisfaction were also common, cited by 90% and 70% of respondents respectively. Unlike the situation in GB, as highlighted by the literature review, reliance on agency staff and the outsourcing of work to consultants, was less common, featured in just 10% of responses. Overall, the findings point to recruitment difficulties causing operational strain, affecting service delivery, staff well-being, and to some extent, the ability to drive improvement across Councils.

Figure 3.4: Issues as a result of hard-to-fill vacancies



Source: UUEPC Recruitment and Retention Survey

Consultation Evidence: The consultation evidence strongly reinforces the survey findings that recruitment difficulties are systemic. They confirmed that although there are challenges with some recruitment processes there is also concern about a constrained pool of suitably skilled applicants. Senior and specialist campaigns attract interest but can fail to result in appointment due to candidates not meeting role requirements. This is compounded by the sector's limited flexibility once staff are appointed, increasing risk aversion and reinforcing cautious recruitment decisions.

Consultations also qualified the acute difficulties identified in roles such as Drivers, Planning, Environmental Health, Digital/ICT, and Leisure services. For frontline and leisure roles, high turnover, often linked to student demographics and short-term employment preferences, creates persistent recruitment churn. For specialist and digital roles, competition from the private sector, faster hiring timelines elsewhere, and expectations around pay and progression limit Councils' attractiveness.

Importantly, consultation feedback clarifies that application drop-off, rather than initial interest, is a significant barrier. It was reported that many candidates begin applications but do not complete them, citing lengthy forms, rigid competency frameworks, and perceived disproportionate effort relative to role seniority. Given the survey finding that Councils do not routinely follow up with applicants it suggests that valuable insight is being lost at an early stage of the recruitment funnel.

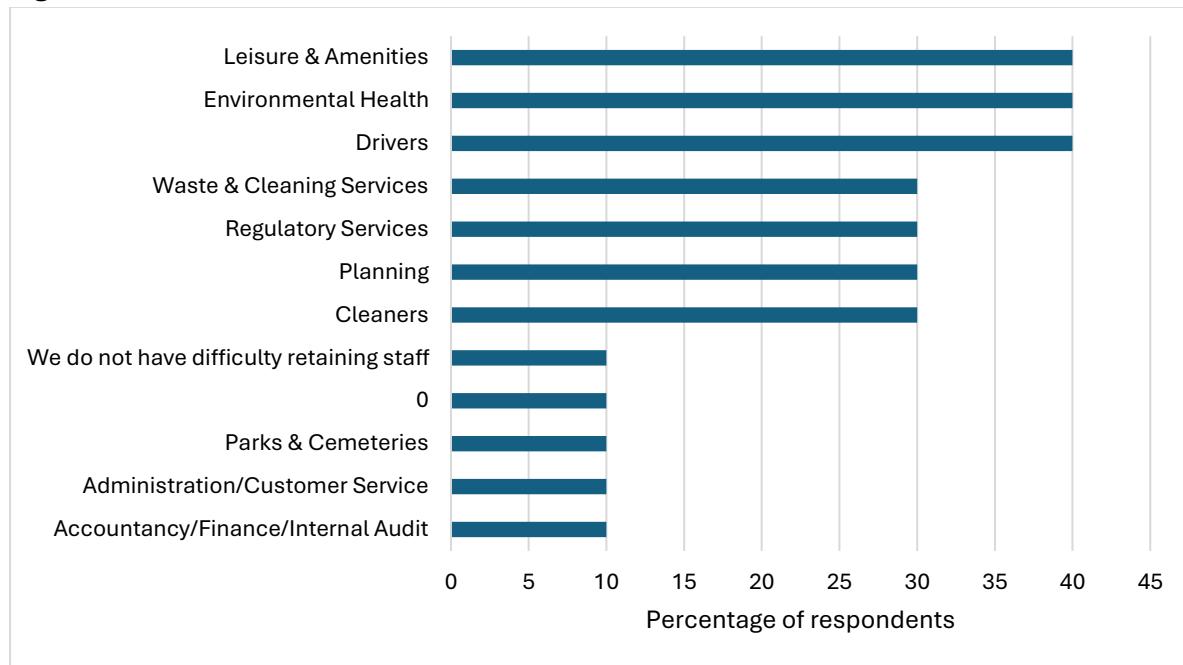
3.3 Retention Issues

Similar to recruitment challenges, although at a much lower scale, Figure 3.5 shows the most acute retention challenges were in Leisure & Amenities, Environmental Health, and Driver roles, with around 40% of Councils reporting difficulties. Just under one third also had retention issues with Cleaners, Planning, Regulatory Services, and Waste and Cleaning Services. In contrast, there were no reported difficulties in retaining staff in Legal, Human Resources, Economic Development, and Digital/IT/Performance. In fact, 10% of Councils reported no difficulties at all in retaining staff.

“We don’t have a high turnover, once people join, they tend to stay.”

The results highlight that retention is less of an issue than recruitment, and while it varies across Councils, retention pressures are concentrated in frontline and operational roles, while professional and technical categories appear more stable. Indeed, the qualitative responses further emphasised the high turnover of both leisure staff and for some manual roles, the former largely due to the student demographic within leisure roles and the latter due to the aging workforce profile.

Figure 3.5: Difficulties with staff retention



Source: UUEPC Recruitment and Retention Survey

Although not widespread across all roles, the survey results indicate that staff retention challenges are still felt across Councils with 56% reporting “some significant impact” and a further 22% citing a “very significant impact” on the Council’s ability to fulfil services or business

needs. Only a small minority indicated little or no effect. The qualitative responses in terms of the impact were largely related to workload and the resulting impact on other staff particularly in terms of necessity to work overtime and cover other duties.

“Increasing workload and pressure across the board – departmentally with added workload to colleagues, added pressure on management to resolve, and added focus on HR for recruitment”.

The results suggest that while retention issues are not crippling service delivery, they are impacting day to day performance particularly in terms of efficiency and staff resilience, and well-being.

Consultation Evidence: Consultation findings again concur with those of the survey, showing retention challenges to be less widespread than recruitment difficulties. Leaders consistently described low overall staff turnover (typically 1–2%), reinforcing the survey findings that councils retain staff relatively well. However, the consultations highlight that this can bring secondary challenges, including ageing workforce profiles, and frustration among high performers who perceive limited recognition or reward for additional responsibilities.

The consultations also emphasised the challenges of sickness absence, which survey respondents linked to operational impact. Leaders across Councils attributed absence pressures in part to generous sickness policies rather than recruitment or skills gaps, although internal staffing conflicts and general mental health issues were also identified as contributing factors. While sickness policies are valued and not seen as negotiable, there was acknowledgement that they can be open to misuse and place strain on remaining staff, exacerbating workload pressures identified in the survey.

In addition, the consultations confirm that the impact of retention challenges is felt most acutely through increased workload, overtime, and management pressure, rather than immediate service failure, aligning closely with the survey responses on moderate to significant impact.

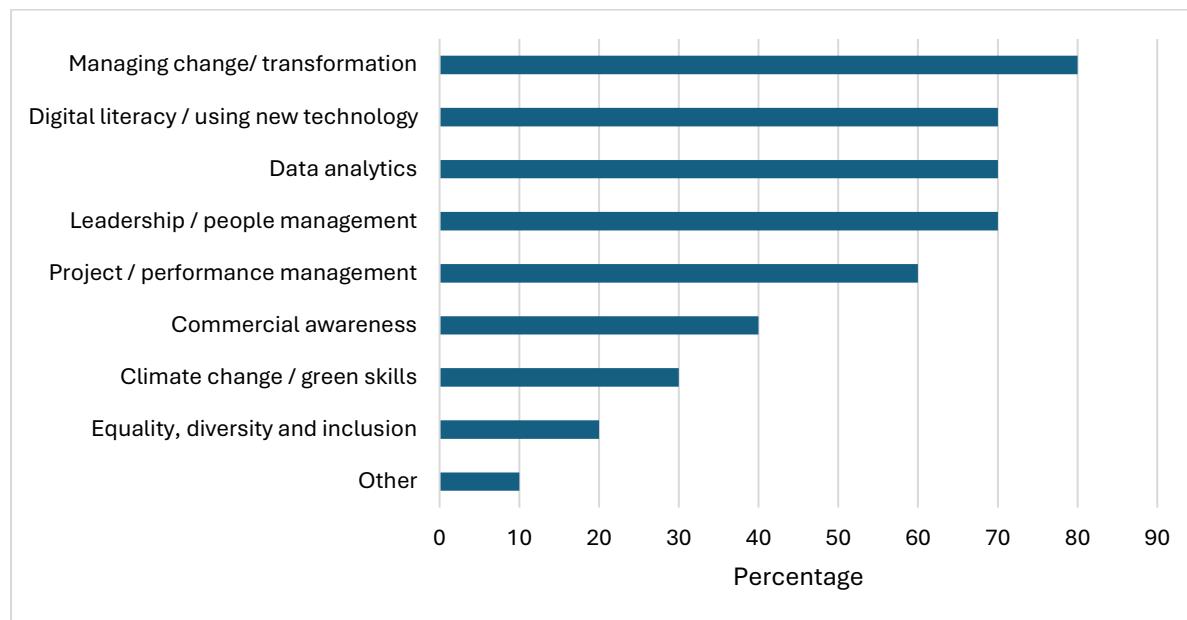
3.4 Skills Gaps

All Councils reported having skills gaps amongst their current employees. The most pressing skills gaps were in managing change/transformation, at 80%, followed by digital literacy, data analytics, and leadership/people management, each noted by 70% of respondents, and project

management at 60%. These findings point to a workforce struggling with strategic and managerial capabilities that are critical for modern service delivery. Importantly, no Councils reported being free of skills gaps, underscoring that capability challenges are universal. Together, the results suggest Councils must strengthen both leadership and analytical skills while preparing for future demands in sustainability and technology.

“If we want more flexible recruitment, we’d also need more flexible ways to manage performance, we’re not set up for that.”

Figure 3.6: Skills gaps amongst current employees



Source: UUEPC Recruitment and Retention Survey

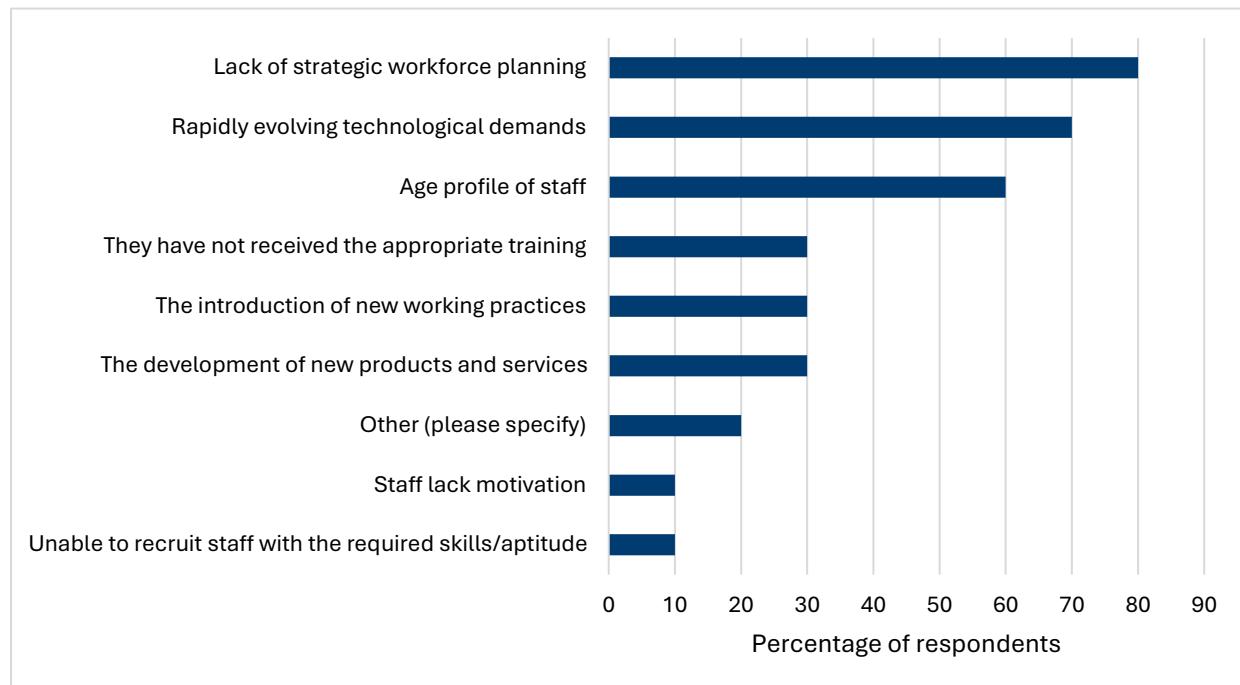
Figure 3.7 highlights several causes of workforce skills gaps. The most prominent is lack of strategic workforce planning, reported by 80% of Councils, followed by rapidly evolving technological demands at 70% and the age profile of staff at 60%. These findings suggest that long-term planning and demographic pressures are central challenges, intensified by the speed of technological change.

“Some of our ambitions are now outside the skills we have internally, we’re becoming more ambitious faster than our skills base can keep up.”

Other less cited causes included lack of appropriate training (30%), the introduction of new working practices (30%), and the development of new products and services (30%). Taken

together, the results show that skills gaps are primarily shaped both by internal organisational factors (planning, training, and culture) and external pressures (technology).

Figure 3.7: Causes of skills gaps amongst current employees

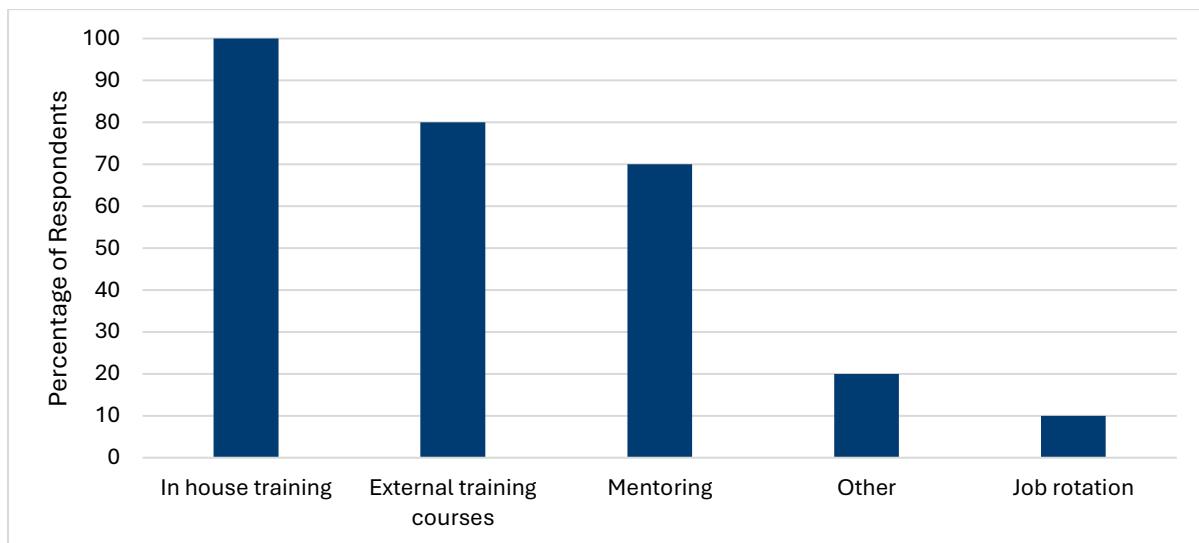


Source: UUEPC Recruitment and Retention Survey

Figure 3.8 shows that the most common way of tackling skills gaps was through in-house training which was used universally (100%). This was complemented by external training courses (80%) and mentoring schemes (70%), reflecting a strong reliance on structured learning and knowledge transfer. In contrast, more experimental approaches such as job rotation were far less common (10%), though some Councils highlighted “other” methods (20%) including cross-departmental working and internal career pathways. Overall, the data suggest Councils heavily use traditional training models, with less importance on rotational practical development, which may limit opportunities for broader skill-building through practice.

“Training is well received and accessible through classroom, online, and e-learning formats.”

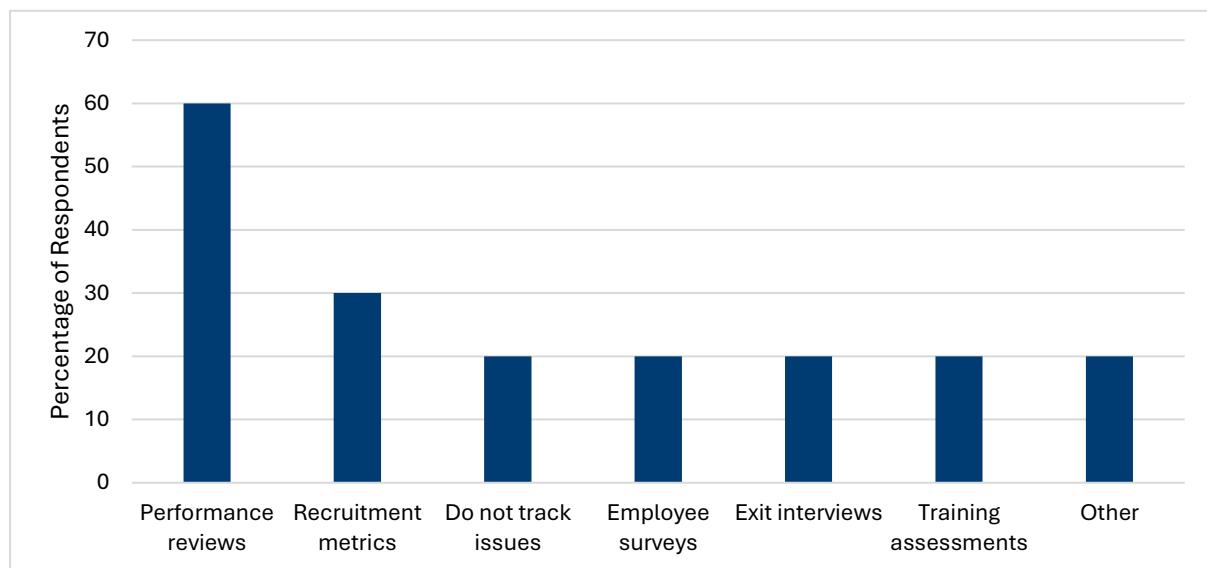
Figure 3.8: Methods to address skills gaps amongst current employees



Source: UUEPC Recruitment and Retention Survey

Councils most commonly monitor skills and workforce capacity through performance reviews, cited by 60% of respondents (Figure 3.9). Other methods which included recruitment metrics, employee surveys, exit interviews and training assessments were much less common, cited by around 20%. Other approaches included training matrices and personal contribution tracking, reported by around 20%. A similar proportion said they do not currently track skills issues, indicating that monitoring practices are still developing across the sector. The results suggest that while some Councils are actively using internal data to understand workforce needs, others have yet to establish consistent tracking mechanisms, which limits their ability to respond strategically to emerging gaps in their workforce.

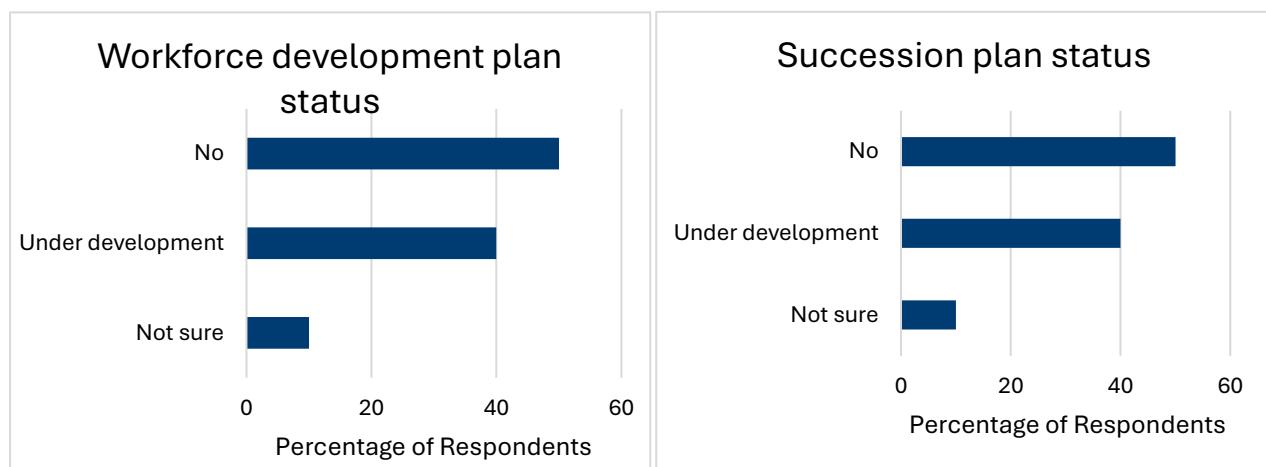
Figure 3.9: Internal sources used to track skills gaps/workforce capacity



Source: UUEPC Recruitment and Retention Survey

For both succession planning and workforce development planning, half of Councils reported having no plan in place, while 40% said a plan was under development and 10% were unsure (Figure 3.10). Although “yes” was an option, no council selected it, confirming that neither succession nor workforce development frameworks are currently fully established. This shows that while Councils recognise the importance of structured planning, most remain at an early stage and have yet to put formal arrangements in place to manage long-term workforce risks.

Figure 3.10: Workplace development plan & succession plan status

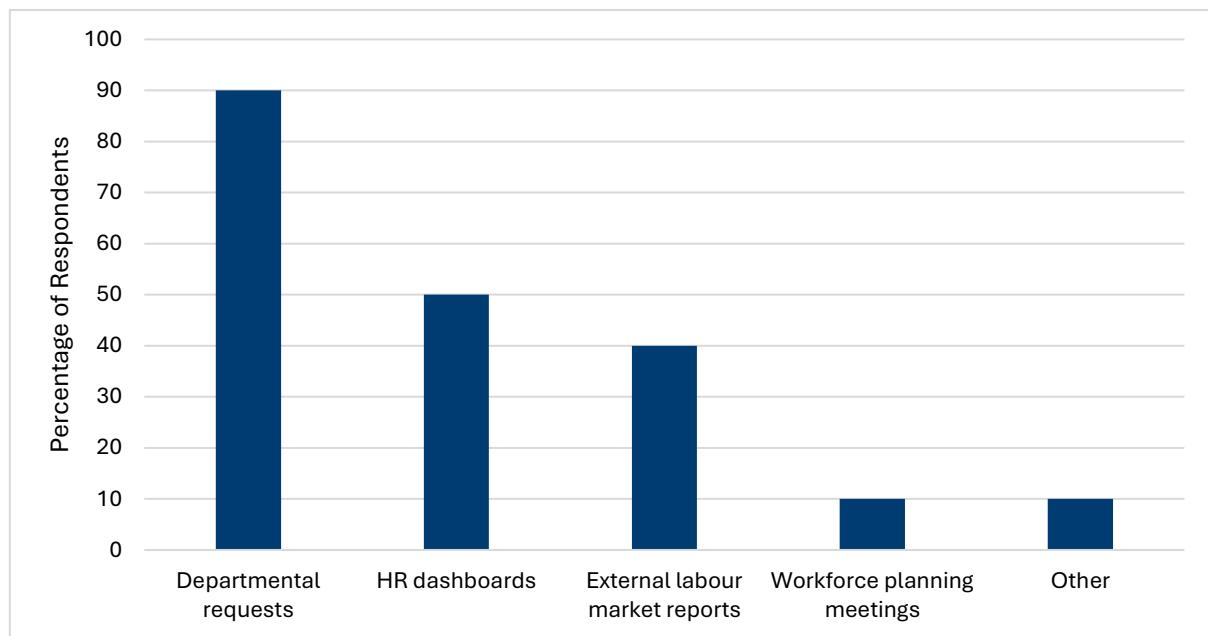


Source: UUEPC Recruitment and Retention Survey

Instead, workforce forecasting and the identification of skills gaps was driven primarily by departmental requests, used by 90% of Councils (Figure 3.11). HR dashboards (50%) and external labour market reports (40%) were also used, though less consistently, while workforce planning meetings were reported by just 10%. HR business partnering meetings with directorates was another method used, although again by just 10%. The results suggest room to improve forecasting by making greater use of labour market information and use of a broader range of more consistent planning methods.

“We’ve begun mapping future leadership needs to ensure continuity.”

Figure 3.11: Methods used to forecast workforce demand and skills gaps



Source: UUEPC Recruitment and Retention Survey

Consultation Evidence: Consultation discussions confirmed that skills gaps are universal and increasingly concentrated in leadership, people management, digital capability, and change management. Leaders emphasised that people management capability is a particularly critical gap. Managers, at various levels, are often reluctant to address underperformance due to fear of grievance, union involvement, or procedural complexity which reinforces survey findings on gaps in leadership and managing change.

Digital and data skills gaps identified in the survey were also explained by consultation insights, highlighting slow/early adoption of AI, fragmented IT systems, and cautious approaches to digital innovation due to policy and governance constraints. While Councils recognise the need for transformation, consultations reveal that skills development is often reactive rather than strategically planned, mirroring the survey findings on the lack of formal workforce and succession planning.

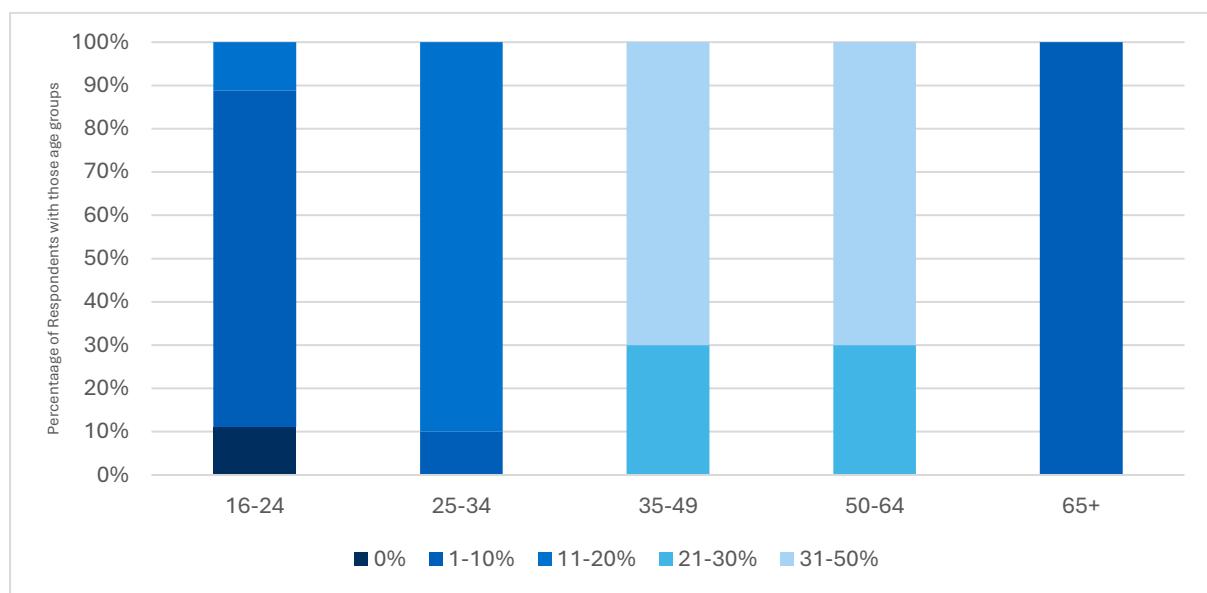
Succession planning initiatives discussed in consultations, particularly leadership programmes and talent continuity frameworks, suggest early progress, but also confirm that most Councils remain at an early stage, aligning with survey results showing the absence of fully embedded plans.

3.5 Workforce Demographics, Pay and Conditions

Council workforces have significant concentrations of staff in the 35–49 and 50–64 age brackets, with most Councils reporting that these groups made up between 21% and 50% of their staff (Figure 3.12). In contrast, representation of individuals under 35 is relatively low. For the 16–24 age group, 78% of Councils reported that they account for only 1–10% of their workforce, and 11% reported no staff in this age group at all. The 25–34 group is slightly better represented, but still limited, with 90% of Councils suggesting they account for 11–20% of staff. As was reported in the literature review, these findings suggest that the Local Government workforce is ageing, with few younger staff entering the sector. This may pose challenges for succession planning and long-term workforce sustainability. In fact, most Councils did view an ageing workforce as a significant risk to their Council's operational continuity; 70% rated it as a high risk and 20% as a medium risk.

“One of our biggest problems is being attractive to young people, many of them think the Council just empties the bins.”

Figure 3.12: Approximate age breakdown of current workforce



Source: UUEPC Recruitment and Retention Survey

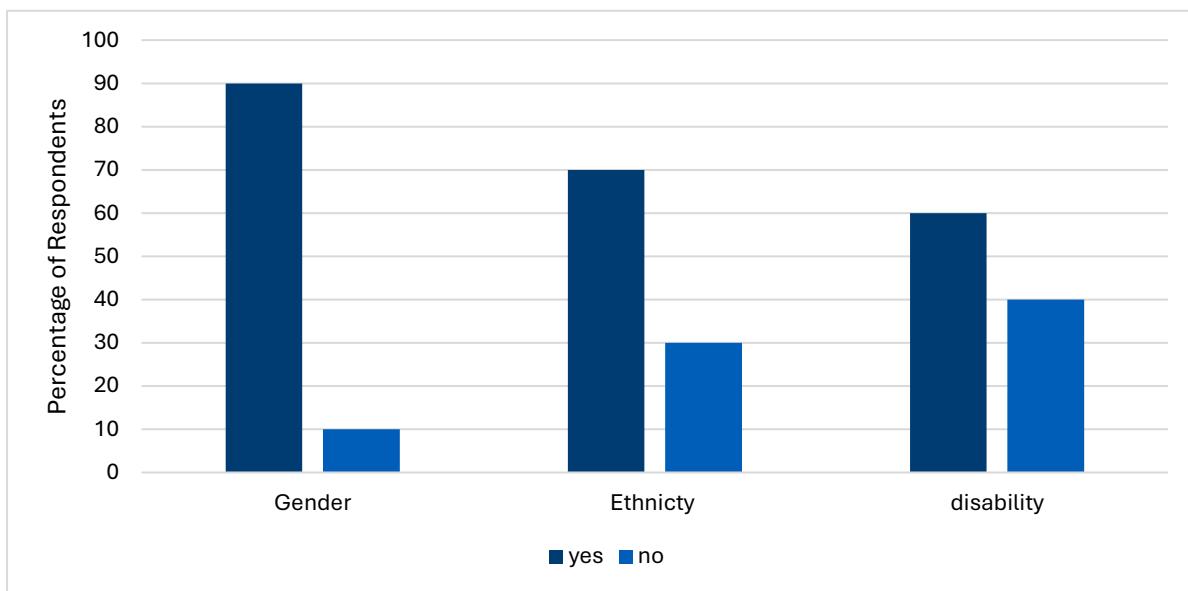
The biggest challenge that Councils face in attracting and retaining staff under the age of 35 is competition on pay from other sectors. The negative perception of Councils was ranked second, and perception of limited career progression opportunities was ranked third overall.

“Capital development roles are difficult to fill because private sector salaries are much higher.”

However, when asked about whether they had researched how their salaries, in general, compare with the private sector 70% of respondents indicated they had not. Of those that had, all felt that their salaries were slightly less competitive than the private sector and about the same as other Councils. The findings suggest that most Councils lack current benchmarking data, which may affect their ability to better attract skilled staff in a competitive labour market.

Most Councils report collecting workforce diversity data, but the level of monitoring varies (Figure 3.13). Gender data is collected most often, with 90% of councils doing so, which suggests this area is well established. Ethnicity data is collected by 70% of Councils and disability data by 60%. Overall, the findings point to Councils gathering useful diversity information, but the uneven coverage means some areas may still be harder to assess and address.

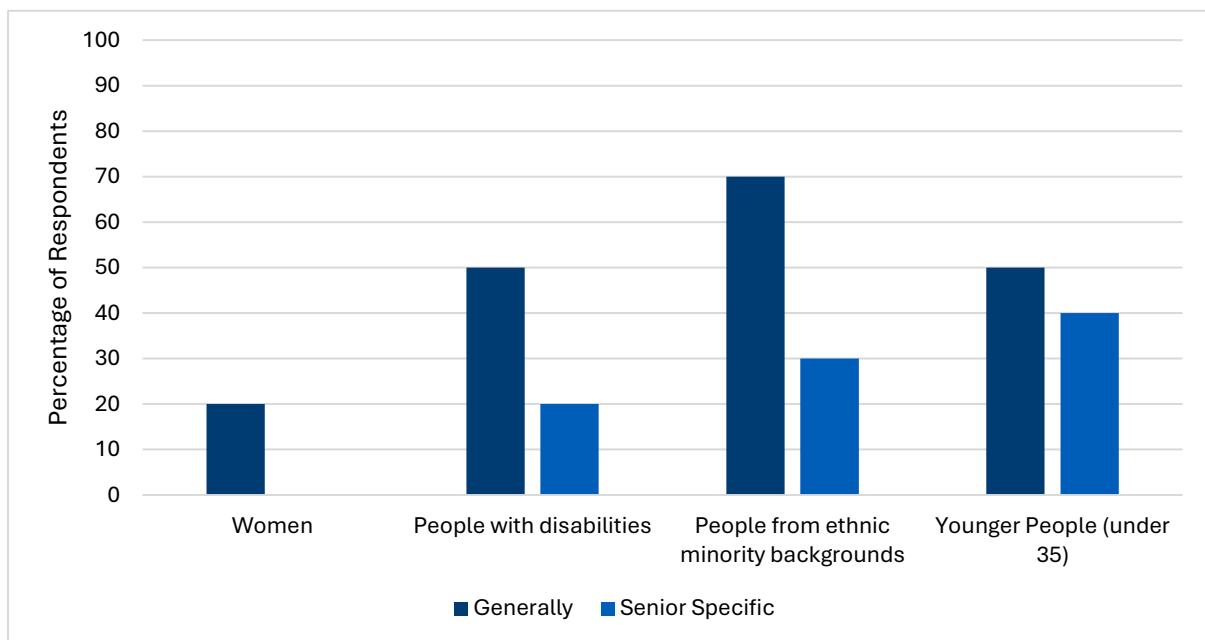
Figure 3.13: Collection of data on workforce diversity



Source: UUEPC Recruitment and Retention Survey

Figure 3.14 show that several groups are viewed as under-represented in Council workforces, although it differs by group. People from ethnic minority backgrounds were highlighted by over 70% of respondents as being generally under-represented though a smaller proportion (30%) saw this gap as senior-specific. People with disabilities were also regarded as generally under-represented by half of respondents, although this fell to 20% for senior roles. Younger people showed a mixed picture, with half reporting general under-representation and 40% saying it applies to senior roles, although this may be due to inexperience for such roles. Women were generally well represented, particularly in senior roles, although 20% did indicate lack of representation for women generally. Overall, the results indicate that under-representation is more commonly seen across the general workforce, with fewer Councils clearly identifying issues tied specifically to senior roles.

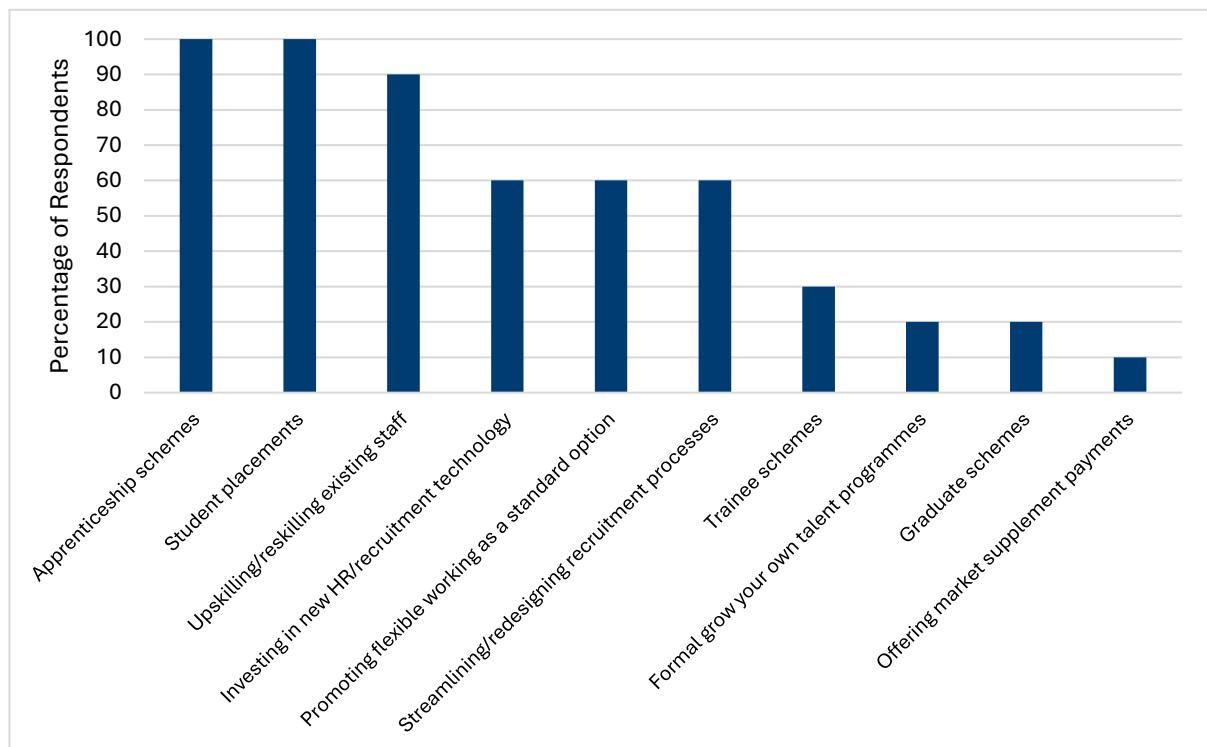
Figure 3.14: Under-representation amongst workforce and in senior roles



Source: UUEPC Recruitment and Retention Survey

Figure 3.15 show that Councils are taking a broad and proactive approach to tackling recruitment and retention pressures. The universal use of apprenticeships and student placements suggests Councils are heavily relying on early-career entry routes to build future capacity. The fact that 90% are upskilling or reskilling existing staff shows that internal development is a key strategy, likely driven by ongoing shortages in the external labour market. Investment in HR/ recruitment technology, flexible working, and streamlined recruitment processes (each at 60%) also indicates that Councils are trying to make hiring more attractive to candidates. Specialised incentives, such as market supplement payments, are used far less often at 10%, which may reflect restrictions on budgets and/or concerns about creating pay inconsistencies. Overall, the responses suggest that Councils are combining long-term talent development with practical changes to recruitment processes in order to manage workforce challenges.

Figure 3.15: Methods used to address recruitment/retention issues

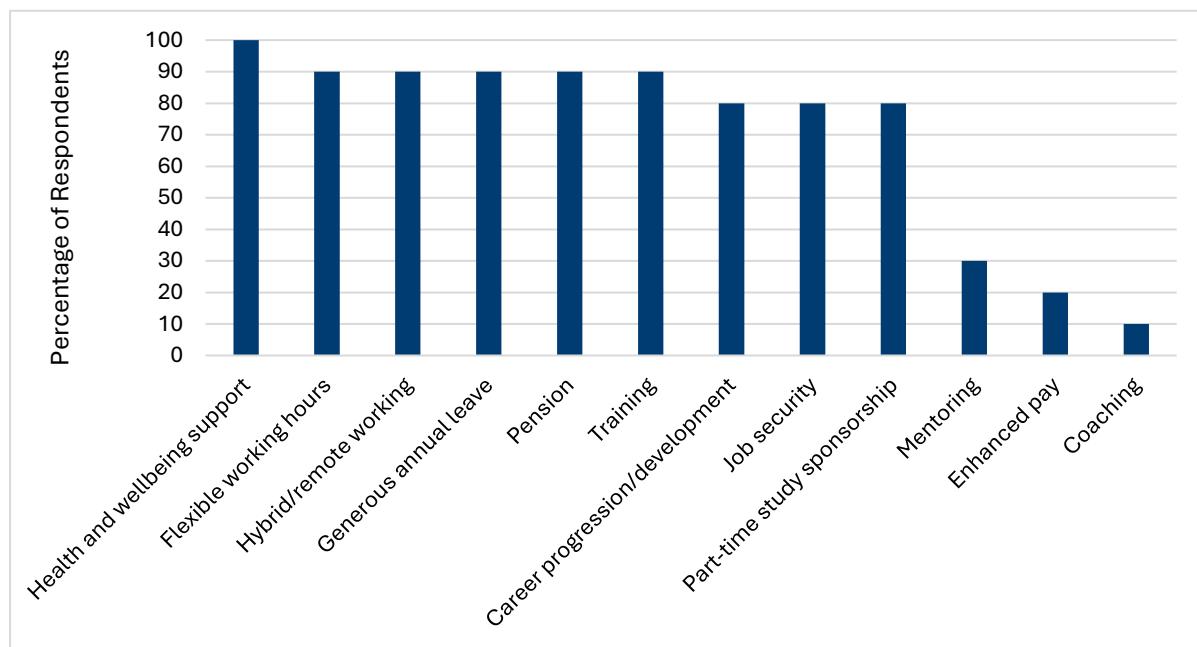


Source: UUEPC Recruitment and Retention Survey

Councils reported a strong emphasis on flexibility and well-being with regards to benefits offered for staff retention (Figure 3.16). Health and well-being support was universal while flexible working hours, hybrid or remote working, training, generous annual leave, and pension provision were each offered by 90% of respondents. Other benefits included career progression and development (80%), job security (80%), and part-time study sponsorship (80%), highlighting investment in stability and growth. In terms of those regarded as *most* effective for retaining staff, flexible working hours and hybrid/remote working came out as the top two. These results show that retention strategies are being built around a work-life balance and professional development rather than necessarily monetary rewards and, combined with the earlier results on limited staff retention issues, suggests they have been largely successful.

“We are very good to our staff and have a great health and well-being programme.”

Figure 3.16: Benefits offered for staff retention

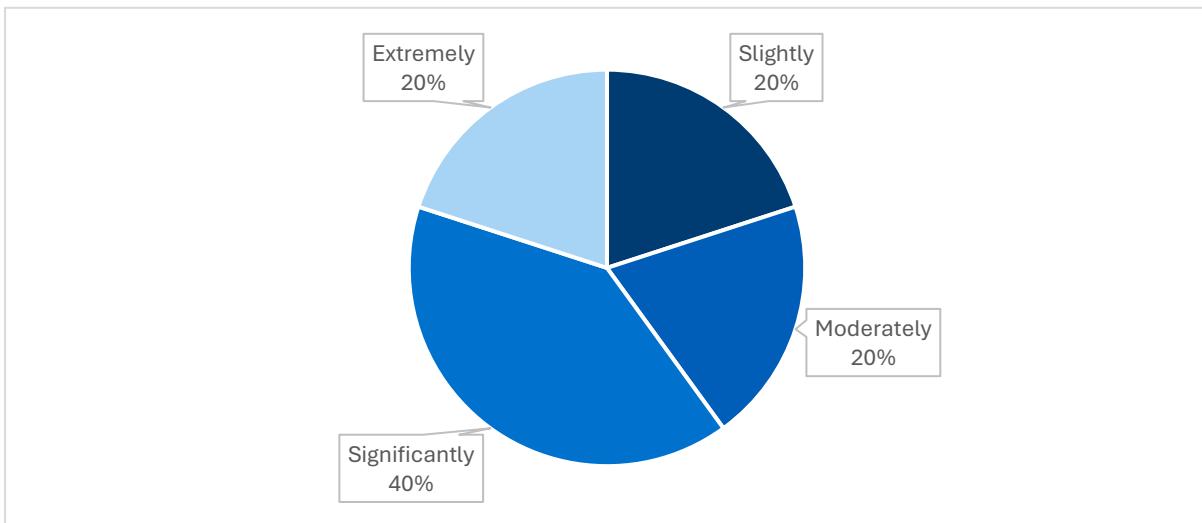


Source: UUEPC Recruitment and Retention Survey

Sickness absences linked to burnout, stress, or harassment were reported to affect service delivery to varying degrees (Figure 3.17). Two fifths of Councils said the impact was significant, while 20% described it as extreme. In contrast 20% said the impact was slight. Well-being related absences cause disruption and may present ongoing challenges in terms of the ability to maintain service levels. This may in part reflect the Councils generous sick leave, which allows staff to take time off, but can also add strain on colleagues who absorb these workloads. As a result, the ability to deliver services may be hindered not only by staff on leave, but also by the pressure placed on those remaining.

“Local government sickness policy offers six months full pay and six months half pay, which doesn’t discourage long-term absence.”

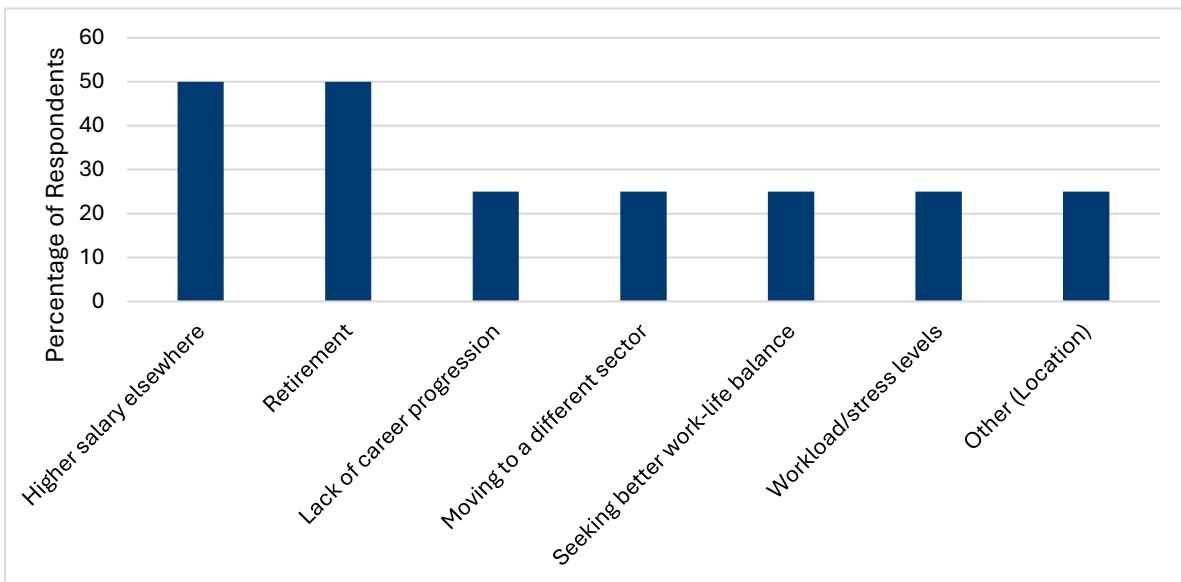
Figure 3.17: Extent of impact of sickness absence on service delivery



Source: UUEPC Recruitment and Retention Survey

Only 40% of Councils reported carrying out exit interviews. Of those that did, the most common reasons for employees leaving were higher salary elsewhere and retirement, each reported by 50% of respondents (Figure 3.18). The spread of responses points to a mix of financial, structural and well-being related drivers but without regular exit interviews, Councils may miss opportunities to identify recurring issues and, as a result, strengthen retention strategies.

Figure 3.18: Reasons cited by employees for leaving employment



Source: UUEPC Recruitment and Retention Survey

Consultation Evidence: The consultations strongly reinforced the survey findings on workforce ageing and difficulties attracting younger staff. Leaders highlighted generational shifts in expectations, with younger candidates prioritising purpose, flexibility, and short-term opportunities over long-term stability. The latter, in particular, noted as a feature more attractive to older/previous generations.

“Young people aren’t looking for a 30-year career anymore. They want to come in, get experience, and move on.”

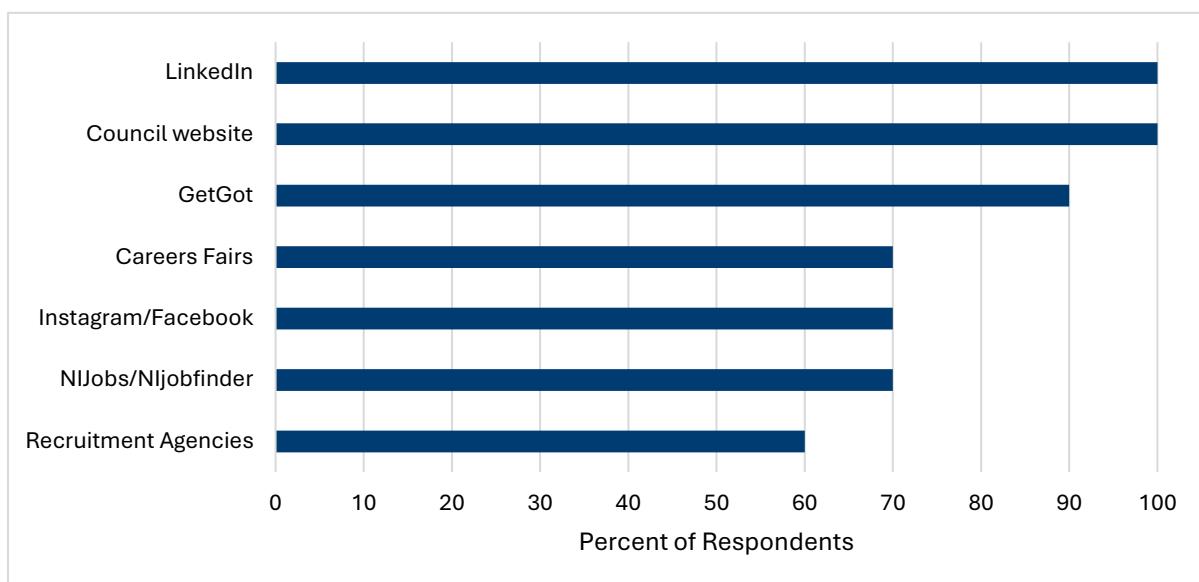
The Consultations also provided clarification and highlighted challenges with pay competitiveness. While survey respondents identified pay competition as a key challenge, consultation evidence confirmed that Councils often lack robust benchmarking data and face more rigid pay structures that limit responsiveness. Leaders described how inter-council competition, particularly with higher-paying authorities nearby, exacerbates recruitment difficulties, supporting the survey findings on inconsistent terms and conditions across the sector.

However, consultation feedback reinforced the survey’s conclusion that non-pay benefits such as flexible working, well-being support, job security, and pensions are genuine strengths. Leaders consistently described flexibility as a decisive attraction factor, sometimes outweighing pay, particularly for experienced candidates.

3.6 Recruitment Processes

Councils rely heavily on established digital platforms to advertise vacancies (Figure 3.19). All Councils reported using both their own website and LinkedIn, while 90% use GetGot, and 70% make use of NIJobs/NIjobfinder, Instagram/Facebook, and careers fairs. Recruitment agencies were used by 60% of Councils. However, no Councils reported using TikTok or YouTube, which may limit their reach to younger audiences. Given the sector’s aging workforce, this lack of engagement with newer channels could reduce visibility among potential recruits and make it harder to attract younger talent.

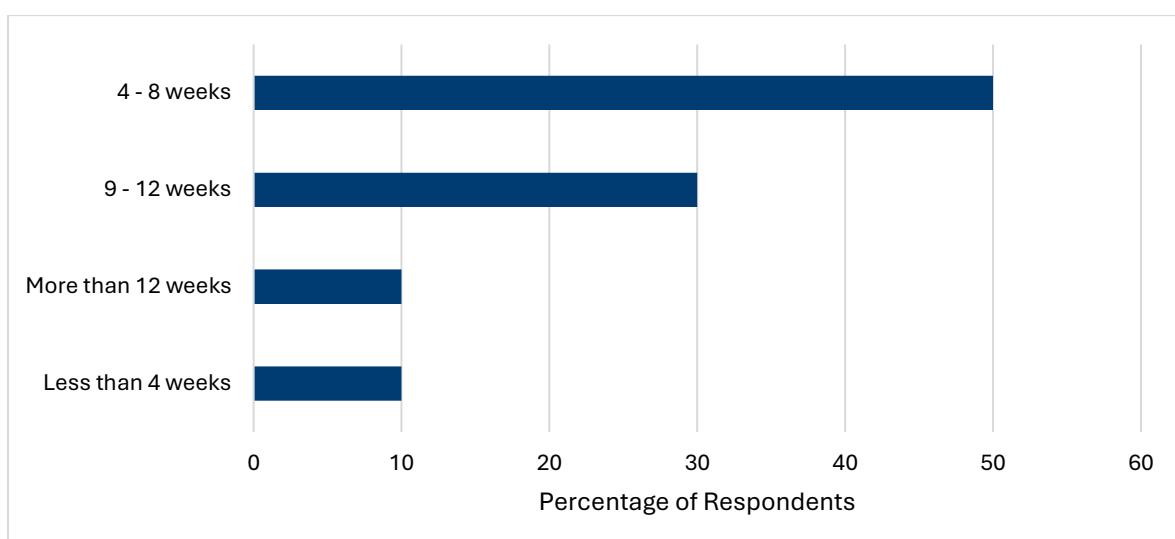
Figure 3.19: Outreach channels used for advertising vacancies



Source: UUEPC Recruitment and Retention Survey

Recruitment timelines for non-executive roles vary, but most Councils reported a moderate duration, with 50% saying the process take 4-8 weeks, while 30% reported 9-12 weeks (Figure 3.20). A small minority indicated either less than four weeks or more than 12 weeks (both under 10%). While half of the Councils manage to recruit within two months, longer processes are still common. Extended recruitment may mean that by the time offers are made, candidates may already have accepted other jobs. This not only slows the filling of vacancies but also risks losing strong applicants, adding further strain to workforce planning and ability to deliver services.

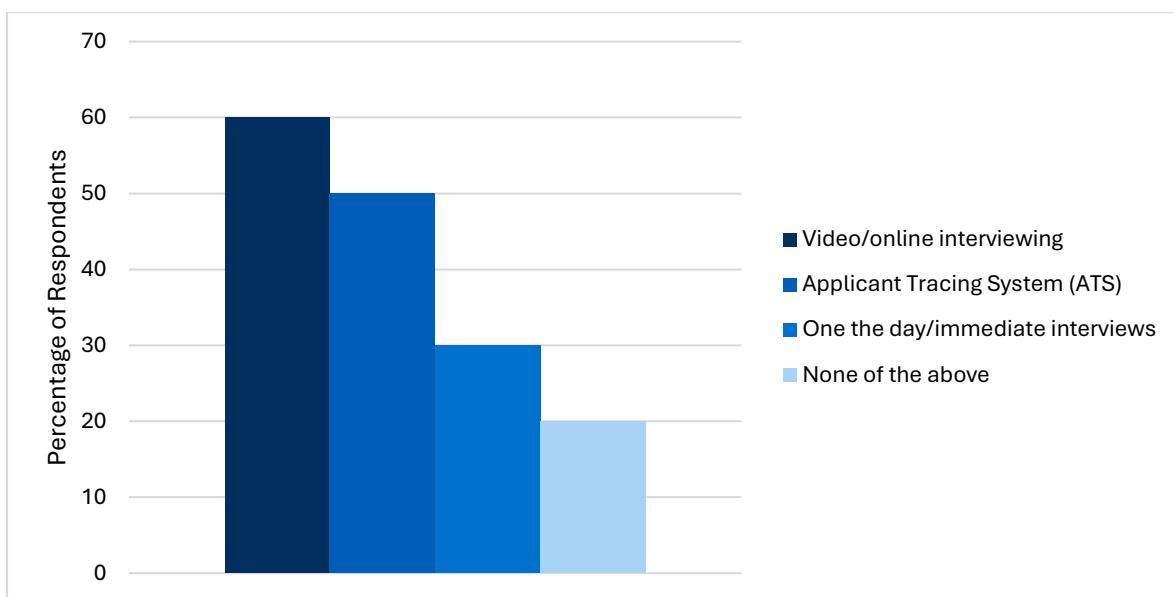
Figure 3.20: Length of recruitment process (from advert to job offer)



Source: UUEPC Recruitment and Retention Survey

Figure 3.21 shows that Councils use a range of tools to support recruitment, with video or online interviewing the most common, used by 60%, followed closely by Applicant Tracking Systems (ATS) at 50%. Immediate interviews were used by 30%. The mix of methods suggests Councils are adapting to modern recruitment practices, though the relatively low use of same-day interviews may limit flexibility in fast-paced hiring situations. Notably, 20% of respondents used none of those methods, while the results also highlight a lack of consistency, suggesting scope for council-wide improvements.

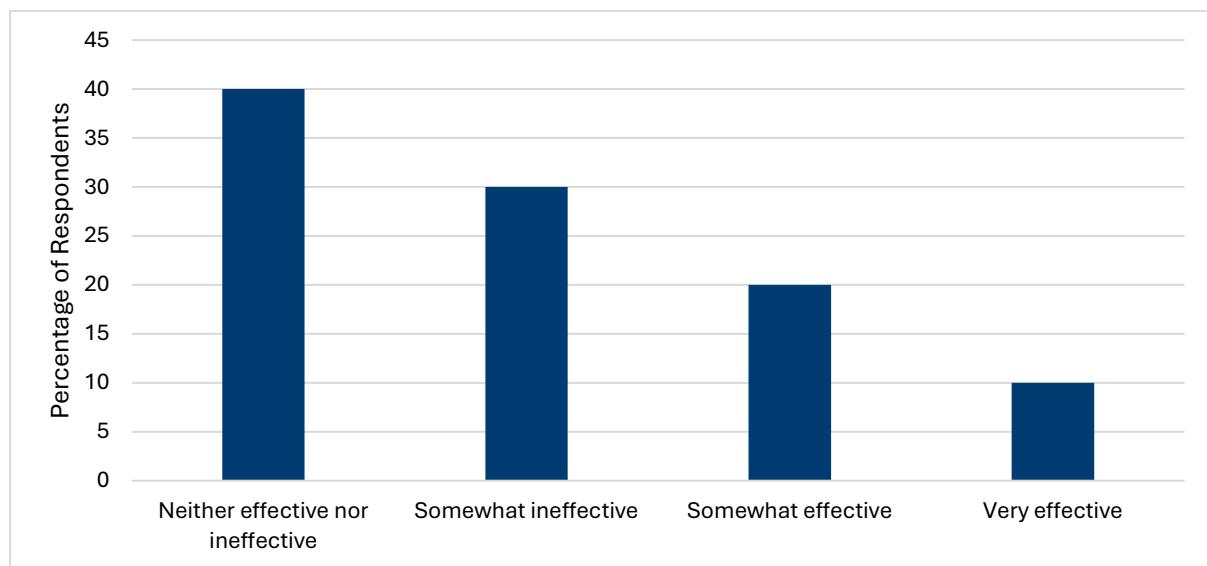
Figure 3.21: Length of recruitment process (from advert to job offer)



Source: UUEPC Recruitment and Retention Survey

Councils gave mixed responses when asked how effectively they promote themselves as attractive employers (Figure 3.22). Two fifths of respondents described their efforts as neither effective nor ineffective, while 30% said they were somewhat ineffective. Only 20% considered their approach somewhat effective, and just 10% rated it as very effective. These figures suggest that most Councils see room for improvement in how they position themselves in the job market, which may be contributing to recruitment challenges and limiting appeal to potential applicants.

Figure 3.22: Effectiveness in promoting the Council as an attractive employer



Source: UUEPC Recruitment and Retention Survey

Almost all Councils (90%) reported implementing specific initiatives to improve diversity and inclusion in recruitment, while the remaining 10% were planning to. The strong uptake suggests that diversity and inclusion are now seen as essential to their recruitment strategy, not an optional extra. Councils appear to be actively working to broaden representation and ensure fair access to opportunities. Among those that had implemented diversity and inclusion initiatives, anonymous shortlisting was the most common, used by 80% of respondents. Guaranteed interviews were reported by 30%, while targeted outreach was used by 20%. The results suggest a strong emphasis on reducing bias in the screening stage, though fewer Councils are actively engaging with under-represented groups or offering structured interview guarantees.

Finally, respondents were asked what action could be taken to improve recruitment and retention in Local Government. Table 3.1 collates these into themes, with representative quotes, the accompanying insights provide an overview of what this means for Councils.

Table 3.1: Effectiveness in promoting the Council as an attractive employer

What Respondents Said	How This Translates
Employer Brand and Visibility <p>“Market the Council as an employer of choice and build on the brand to attract and retain talent. Work on positive promotion/image of the Council”</p>	<p>There is a clear need for a more coherent and proactive employer brand. This includes targeted outreach, stronger recruitment marketing, and consistent messaging that positions councils as employers of choice in a competitive labour market.</p>
Innovation and Modern Ways of Working <p>“Innovation to show that we are a progressive employer, both in the benefits package we offer and ways of working”</p>	<p>Respondents want councils to visibly demonstrate innovation, particularly in flexible working practices and modern employment offers. This suggests an opportunity to better articulate and potentially expand progressive working arrangements.</p>
Promotion of Benefits and Roles <p>“Better promotion of the diverse roles that exist within council and the full package which includes salary, generous leave and pension and Health & Well-being support”</p>	<p>While councils offer competitive total reward packages, these are not consistently understood or well-promoted. Improved communication of the full employment offer could strengthen attraction and retention outcomes.</p>
Career Pathways and Progression <p>“Communication of the career pathways available combined with the flexible working options available in local government to attract and retain staff”</p>	<p>Clearer articulation of career pathways and progression opportunities is required. Linking progression possibilities with flexible working opportunities could enhance the attractiveness of the sector and strengthen workforce planning and retention.</p>
Consistency Across Councils <p>“Same terms and conditions across all councils”</p>	<p>Respondents highlight a desire for greater consistency in terms and conditions, suggesting that variation may create confusion or perceived inequity across the sector.</p>
Recruitment Process Experience <p>“Overly bureaucratic recruitment processes could be simplified and increase staff engagement”</p>	<p>Recruitment processes are perceived as overly complex and bureaucratic in places. Streamlining processes could improve candidate experience, reduce time to hire, and increase engagement.</p>

Source: UUEPC Recruitment and Retention Survey

Consultation Evidence: The consultations aligned with the survey results around employer branding as being only moderately effective. The consultations revealed that Councils face a persistent image problem, particularly among younger generations, with local government often seen as bureaucratic, slow, or lacking impact. However, leaders noted that candidates who engage through placements, apprenticeships, or work experience report positive experiences, suggesting that perception rather than reality is a key barrier.

The consultations also expanded on the survey findings relating to bureaucratic recruitment processes. Leaders acknowledged that competency-based frameworks and due diligence processes ensure fairness but can feel rigid, outdated, and misaligned with modern recruitment expectations particularly in digital and specialist roles, which helps explain the longer recruitment timelines and applicant attrition identified in the survey.

“The competency framework is good but applied too rigidly, we need more flexibility.”

Importantly, consultation feedback confirmed that while individual Councils are improving branding through awards, social media, and outreach, sector-wide co-ordination is limited.

“We’ve done a lot of work to build our brand and highlight the benefits of working here.”

Differences in reputation, autonomy, and union dynamics make a unified “council employer brand” challenging, but likewise there is a general perception amongst the public that work across all Councils is the same.

4 Summary, Conclusion and Recommendations

4.1 Summary

This report has examined recruitment, retention, workforce capacity, and future skills challenges across Councils in NI, drawing on quantitative survey evidence and in-depth qualitative consultations with senior leaders and HR practitioners. Together, these sources provide a comprehensive picture of the workforce pressures facing local government and the systemic factors shaping them.

The survey evidence confirms that recruitment difficulties are widespread and persistent, affecting all Councils and spanning both professional and operational roles. While vacancy numbers are generally manageable in administrative and professional roles, operational and frontline services, particularly Drivers, Leisure and Amenities, Waste and Cleaning Services, and certain technical roles, experience higher vacancy levels and more acute recruitment pressures. These challenges are compounded by strong competition from other sectors, limited applicant pools with the required skills and experience, the temporary nature of the student workforce in certain roles, and a perception that local government is not an attractive or aspirational career path.

Consultation findings highlight that recruitment challenges are also driven in part by the mechanics of recruitment processes and also by structural constraints. These include rigid pay frameworks, limited flexibility once staff are appointed, and a cautious approach to hiring in a context where underperformance can be difficult to address. Senior and specialist recruitment campaigns often attract interest but fail to convert into appointments due to skills mismatches. Meanwhile application drop-off remains a significant barrier, particularly for digital, technical, and operational roles.

Retention pressures are less widespread than recruitment difficulties, and overall staff turnover across Councils remains low. However, both survey and consultation evidence show that retention challenges, where they exist, are concentrated in frontline and leisure roles and are felt primarily through increased workload, reduced resilience, and pressure on remaining staff, rather than immediate service failure. Sickness absence which is linked to stress, burnout, and broader societal issues emerges as a significant operational challenge.

The report also identifies universal skills gaps, particularly in leadership, people management, managing change, digital capability, and data analytics. While Councils are actively addressing these gaps through in-house and external training, the evidence suggests that workforce

planning, succession planning, and skills forecasting remain underdeveloped and inconsistent. Demographic trends, most notably an ageing workforce and under-representation of younger employees, pose longer-term risks to workforce sustainability.

Despite these challenges, the evidence also highlights important strengths. Councils offer strong non-pay benefits, including flexible and hybrid working, well-being support, job security, and pension provision, which are widely valued by staff and play a critical role in retention. Organisational culture is generally positive, with strong pride in public service and commitment to community impact. However, these strengths are not always communicated effectively to potential recruits.

4.2 Conclusion

The findings demonstrate that Councils are operating in a highly constrained labour market, facing competition from the private sector, demographic change, and increasing service complexity, while working within rigid policy, pay, and governance frameworks. Recruitment difficulties are unlikely to be resolved through incremental process changes alone; instead, they require a more strategic, co-ordinated, and evidence-informed response.

The evidence suggests that Councils are not failing to act, in fact many are already implementing apprenticeships, training programmes, flexible working, and targeted recruitment initiatives. However, these efforts are often fragmented, locally driven, and insufficiently aligned across the sector. In particular, the lack of consistent workforce planning, succession planning, and applicant insight limits Councils' ability to anticipate and respond to emerging challenges.

There is also a large disconnect between the reality of Council employment and its external perception. While Councils provide stable, flexible, and meaningful employment, they continue to be viewed as bureaucratic, slow-moving, and less attractive particularly by younger generations and candidates in specialist fields. Addressing this perception gap is as important as addressing wider recruitment constraints.

Overall, the evidence points to a need for Councils to focus on removing unnecessary constraints and process-related obstacles, where possible, strengthening leadership and workforce capability, and making better use of the assets they already have, particularly culture, flexibility, and purpose, to compete more effectively for talent.

4.3 Recommendations

As was found in the earlier literature review, the survey and consultation evidence demonstrate that Councils in NI face significant but not insurmountable workforce challenges. Due to the current labour market in general, external constraints will remain but there are clear opportunities to improve recruitment outcomes, strengthen workforce capability, and enhance long-term sustainability through more strategic, evidence-led action. By reducing existing barriers and inefficiencies, investing in leadership, and telling a stronger story about the value of local government careers, Councils can position themselves more effectively to meet future service demands. The following recommendations are based on the survey and consultation findings and provide some practical actions to overcome the demonstrated constraints.

Recommendation 1. Strengthen Employer Branding and Sector Narrative

Develop a more coherent and proactive employer branding approach that better articulates the purpose, impact, flexibility, and breadth of careers within local government. This should:

- Emphasise purpose, community impact, job security, flexible working, and well-being benefits
- Showcase diverse roles beyond traditional perceptions
- Leverage awards, positive staff stories, and placement experiences
- Consider new outreach channels particularly focused on younger generations
- Develop a clearer approach to improving workforce diversity and addressing cultural imbalances

Where full sector-wide branding is not feasible, greater alignment in messaging and shared assets should be pursued.

Recommendation 2. Simplify and Modernise Recruitment Processes

Reduce unnecessary complexity in recruitment processes, particularly for operational, and technical roles, while maintaining fairness and compliance. Prioritise improved candidate experience throughout the recruitment process. Actions could include:

- Reviewing application forms to reduce duplication and length
- Introducing more proportionate assessment approaches by role type
- Streamlining timelines to reduce candidate drop-off and loss to other employers

Recommendation 3. Introduce Systematic Applicant and Exit Feedback

Establish routine mechanisms to capture feedback from the recruitment process. This evidence should be used to identify avoidable barriers in recruitment and retention and to inform continuous improvement. Information should be collected from:

- Applicants who withdraw or decline offers
- Employees leaving the organisation

Recommendation 4. Strengthen Leadership and People Management Capability

Prioritise leadership development and people management skills across all levels, reinforced through training, peer support, and senior role modelling with a focus on:

- Managing performance and difficult conversations
- Leading change and transformation
- Supporting staff well-being while maintaining accountability
- Addressing sickness absence through tighter monitoring and cultural change.

Recommendation 5. Embed Workforce and Succession Planning

Move from reactive, department-led workforce planning to a more structured and consistent approach to improve resilience and reduce reliance on external recruitment. Actions include:

- Identify critical roles and skills at risk
- Link demographic data, skills gaps, and service priorities
- Integrate succession planning into leadership and development programmes

Recommendation 6. Maximise the Impact of Non-Pay Benefits

Given limited flexibility on pay, Councils should better leverage and communicate non-pay benefits. These benefits should be positioned clearly in recruitment campaigns and internal communications and include:

- Flexible and hybrid working
- Well-being and health support
- Learning, development, and progression opportunities
- Recognition for exceptional performance

Recommendation 7. Prepare Strategically for Digital and AI Transformation

Develop clearer policies, capability frameworks, and training pathways for digital transformation and AI. Actions include:

- Building confidence and consistency in adoption
- Addressing risks while enabling productivity
- Attracting candidates with modern digital skillsets

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