

10 March 2021**Agenda Item: 9****REPORT OF SERVICE DIRECTOR - CUSTOMERS, GOVERNANCE AND
EMPLOYEES****EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT WITH THE COUNCIL'S WORKFORCE****Purpose of the Report**

1. To inform Members of the range of communication and engagement activities being undertaken to ensure the Council's workforce is prepared and enabled to deliver the Council's published priorities and to fully understand their roles in doing so as set out in a range of corporate and departmental strategies and action plans. In addition, the report seeks Members' approval to progress with the development of an Employee Communications and Engagement Strategy and action plan to further encourage the flow of information ideas and feedback from employees across the Council.

Information

2. Members have previously expressed interest in the level of communication and engagement with the workforce during the Covid pandemic and how their ongoing contribution is being recognised. This has included raising concerns for the physical and mental well-being of the workforce during the ongoing emergency and the various actions taken in respect of this have been considered and addressed in previous reports to Personnel Committee.
3. The work undertaken as part of the various priority workstreams of the Workforce Resilience and Recovery Group, chaired by the Service Director - Customers, Governance and Employees, focuses on a range of activities which seek to maintain and build on levels of existing employee engagement and commitment. This report seeks to update Members on some of the actions taken to date and seeks approval for the further development of work in this area. To support this aim, we are currently developing an over-arching Employee Communications and Engagement Strategy, with an associated action plan, to enable us to understand the employee experience and the culture of the organisation.
4. Employee engagement is a workplace approach resulting in the right conditions for all members of the Council to give of their best each day, committed to the Council's goals and values, motivated to contribute to our overall success, with an enhanced sense of personal well-being. It is important for the Council to understand how its employees view their employer as an "engaged employee" is defined as one who is fully absorbed by and enthusiastic about their work and so takes positive action to further the Council's reputation and interests.

5. The Council has adopted a range of measures to try to ensure it has an engaged workforce and continues to seek employees' views on service development and delivery to shape future work, rather than relying on a top down, directive approach. Members may recall the challenging negotiations around proposed changes to terms and conditions in 2018 where these were paused to enter into a direct conversation with the workforce. Employees had the opportunity to email their views confidentially or to attend a series of workshops led by the Corporate Leadership Team. This exercise provided invaluable insight into how people were feeling, how they felt about the Council as their employer and helped senior officers understand what people valued in the employment package. This feedback helped reshape the package of measures which were eventually accepted and implemented from 1 April 2019 as a collective agreement.
6. The Covid pandemic has presented many challenges in how key workforce messages are communicated to different audiences. Some, such as the initial directive to work from home in March 2020, were necessarily instructive. However, over the course of the last twelve months, there have been opportunities to engage more collaboratively with our workforce and seek their views which has helped shape our response and will further inform the future of work as we edge towards recovery and beyond.
7. The Council undertook an employee well-being survey in May 2020 to gauge how people were feeling and asking them to identify what further support they required to continue delivering services during the Covid emergency. We had a large response with over 2,400 employees responding. The responses were overwhelmingly positive and colleagues shared their renewed sense of pride in delivering public services and also told us how well they thought this Council had been led in its response to the pandemic. It is likely that we will undertake further surveys in future which may be more targeted and also seek to utilise the technology people have become more familiar with over the course of the last twelve months. Whatever tools we use in future, and it is unlikely that there will be a "one size fits all" solution, these must be accessible to all to ensure the views of the whole workforce are heard. This includes frontline colleagues with limited access to workplace technology but also for people with issues accessing and responding to information due to a disability.
8. Having effective communication and engagement with our employees creates a better understanding of what motivates people, which in turn assists with maximising their performance, these include:
 - employees feeling properly supported by their managers and colleagues.
 - being given timely and constructive feedback.
 - being empowered to take responsibility for their job is very important. This includes having work autonomy – for example, being able to make decisions about how and at what pace they work – and having the right skills and the confidence to do a good job.
 - Employees must not feel overwhelmed by the demands of their job.
 - Employees' motivations are shaped by individual factors. These include how we identify as people, personally and professionally, and our ability to 'self-regulate' or manage our behavior and not be distracted from our goals.
9. Since the start of the pandemic, there has been regular engagement with the recognised trade unions and the self-managed groups to share information and to provide a forum where issues can be raised and addressed collaboratively. This approach has been very positive and well received and has facilitated joint problem solving when issues have arisen. The intention is

also to continue to engage with all sections of the workforce to gain their views on a range of issues.

10. A series of Question and Answer sessions have been instigated where the Chief Executive and Corporate Leadership Team members engage in conversations with employees virtually, with the option of emailing questions prior to the event, to be answered in the course of the discussion. To date, two events have taken place, one with an invited audience drawn from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic employees to address specific issues and the second was an open event to discuss the culture of the organisation and to understand our employees' experiences of what it is like to work for Nottinghamshire County Council. These events are ongoing and future subjects will include recognition, development and engagement.
11. The feedback from these events has been positive and employees have welcomed the opportunity to discuss key issues with senior leaders of the organisation. The topics covered can be broadly summarised under the following headings:
 - Communication and employee engagement
 - Smarter working
 - Induction
 - Shared best practice with other organisations on how we will work in future
 - How to maintain a sense of "team" whilst working remotely
 - Leadership development and career progression
 - The Green estate.
12. Those who participated felt it was a valuable session and a good opportunity to share and receive information with colleagues from across the Council who they may not have any contact with in their day to day roles. In some cases, it highlighted the need to ensure information has been widely shared rather than assuming this to be the case. Below are a sample of some of the comments received at the end of the most recent Q&A briefing:

"Really good session, very informative and exciting thoughts for the future. Thank you for giving us the opportunity to partake in this session"

"NCC still a good organisation to work for!"

"I've been with NCC since 2003....great employer hence that I'm still here! Still areas for development though to make us even better"

"Please don't forgot the people that are doing informal care for an elderly relative 24:7, trying to keep them safe as well as working full time at home."

"Would love to get more involved in working groups where possible"

"Really useful and engaging - will be feeding back to the team"

"Great to have a forum for open, honest and constructive discussion. Thanks"

"Thank you - great session, really useful to hear all the info from the speakers and views and experiences of colleagues. Definitely would like to do it again. Thanks for your time in putting it together."

“I'd like to share/update my team and encourage them to attend if there is another in the future.”

13. One of the exercises undertaken as part of the latest session was a Menti survey. This provides a snapshot of how people were feeling at that time in the form of a word cloud (appendix 1). This exercise was initially undertaken with the Extended Leadership Team and will be repeated with different groups to provide a snapshot giving valuable insight into the overarching mood and experiences of the workforce at different stages of the pandemic.
14. The Q&A sessions are designed to encourage a dialogue between employees and senior officers to create a greater understanding of employee experience and the feedback has been encouraging as to how people have welcomed the opportunity to engage directly with members of the Corporate Leadership Team. Further sessions with the Corporate Leadership Team are being planned to continue this two-way dialogue.
15. Next steps include understanding what drives, or hinders, commitment or motivation and identifying effective channels to give employees' their voice and to listen carefully to their concerns and aspirations. As mentioned above, we have conducted employee attitude surveys, and are now introducing more qualitative methods of engagement such as focus groups, adopting a mixed approach as different methods have varying benefits. Employee surveys give a representative view of experiences across the organisation at a particular time. On the other hand, qualitative methods provide a richer understanding of employee experiences in their own words and can give deeper insight into why people are happy or unhappy. Research indicates that the key enablers of employee engagement include:
 - Leadership that gives a 'strong strategic narrative about the organisation'.
 - Line managers who motivate, empower and support their employees.
 - Employee voice throughout the organisation, to involve employees in decision making.
 - **Organisational integrity** that stated values are reflected in the actual organisational culture; that is, what we say is what we do.
16. It is important for the Council to develop an effective Employee Communications and Engagement Strategy because when workplace engagement is successful, it can massively help in better employee productivity, organisational growth, and workplace wellness. The most common benefits of having an engaged workplace are higher customer or client satisfaction; enhanced employee productivity; lower turnover rates; reduced absenteeism; enhanced workplace culture; better employee health and wellness.
17. The work to develop an Employee Communications and Engagement Strategy has started and a draft version with an associated action plan will be brought to a future Personnel Committee for consideration and approval.

Other Options Considered

18. The Council will adopt a range of tools to engage its workforce in developing its response to the ongoing pandemic and the future of work beyond the current situation. There is not one single initiative or response which will deliver this, so a multi-faceted, blended approach is the recommended way forward, using new technologies where appropriate, to ensure the Council's workforce is fully involved in the delivery, development and ongoing improvement of

our services. The development of the strategy and action plan will involve consideration of the most effective mechanisms for delivering these ambitions so other options may be included as the strategy develops and evolves.

Reasons for Recommendations

19. Members have been greatly interested in the contribution of the Council's workforce during the Covid pandemic and how they have been engaged and communicated with during this period where many are working in a different way. Members have also received information in a number of reports which highlight our aspiration to be an employer of choice in a very competitive job market. Understanding what perspective existing employees want in terms of engagement, recognition and reward, flexible working, personal and professional development, support and a range of other issues is critical to ensure we have a workforce which can transform and deliver the services required by the residents of Nottinghamshire. Employees have clearly stated how much they value being engaged in discussions about the future of work and how services will be delivered.

Statutory and Policy Implications

20. This report has been compiled after consideration of implications in respect of crime and disorder, data protection and information governance, finance, human resources, human rights, the NHS Constitution (public health services), the public sector equality duty, safeguarding of children and adults at risk, service users, smarter working, sustainability and the environment and where such implications are material they are described below. Appropriate consultation has been undertaken and advice sought on these issues as required.

Data Protection and Information Governance

21. There is no personal information about named individuals contained within the body of the report.

Financial Implications

22. There are no costs associated with the content of this report. The Council seeks to have a fully engaged workforce which it is recognised leads to reduced turnover and therefore avoids the associated costs of additional recruitment.

Human Resources Implications

23. Employee communication and engagement are key tools to ensuring the Council has a committed, energetic and healthy workforce. The opportunity to have direct discussions with employees as well as through their representatives and self-managed groups, provides invaluable insight into what the workforce feels about the Council as an employer and allows us to target resource and effort into addressing any emerging issues.

Smarter Working Implications

24. There are no direct smarter working implications although the provision of flexible working opportunities in itself provides a valuable platform to engage with employees on how the benefits of this can be maximised both for individuals and the organisation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

That Members agree:

- 1) To the development of an Employee Communication and Engagement Strategy and action plan for consideration at a future Committee.
- 2) To commend the positive engagement continues to enable the ongoing positive contribution of the workforce.

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Constitutional Comments (KK 17/02/21)

25. The proposals in this report are within the remit of the Personnel Committee.

Financial Comments (SES 23/02/21)

26. There are no specific financial implications arising directly from this report.

HR Comments (JP 24/02/21)

27. Any HR implications are set out in the report. Engagement with the workforce and the recognised trade unions will continue to assist with this programme of work.

Background Papers and Published Documents

Except for previously published documents, which will be available elsewhere, the documents listed here will be available for inspection in accordance with Section 100D of the Local Government Act 1972.

- None

Electoral Division(s) and Member(s) Affected

- All