

Workforce Innovation - how councils are responding to workforce challenges

Best Value thematic work in Comhairle nan Eilean Siar - 2023-24



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Contents

Key facts	3
Key messages	4
Scope of the audit	5
Workforce strategy and priorities	7
Digital technology and the workforce	11
Flexible working and other innovative staff deployment	15
Developing future skills and capacity	18
Joint workforce arrangements across services and partners	20
Measuring the impact of workforce planning	22
Appendix 1	25

Key facts



Workforce

2,079	Number of people working for the Comhairle – headcount
1,565	Number of people working for the Comhairle – full time equivalent
86%	Percentage of staff with a permanent contract
10.1%	Turnover of staff in last year
14.7	Days lost due to absence in last year per employee



Age profile

4.5%	16 to 24
14.0%	25 to 34
20.0%	35 to 44
27.9%	45 to 54
33.6%	55 and over

Source: Headcount and FTE - Corporate Strategy 2024-27, Permanent contracts, turnover and absence– Corporate Workforce Plan 2023-27, Age profile – Employee Equality Monitoring Statistics 2023

Key messages

- 1** The Comhairle has just over 2,000 employees, more than half of whom are over 45 years old. Given the projected decline in working age population in the Western Isles, workforce planning will be a huge challenge.
- 2** The Comhairle's Corporate Workforce Plan 2023-27 draws upon an extensive range of workforce and demographic data. However, it does not clearly set out the Comhairle's overarching outcomes for its workforce or explicitly link with other key strategies and plans. The Comhairle did not engage with employees or Trades Unions when developing the plan, partly due to local representatives not being in place.
- 3** The Comhairle is at the early stages of digital adoption compared to other councils. The cyber attack is providing an opportunity to update its systems and processes. The Comhairle needs to demonstrate workforce benefits and productivity gains made through the use of digital technology.
- 4** Around 50 per cent of the Comhairle's office-based staff work in a hybrid manner. The Comhairle is exploring the impact of hybrid working on employee wellbeing through its employee survey. There is scope for its relationships with Trades Unions to develop.
- 5** The Comhairle has adopted a wide range of approaches to address its workforce challenges, including a well-established apprenticeship programme that demonstrates positive outcomes.
- 6** The Comhairle has some formal arrangements in place for sharing services with partners to create workforce benefits. It is limited in sharing services with other councils by its commitment to employing people living in the Western Isles to ensure a sustainable population.
- 7** The Comhairle has developed both corporate and service-level action plans for workforce planning. Annual monitoring is in place at corporate level but the monitoring and reporting of progress against service-level action plans could improve. It has not set out how it intends to assess its overall performance in workforce planning and what metrics it will use.

Scope of the audit

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

Code of Audit Practice 2020 Best Value reporting requirements

Best Value reporting – extract from the Code

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

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

4. This report covers the thematic aspect of the Best Value audit requirements. The Commission has directed auditors to report on workforce innovation and how councils across Scotland are responding to workforce challenges. In carrying out the work auditors have considered the following questions:
 - How effectively are the Comhairle's workforce plans integrated with its strategic plans and priorities?

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

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

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

7. The Comhairle experienced a criminal cyber attack on 7 November 2023. The incident caused significant disruption, including a partial loss of data that is having an ongoing impact. We will indicate whether this data loss impacts our findings at relevant points throughout the report.

Workforce strategy and priorities

8. Comhairle nan Eilean Siar employs just over 2,000 members of staff, over one third of whom are aged 55 or over. Staff costs equate to around 62 per cent of the Comhairle's overall net expenditure.

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

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

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

12. The 2022 Best Value Assurance Report on Comhairle nan Eilean Siar noted that the Comhairle's workforce plan needed to be updated. In August 2023 the Comhairle's Best Value thematic report on leadership contained one improvement plan action relevant to workforce: The Comhairle should review its strategic plans for consistency and alignment with priorities. It needs to further develop service plans, operational asset plans, and service-level workforce plans within its strategic framework.

The Corporate Workforce Plan 2023-27 lists the Comhairle's strategic priorities, alongside those of the Outer Hebrides as a whole, but it does not set out explicitly how workforce planning will contribute to these priorities being achieved

13. The Comhairle's Corporate Workforce Plan 2023-27 sets out its intention for workforce planning to be informed and driven by the Outer Hebrides Local Outcome Improvement Plan (OHLOIP), the Comhairle's Corporate Strategy 2024-27 and its Budget Strategy. The priorities set out in these documents, and listed in the Corporate Workforce Plan, include the Outer Hebrides retaining and attracting people to ensure a stable population, all people having access to appropriate employment opportunities and a sustainable and inclusive council.

14. Whilst the Corporate Workforce Plan lists the strategic priorities from the OHLOIP and the Corporate Strategy, it does not set out specifically how workforce planning will contribute to these priorities being achieved.

Recommendation 1

The Comhairle should ensure its Corporate Workforce Plan aligns with its key strategies and plans and sets out explicitly how workforce planning will support it achieve its strategic priorities.

The Comhairle sets out five workforce planning priorities, with associated outcomes, in its Corporate Workforce Plan 2023-27 but these would benefit from being more strategic

15. The Comhairle approved its new Corporate Workforce Plan 2023-27 in September 2023. It includes five main elements: understanding the organisation and its environment; analysis of the current workforce; risk analysis; future workforce needs; and an action plan.

16. The Comhairle sets out its five priorities for workforce planning in the action plan included in its Corporate Workforce Plan 2023-27. These are:

- support organisational change
- develop HR systems
- examine the offer of employment
- prioritise employee communication
- options to leave.

17. These priorities, whilst providing a useful framework for its actions, do not provide a clear sense of what the Comhairle's vision for its workforce is. To better align its workforce planning with its strategic vision the Comhairle should clearly define the overarching outcomes it aims to achieve. By doing so, it can more effectively prioritise and organise its actions to support these goals.

18. The Comhairle has assigned, what it refers to as, outcomes to each of the priorities set out in [paragraph 16](#). However these tend to be outputs and actions as opposed to outcomes. Examples of these include new working practices embedded within the Comhairle, succession plans in place, increased number of applications per post and reduced number of posts needing readvertising.

Recommendation 2

The Comhairle should develop corporate-level strategic workforce planning outcomes, linked clearly to its action plan, to demonstrate a clearer understanding of how the actions it is taking forward are contributing to its strategic vision for its workforce.

The Comhairle produces annual service-level workforce plans but it is not clear how the actions in these contribute to it achieving its corporate workforce planning priorities

19. The Comhairle produced service-level workforce plans across the majority of its services in 2023/24 and is in the process of updating these for 2024/25. These tend to be detailed with most setting out an overview of the service workforce, workforce-related risks and an action plan related to those risks. The social care/social work plans have actions arranged around the Scottish Government's five national pillars of workforce planning (plan, attract, train, employ, nurture).

20. There are no clear and consistent links between the five priorities set out in the Corporate Workforce Plan and the actions in the service-level workforce plans. Although templates are provided, the Comhairle could further support services in developing a consistent and effective approach to workforce planning by providing more guidance and tools.

Recommendation 3

The Comhairle should ensure that priorities and actions from the Corporate Workforce Plan are reflected in the next round of its service workforce plans in addition to service-specific actions. It should provide more guidance and/or tools to support services develop service workforce plans.

The Corporate Workforce Plan 2023-27 draws upon an extensive range of workforce data alongside demographic and employment information. This clearly illustrates the challenges the Comhairle is facing in terms of workforce.

21. As well as setting out a range of workforce data, the Corporate Workforce Plan 2023-27 also includes demographic and employment data with accompanying narrative. The Comhairle's available employment pool is, and will be, affected by a predicted population decline of over six per cent between 2018 and 2028 alongside an ageing population. Residents are, on average, eight years older than the Scottish average (50 years old compared to 42 nationally). The Plan connects this data with the need for innovative approaches to recruitment, retention, and skills development, aiming to attract and retain people while reducing outward migration through the use of apprenticeships and trainee programs.

22. An extensive amount of workforce data is presented in the Corporate Workforce Plan 2023-27, including:

- Headcount
- FTE
- Percentage of permanent contracts

- Turnover
- Proportion of leavers by age category
- Gender and age split
- Number of employees in each age bracket
- Average retirement age
- Average number of applications per post
- Number of posts where no appointments were made
- Sickness absence.

The Comhairle did not engage with employees and Trades Unions when developing its Corporate Workforce Plan 2023-27

23. Employees and Trades Unions were not involved in the development of the Corporate Workforce Plan 2023-27. A final draft was shared with Trades Unions in summer 2023 at the final draft stage. As described in [paragraph 55](#), the development of the Plan coincided with a gap in Joint Consultative Committee meetings being held in 2022 and early 2023.

Digital technology and the workforce

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

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

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

The Comhairle has developed a delivery plan for its Digitalisation Strategy 2022-27

27. The Comhairle approved its Digitalisation Strategy 2022-27 in November 2022. The strategy sets out the Comhairle's overarching vision '*To transform our culture and the way we work and live through digital thinking; operating technology in a secure, efficient and user centred way that is inclusive and supports wellbeing and enables economically thriving and sustainable communities*'.

28. The strategy has three broad priorities: people and place; a strong digital economy; and technology and services. Under a strong digital economy, the Comhairle sets out the need to create a skilled and digitally enabled workforce. Digital leadership and a digital workforce are key principles underpinning the strategy.

29. [Audit Scotland's Best Value Thematic Review 2022/23](#), published in August 2023, found that while the Digitalisation Strategy 2022-27 sets out a wide range of ambitions across services, it lacks specific actions, priorities and timescales. The Comhairle agreed to approve its revised digital plans later in 2023.

30. Following the publication of the Best Value review in November 2023, the Comhairle was the victim of a significant criminal cyber attack causing significant damage and impacting many services. An Incident Management Team (IMT) was established and continues to prioritise the Comhairle's response to the cyber attack including prioritising implementation of the Digitalisation Strategy. A delivery plan for the Digitalisation Strategy was

prepared and approved in November 2022 setting out actions under its three priorities ([paragraph 28](#)).

31. Broad timescales are included for each of the actions although these could be more ambitious and precise for example short term is defined as one to two years. While it identifies performance indicators, no baseline data is included against which to measure progress, and no targets are set.

The Comhairle's Incident Management Team is overseeing implementation of the Digitalisation Strategy and a progress report has gone to Committee

32. Following the cyber-attack, the IMT was tasked with prioritising the organisational response to the attack including implementation of the Digitalisation Strategy. The IMT initially met twice weekly to work closely with services. They now meet fortnightly and provide updates to corporate management team. The Comhairle uses its performance management system, Interplan, to track progress against its Digitalisation Strategy and delivery plan.

33. A Digitalisation Strategy progress report went to Policy and Resources Committee in September 2024. The report provided a narrative on progress against its three priorities as well as progress against each of the actions in the delivery plan. This includes percentage completion and what has been done so far to progress the actions, but it does not generally show progress against the performance measures set out in the delivery plan (see para 32). This makes it difficult to assess the overall impact.

The Comhairle is at the early stages of digital adoption compared to other councils. The cyber attack is providing an opportunity to update its systems and processes

34. The Comhairle is at the early stages of digital adoption compared with other councils. For example, it is only now rolling out training on Microsoft 365, it does not have online customer services, and some staff functions are still not fully automated.

35. Since the cyber-attack, the Comhairle has recruited more IT staff and the IMT is prioritising digital initiatives. The Comhairle notes that that the cyber attack provided an opportunity to re-evaluate and update the systems and processes it uses and ensure they reflect the key principles of the strategy.

36. Some of the projects underway will provide opportunities to improve staff productivity:

- School enrolment process - previously a form that needed to be submitted and collated, this is now completed electronically and has reduced the processing work of the team by a number of days.
- A new website and e-forms package is being developed following the cyber-attack. Customer Services and Business Software Analysts will work with services to map out processes that reduce calls and processing and improve customer service and access to information. This should improve workforce productivity.

- Human Resources are moving from largely paper-based systems to the cloud. The Comhairle has developed the digital infrastructure, and this now needs testing before it is rolled out. Training will be provided to managers.

The Comhairle needs to demonstrate workforce benefits and productivity gains made through the use of digital technology

37. The Comhairle has still not quantified potential transformation or cost efficiency benefits in its Digitalisation Strategy as recommended in [Audit Scotland's Best Value Thematic Review 2022/23](#), published in August 2023. The Comhairle is yet to develop a transformation plan incorporating digital priorities. There is a section on digital transformation in the draft Organisational Development Strategy 2024-30, but this is very high level and does not quantify expected benefits.

38. The Comhairle is progressing digital initiatives ([paragraph 36](#)) and should put mechanisms in place to quantify the impact of the improvements on workforce benefits and productivity gains.

Recommendation 4

The Comhairle should demonstrate and quantify what workforce benefits and productivity gains are made through its use of digital technology.

E-Sgoil is a positive initiative that helps respond to teacher shortages and improve equality of opportunity for students

39. Audit Scotland's Best Value Thematic Review 2022/23 highlighted the Comhairle's success implementing its digital e-Sgoil initiative. E-Sgoil, based in Stornoway, is a national on-line learning initiative to promote equity in curricular choice in schools, helping respond to the challenge of a lack of teachers in certain disciplines.

40. E-Sgoil uses technology to connect schools and pupils throughout the Western Isles to enable students to access the opportunities that are available in any school or educational resource in the Outer Hebrides. A physical hub comprises office space for e-Sgoil staff and five main teaching and learning spaces. The E-Sgoil annual impact report 2023/24 noted that the e-Sgoil continues to support Comhairle schools to broaden their curricular offer and ensure greater resilience during periods of staff absence as well as generating additional employment opportunities for many staff.

The Comhairle is conducting a digital skills survey of its staff to identify digital skills gaps

41. The Digitalisation Strategy sets out the need for a skilled and digitally enabled workforce and the delivery plan commits to undertake a review of staff digital capacity and provide training and upskill opportunities for all staff in the next one to two years. The progress report in September 2024 states that the staff survey of digital capacity is 50 per cent complete, a staff survey on digital

skills is underway and training on Microsoft 365 is available. A digital training programme for members is also underway and they are appointing digital champions.

42. The digital skills survey should provide a more comprehensive overview of digital skills gaps and direct future training needs and opportunities. At present, digital skills are updated in a more ad hoc way for example as part of a qualification, through employee requests or performance appraisals.

43. The Comhairle plans to align employee digital skills with the competency framework currently in development by the Society of Personnel and Development Scotland when available.

The Comhairle has committed to address risks around digital exclusion and needs to prioritise this as it implements digital solutions

44. Addressing digital exclusion is a priority in the Digitalisation Strategy 2022-27 and the delivery plan identifies actions to increase digital capacity and skills among its communities and workforce. The progress report in September 2024 shows that the Comhairle is progressing some, but not all, of the actions to support communities:

- Outreach work through adult learning services providing digital literacy courses with more tailored learning approaches – in progress
- Community learning and development are rolling out devices and links to support services – in progress
- Schools are providing digital skills and identifying those without access – in progress
- Identifying a baseline for digital awareness and capacity in communities – not yet progressed
- Exploring delivery of services in partnership with other sectors and community groups through community Hubs – not yet progressed

45. It will be important that the Comhairle considers and addresses digital exclusion as it implements digital initiatives in response to the cyber attack such as a new website with online customer services ([paragraph 36](#)). The Comhairle told us that it recognises the risks of digital exclusion especially with an older population and will retain frontline services. The Comhairle's Customer Service Strategy was approved by the Policy and Resources' Committee in September 2024 and includes a section on digital inclusion and accessibility.

46. As mentioned in [paragraph 33](#), the Digitalisation Strategy progress report did not report on the performance measures identified in the delivery plan. The Comhairle should use its performance measures to help determine whether the actions they are taking to reduce digital exclusion are achieving their intended outcomes.

Flexible working and other innovative staff deployment

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

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

Around 50 per cent of the Comhairle’s office-based staff work in a hybrid manner and the Comhairle has recently approved a hybrid working policy to ensure a consistent approach. Employees are expected to have a home base in the Western Isles due to the Comhairle’s commitment to a sustainable population

49. New ways of working have been in place at the Comhairle since the pandemic. The Comhairle has developed a hybrid working policy to ensure fair treatment and a consistent approach and this was approved by the Policy and Resources Committee in September 2024. The policy sets out the hybrid working arrangements, entitlements, eligibility criteria and other conditions that apply. Employees have to complete a hybrid working request if they wish to work in a hybrid way.

50. In October 2022, managers were consulted on the way office-based employees were working. From this survey, four per cent of staff were home based, 43 per cent were office-based and 53 per cent were hybrid workers. This survey has not been repeated, but the consensus is that this remains an accurate reflection of how employees are working, although it has been noted that hybrid workers seem to be working more days in the office than at home.

51. The Comhairle sets out in its Corporate Workforce Plan 2023-27 that employees are expected to have a home base within the Western Isles due to the need for it to balance what it can offer employees with its commitment to ensuring a sustainable population.

Fixed term contracts are becoming more prevalent due to increases in short-term funding

52. With financial constraints and the increase in short-term funding opportunities, there is an acknowledgement that there is likely to be an increase

in fixed term contracts offered. Currently 12.4 per cent of FTEs are on fixed term contracts. The number of staff on fixed term contracts is monitored closely as extensions are regularly required as many posts are dependent on funding.

53. The Comhairle has also recently undertaken an exercise to benchmark pay and terms and conditions of employment. Benchmarking exercises demonstrate that it must maintain its focus on the quality of the offer of employment to remain competitive in the local and national employment market now and in the future.

Employee surveys are carried out every three to four years, with the next one due in October

54. The Comhairle undertakes employee surveys every three to four years to gain employee feedback and is due to carry out a survey in October 2024. The questions to be included in the survey were agreed at the Human Resources Sub-Committee in September 2024. The survey includes standard questions to allow for benchmarking, alongside a focus on staff wellbeing. The Comhairle is aiming to achieve a 40 per cent response rate. Results from the survey are scheduled to be published in early 2025.

There is scope for the Comhairle's relationship with Trades Unions to develop

55. Relationships between the Comhairle and Trades Unions are still developing due to changes in union representatives. In 2019 all the local representatives in one of the larger unions stood down. In June 2023, new local representatives were appointed and this led to the JCC meetings being reinstated in August 2023. However, the next JCC meeting was not held until a year later, in August 2024. The November 2023 cyber attack was cited by the Comhairle as the reason for this gap. JCC meetings are now scheduled to be held quarterly.

56. Trades Unions feel that the Comhairle could improve its communication and engagement with them and with employees. As a number of union officials are relatively new then there is scope and opportunity for this relationship to mature over time.

57. The 2022 Best Value Assurance Report found there was scope for the Comhairle to improve its communication with staff. Previous staff surveys showed a perception that the Comhairle needed to be more open and keep staff informed. One of the Comhairle's five priorities in its Corporate Workforce Plan 2023-27 is to prioritise employee communication. A Communications Strategy was approved by the Policy and Resources Committee in September 2024. One of its objectives is to provide employees with regular information. An employee engagement forum has been re-established and the Chief Executive issues employee updates as appropriate. Trades Unions are cited as one of the Comhairle's internal stakeholders in the strategy but there is little detail included about how it will engage with them.

Recommendation 5

The Comhairle should put plans in place to support the development of its relationship with Trades Unions.

Developing future skills and capacity

58. Councils need to find innovative ways to ensure the workforce capacity and skills they need to deliver services in the future. Training and development opportunities can help to attract and retain employees and ensure skills are in place. Many councils work with their partners to offer apprenticeship schemes or vocational qualifications. Succession planning is also important to develop future leaders and ensure that essential skills are in place.

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

The Comhairle has its own well-established apprenticeship programmes in place in addition to the modern apprenticeship programme run by Skills Development Scotland

60. The Comhairle's key workforce challenges include an ageing workforce and depopulation. Through Skills Development Scotland (SDS) funded programmes, the Comhairle has developed an apprenticeship pipeline to support these challenges. It currently works with SDS to provide modern apprenticeships and has also created its own bespoke apprenticeship programmes, in areas such as social work, HR, IT and engineering where no SDS funding is in place. This helps it to put plans in place for hard to fill posts and support succession planning.

61. The Comhairle promotes modern apprenticeships as an option to gain qualifications without leaving the islands. In 2023/24 there were 88 young people on apprenticeships. Of these, 25 apprentices achieved their qualifications and went on to employment with the Comhairle, ten young people left the programme early whilst the rest are continuing with their qualifications.

62. The Comhairle also makes use of foundation apprenticeships to help build career pathways. Anyone completing a foundation apprenticeship is guaranteed an interview for a modern apprenticeship. The Comhairle promote the apprenticeships through visits to local schools and engaging with staff, pupils and parents. In 2023/24, 130 young people signed up for the programme, and all 130 achieved their qualifications.

The Comhairle has introduced several initiatives to address difficulties in retaining carers and social workers

63. Like most councils, the Comhairle has experienced difficulties in recruiting and retaining adult social care and social worker roles and has introduced several initiatives to address these difficulties:

- In 2022 a retention payment of £600 was introduced on a temporary basis to eligible frontline Care at Home employees. The payment was made over two instalments to those employees who had been in post for more than 12 months to encourage employees to remain within the service. The payment was put in place to allow the service time to consider long-term options, particularly a restructuring exercise, whilst retaining enough staff to operate the service.
- This restructuring of the Care at Home service enabled a new career entry grade post to be established which provides all new employees with a comprehensive training and support package. This then enables them to complete all mandatory training and the required SVQ for roles within a targeted six-month period. A qualified worker post was also established to capture the knowledge, experience and skills of workers and allows for career progression.
- Services have the option to request a post is assigned key worker status and requires priority housing requirements. This means that a person moving to the islands for a job can get help to find housing via the Hebridean Housing Partnership. This has been used effectively in challenging areas, such as Uist and Barra.

The Comhairle works with local schools and other education providers to promote careers within the Comhairle

64. The Comhairle has held a number of careers fairs and events to provide information on working in the public sector. It held a graduate careers fair in June 2024 which targeted individuals studying at degree level or higher or who had recently graduated to promote the Comhairle as a career choice.

65. It also held a careers event aimed at pupils from primary 4 to sixth year. These pupils were invited to attend a careers event where they could speak directly to employers and learn about the varied opportunities available in their area and the different routes available to them.

The Comhairle has a good understanding of the roles that are challenging to recruit into as well as the skills and training needs of staff

66. The Corporate Workforce Plan 2023-27 contains information on roles that require skills development and investment, and the work that has been carried out to date. Service training plans have been completed for 2023/24 and have been developed for 2024/25. This helps the training section to prioritise the training needs of the organisation and provide relevant training.

Joint workforce arrangements across services and partners

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

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

The Comhairle works well in partnership with a range of organisations

69. The 2022 Best Value Assurance Report found that the Comhairle works well with partners in delivering services. This includes its work to support the economy and develop community hubs and its apprenticeship programme. It collaborates with other rural and island authorities and government agencies, including its work with the Northern Alliance to improve education outcomes. The Comhairle and Skills Development Scotland work closely together and have a charter setting out their shared aim to help school leavers into work, training or further study.

70. The Comhairle recognises that partnership working is essential for it to achieve its economic objectives. It has supported close partnership working with economic partners, including Highlands and Islands Enterprise, Business Gateway, Skills Development Scotland and Stornoway Port Authority, including co-locating teams in Comhairle's main office. It is an active member of the Regional Economic Partnership, which aims to bring together regional interests to help drive economic growth. It supports economic development in the Outer Hebrides through a broad range of activities:

71. The Islands Growth Deal provides a framework and funding for key economic projects. Regional growth deals set out long-term strategic aims for improving regional economies. The Comhairle has taken an active role in developing the Deal together with Orkney and Shetland islands councils. The Deal's aims are consistent with the National Islands Plan and the Highlands and Islands Enterprise regional strategy for the area.

The Comhairle has some formal arrangements in place for sharing services with its partners to create workforce benefits. It is limited in sharing services with other councils by its commitment to employing people living in the Western Isles to ensure a sustainable population.

72. The Comhairle has confirmed that it is open to considering sharing services where appropriate. It currently has some arrangements in place for sharing services with its partners. Sharing services with other councils is limited because, as discussed in [paragraph 51](#), all employees are expected to have a home base within the Western Isles due to the Comhairle's commitment to ensuring a sustainable population.

73. While there are some examples of services being delivered on behalf of the Comhairle, the Comhairle also provides services for its partners. For example:

- HR deliver recruitment and HR services for HI TRANS
- Payroll provide services to the Hebridean Housing Partnership
- Patient Travel in Barra is delivered by the Comhairle on behalf of NHS Western Isles.

Measuring the impact of workforce planning

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

The Comhairle has developed a corporate-level action plan for workforce planning and reports progress against this to Committee annually.

75. The Corporate Workforce Plan 2023-27 contains an action plan as noted in [paragraph 15](#). The action plan includes columns for the lead department (eg HR or 'services') and the timescale for each action as well as one for outcomes ([paragraph 18](#)). Although there is no information set out in the Corporate Workforce Plan 2023-27 about how the actions will be monitored and reported the Comhairle has confirmed actions are to be monitored annually and the first monitoring report is due to be considered by Policy and Resources Committee in November 2024.

76. The first annual monitoring report consists of the original action plan with an extra column added to provide a progress update on each of the actions along with another column setting out the RAG status of each action.

There is likely to be crossover between the actions set out in the Organisational Development Strategy 2024-30, currently being developed, and the actions from the Corporate Workforce Plan 2023-27 action plan.

77. The Comhairle is in the process of updating its Organisational Development Strategy 2024-30 and has shared a draft with the audit team. The strategy is due to be approved by the end of 2024 and includes three main themes, with action plans being developed for each:

- work well – empowering employees to become a more resilient and effective workforce
- work smart – making workspaces more flexible and responsive to people's needs
- work sustainably – supporting a skilled and balanced workforce.

78. There is a clear crossover between the actions that are likely to be in the Organisational Development Strategy and some of the actions from the

Corporate Workforce Plan 2023-27 action plan. The Comhairle intends to use its electronic performance management system, Interplan, to track progress against actions in the Organisation Development Strategy.

Recommendation 6

The Comhairle should ensure that the actions from the Corporate Workforce Plan 2023-27 and the Organisational Development Strategy 2024-30 are clearly aligned.

At corporate level, the Comhairle presents detailed information in relation to its workforce across various reports but has not set out how it intends to assess its overall performance in workforce planning and what metrics it will use

79. The Comhairle has not set out how it intends to assess its performance in workforce planning and what metrics it will use. It has a rich source of available data in relation its workforce and yet there is no comprehensive overview of performance measures and targets. The Comhairle would benefit from developing a performance framework to provide an overview of the impact and measure the effectiveness of its workforce planning activities.

80. Reports produced that refer to workforce data include:

- annual employee equality monitoring statistics
- reports on staff absence
- detailed recruitment analysis produced for the Human Resources Sub-Committee in June 2024. This included, for 2023/24, the number of applications per post advertised (1.9), the number of posts filled (567) and not filled (503) and the number of readvertisements
- results of a recruitment survey of managers and applicants
- a HR performance outcomes report on performance appraisals, exit interviews and special leave
- the number of apprentices moving into sustained employment ([paragraph 61](#))

81. The Comhairle has not carried out any formal self-evaluation of its workforce planning such as the [Local Government Association workforce planning maturity index](#). These can help identify strengths and weaknesses in workforce planning approaches and inform future approaches.

Recommendation 7

At corporate level, the Comhairle should set out how it intends to assess its performance and what metrics it will use to measure the impact of its workforce planning and initiatives.

Actions in the Comhairle's service-level workforce plans are not always SMART. It is not clear how progress against actions is monitored and reported at service level or how issues arising are collated across services to identify any common issues

82. As noted in [paragraph 19](#), the Comhairle has produced service workforce plans for the majority of its services. Each of these contains an action plan. However, many of the actions contained in these are not SMART and it is not clear how progress against them will be measured, monitored and reported. Also, there is an opportunity for the Comhairle to use rich monitoring information from actions across services to identify common issues that may require action at corporate level.

Recommendation 8

The Comhairle should set out its arrangements for monitoring and reporting on progress against actions in and across service-level workforce plans.

Appendix 1

Improvement Action plan

Issue/risk	Recommendation	Agreed management action/timing
<p>1. Aligning the Corporate Workforce Plan with key strategies and plans</p> <p>The Corporate Workforce Plan 2023-27 does not set out explicitly how workforce planning will contribute to its strategic priorities being achieved.</p> <p>Risk – There is a risk that the Comhairle’s approach to workforce planning does not support its strategic priorities.</p>	<p>The Comhairle should ensure its Corporate Workforce Plan aligns with its key strategies and plans and sets out explicitly how workforce planning will support it achieve its strategic priorities.</p> <p>Paragraphs 13 and 14</p>	<p>The Corporate Workforce Plan is due for review in 2026/27.</p> <p>Chief Officer, HR and Performance</p> <p>December 2026</p>
<p>2. Developing strategic corporate-level workforce planning priorities</p> <p>The Comhairle sets out its workforce planning priorities, with associated outcomes, in its Corporate Workforce Plan 2023-27 but these would benefit from being more strategic.</p> <p>Risk – There is a risk that the workforce planning actions the Comhairle is taking forward do not contribute to its strategic vision for its workforce.</p>	<p>The Comhairle should develop corporate-level strategic workforce planning outcomes, linked clearly to its action plan, to demonstrate a clearer understanding of how the actions it is taking forward are contributing to its strategic vision for its workforce.</p> <p>Paragraphs 17 and 18</p>	<p>The Corporate Workforce Plan is due for review in 2026/27.</p> <p>Chief Officer, HR and Performance</p> <p>December 2026</p>
<p>3. Strengthening links between the Corporate Workforce Plan and service workforce plans and providing more support to services in producing these</p> <p>The Comhairle produces annual service-level</p>	<p>The Comhairle should ensure that priorities and actions from the Corporate Workforce Plan are reflected in the next round of its service workforce plans in addition to service-specific actions. It should provide more guidance and/or tools to support</p>	<p>A review of the service level workforce planning templates will be included for 2025/26.</p> <p>Chief Officer, HR and Performance</p> <p>March 2025</p>

workforce plans but it is not clear how the actions in these contribute to it achieving its corporate workforce planning priorities.

Risk – There is a risk that workforce planning is not as effective as it could be if corporate workforce planning actions are not supported by actions in service workforce plans.

services develop service workforce plans.

Paragraphs 19 and 20

4. Demonstrating workforce benefits from the use of digital technology

The Comhairle needs to demonstrate workforce benefits and productivity gains made through the use of digital technology.

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

The Comhairle should demonstrate and quantify what workforce benefits and productivity gains are made through its use of digital technology.

Paragraphs 37 and 38

New performance measures will be developed.

Chief Executive

December 2026

5. Improving communication and engagement with employees and Trades Unions

Relationships between the Comhairle and Trades Unions are still developing due to changes in union representatives. The 2022 Best Value Assurance Report found there was scope for the Comhairle to improve its communication with staff.

Risk – Changes to ways of working are harder to implement because Trades Unions and employees do not feel consulted or engaged with.

The Comhairle should put plans in place to support the development of its relationship with Trades Unions.

Paragraphs 55-57

2024 employee survey commenced November 2024. Employee Forum established. Discussion with Trade Unions underway on policy reviews.

Chief Officer, HR and Performance

December 2024

6. Clear reporting of progress on actions in the Corporate Workforce Plan 2023-27

There is likely to be crossover between the actions set out in the Organisational Development Strategy 2024-30, currently being developed, and the actions from the Corporate Workforce Plan 2023-27 action plan.

Risk – Elected members do not have a clear view of progress in workforce planning.

The Comhairle should ensure that the actions from the Corporate Workforce Plan 2023-27 and the Organisational Development Strategy 2024-30 are clearly aligned.

Paragraphs 77 and 78

The Corporate Workforce Plan is due for review in 2026/27.

Chief Officer, HR and Performance

December 2026

7. Assessing the impact of workforce planning and initiatives

At corporate level, the Comhairle presents detailed information in relation to its workforce across various reports but has not set out how it intends to assess its overall performance in workforce planning and what metrics it will use.

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

At corporate level, the Comhairle should set out how it intends to assess its performance and what metrics it will use to measure the impact of its workforce planning and initiatives.

Paragraphs 79 and 80

The HR performance reports will be collated into one annual report.

Chief Officer, HR and Performance

December 2025

8. Reporting progress against service-level workforce planning actions

It is not clear how progress against actions is monitored and reported at service level or how issues arising are collated across services to identify any common issues.

The Comhairle should set out its arrangements for monitoring and reporting on progress against actions in and across service-level workforce plans.

Paragraph 82

Annual Reporting on service level workforce plans will be implemented

Chief Executive

December 2025

Risk – Common workforce planning issues across services that may require corporate action are not identified.

Workforce innovation - how councils are responding to workforce challenges

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