

Staff focus groups

Summary of findings

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Walsall Council



IMPROVE
outcomes and
customer experience



IMPROVE
employee satisfaction
and engagement



IMPROVE
service efficiency
and performance

Staff focus groups

- Four staff focus groups were convened as a follow up to the Your Views Matter Employee Survey 2023
- Conducted on 28 and 29 February 2024 @ Civic Centre
- Informal 2 hour discussions held with council staff to gain deeper insights into their experiences and perceptions of working at the council.
- 30 people took part representing all directorates

"It's like voting - don't complain about the government if you don't use your vote. So it's a chance to say and be heard. If things change, great, if they don't, well, I've come and said what I thought. That's why I came."

Discussion topics

- All groups discussed:
 - Views on the results of the quantitative survey
 - Perceptions of what makes Walsall Council a good place to work,
 - Views on communication and information
- Each group then focussed on one of the following topics:
 - Your future at the council / recruitment and retention
 - Line and senior management
 - Direction of the council, vision and values
 - A representative, healthy workforce

Reaction to the Your Views Matter 2023 survey results

- Staff did not find the survey results surprising commenting that they were similar to the 2021 survey.
- Communication was a recurring topic, with employees recognising improvements but also noting the need for ongoing enhancements, especially in inter-departmental communication and with remote workers.

“I feel that communication between departments is quite critical. I’m learning a new role and when you’re working with different groups it’s hard if you don’t know the people. It maybe exacerbated by remote working, it’s difficult sometimes to get hold of someone that you need for a particular task”.

Walsall Council as an employer of choice (1)

- Employees discussed what makes the council a good place to work, highlighting;
 - the interesting and meaningful nature of their roles
 - the opportunity to make a difference and impact residents' lives
 - the benefits of working in the public sector
 - location
 - the importance of strong colleague relationships
 - flexible working arrangements.

"Having a meaningful role, so feeling as if you're able to make a positive change, not just within the Council, but with the borough and for residents."

"I find that if you try to find a job on the same money, the same sickness, the same holidays, the same package, pensions and whatever else, you won't get it. You will not find it."



Walsall Council as an employer of choice (2)

- Additional factors were suggested to make Walsall Council a better employer;
 - Improving internal communication and understanding across different departments. Felt that greater recognition and understanding of the work done by different teams across the council would foster a culture of mutual appreciation and support
 - While flexibility and the ability to work from home were generally viewed positively, there were concerns about feeling physically distant from colleagues and the challenges of navigating online communication channels
 - Opportunities for career progression, upskilling, and reskilling emerged as crucial drivers of employee satisfaction and retention, some felt these are not readily available to all employees.

Employer of choice - feeling valued

Feeling valued is important;

- Feeling valued has a significant impact on employee morale, motivation, and overall job satisfaction
- Positive reinforcement and encouragement were highlighted as essential for creating a sense of validation and confidence

"A pat on the back goes a long way to help everybody's self-esteem."

"There's always going to be bits in your job that you don't necessarily want to do as much as other bits. If you're dealing with the general public, sometimes you can get a bit of agro from that, and then you do need that support. Someone to say 'you've done a good job there'."

Employer of choice - recognition

- Staff felt there is a need to improve existing recognition programs, suggesting;
 - increased face-to-face acknowledgment and verbal praise from managers
 - informal recognition systems e.g. peer-to-peer recognition programs or appreciation events.
- Annual Staff Recognition Awards (SRAs): some see as 'tokenistic', a box-ticking exercise rather than genuine praise
- Calls to make SRAs more meaningful and inclusive.

"The value of being recognised for what you do in your job, not just once a year, is important. Whether that's bimonthly, whether that's every six months...I think you get a lot more staff working harder to achieve that because it's recognised more than just once a year."



What employees say to friends and family about working for Walsall Council

- Employees are generally proud of the work that they do, but reluctant to openly broadcast their council employment due to potential negative perceptions / reactions
- Many say that they work for a 'local authority' as opposed Walsall Council.

"It's that negative perception that people have - when they think of the Council, they think of bins or fly-tipping...you're constantly having to field against that."

- Participants were however enthusiastic about recommending Walsall Council as a workplace to others, emphasising;
 - excellent working environment,
 - opportunities for career progression, and
 - attractive employee benefits package

Communication and information

- The effectiveness of various communication channels were discussed, with Inside Walsall and the Chief Executive's video updates being well received.
- There was a call for more diverse communication methods to ensure all employees are reached, including those without computer access.

"The intranet...when I first started a year and a half ago, it wasn't a priority for me to look at it. Now I will do because I know that there's going to be updates on there that are interesting and not just me reading lots of stuff - every article seems to be different. So I think that the intranet now works, probably the best that I've ever encountered."

"The chief's briefing has been a welcome addition. That gives you a bit of insight."

- Feeling of inconsistency in communication practices across directorates, with some teams receiving more frequent updates than others
- Quarterly "roadshows" were praised for providing updates, but shorter, more focused sessions were recommended to improve engagement



Communication and information

- There are mixed views on the need for communication between directorates
- Staff want to hear about;
 - Budget setting and the impact of budgets on service delivery
 - Structures
 - Good news stories
 - Community events
 - Video content
 - Service-specific information

"It's nice to see good things that are happening across this Council that we are part of as a team, and it might help people feel like more of a team as well."

"As a resident and a Council employee, once you've heard that you can put that message out in the Community...even if you tell a few family and friends, they'll pass on that message out there as well."



Employee expectations of Senior Leaders

- There is a desire for more transparent and informative communication from Senior Leaders.
- Staff want to be kept in the loop about organisational changes and feel that their input is valued and considered in decision-making processes.
- Some feel there is a lack of clarity about the structure above their line managers

"Being more visible and knowing who's who and what they do and recognising their service area because they do seem a bit removed."

"You've seen all these other executive directors and people are like 'who's that?', and you're like 'that was our executive director?...people just don't know who they are.'"

- Interest in understanding the topics discussed in Senior Leaders' meetings - priorities and spending decisions. Felt it would help employees better understand organisational goals and priorities, enabling them to align their work accordingly.



Key Selling Points for Recruitment

- Key selling points that may set the council apart as an employer;
 - clinical supervision for social workers
 - pension scheme
 - local
- The opportunity to make a difference to local people emerged as the most significant selling point for working at Walsall Council.
- The sense of contributing to the public good and having a positive impact on the community is a powerful motivator for prospective candidates and can serve as a compelling reason to choose employment with the council.

"We're all about giving pride back to customers and to our residents. I don't think that comes across well in our advertising."



Line and senior management

- **Management styles** varied significantly, which sometimes caused issues for staff. There was a suggestion for additional training to address this inconsistency.
- Time management, interpersonal and organisational skills were seen to contribute to effective management
- **Performance management** feelings of frustration, deflation, and demoralisation, indicating a sense of disillusionment with the current approach to addressing poor performance.
- **Acting on the results of the survey** there was a focus on the importance of clear and transparent communication, as well as tangible actions taken in response to survey feedback *"You Said, We Did"*.



Direction of the council, vision and values

Direction of the council

- Participants emphasised the importance of understanding the Council's vision and how their roles contribute to achieving it
- A need for clear communication of the Council's values to ensure they are reflected in everyday work practices
- There were calls for transparency, accountability, and consistency in organisational leadership and decision-making processes. Emphasising the importance of having clear communication channels and a sense of trust in leadership to navigate challenges effectively.

Vision and values

- Participants felt that it is important for the core values to remain stable and not change frequently
- Whilst the wording of values may evolve, the underlying essence and principles should remain consistent to ensure clarity and alignment across the organisation.

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

Need...

- **Equal treatment and opportunity:** treating everyone equally and to provide the same opportunities to all individuals, regardless of their background, identity, or characteristics.
- **Eliminate biases and barriers:** that may prevent certain groups from accessing opportunities or experiencing equal treatment
- **Respect and Recognition:** respectful treatment and recognition of diversity creates an inclusive workplace culture.
- **Awareness and Education:** critical factors in promoting equality and diversity in the workplace. Employees stressed the importance of ongoing training and education initiatives to raise awareness about unconscious bias, discrimination, and systemic inequalities.
- **Representation and Visibility:** diverse perspectives exist in the workplace. Representation is needed at all levels of the organisation.



Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

- **Accountability and Action:** Employees spoke of the need for accountability and action to address inequality and promote diversity in the workplace.
- **Ongoing Improvement:** While there was acknowledgement of the councils existing efforts to promote equality and diversity, participants did highlight a need for continued improvement.
- **Provision of Resources:** Participants highlighted the need for better provision of resources, particularly for individuals with disabilities.
- **Strategies to Enhance Diversity:** Targeted recruitment efforts aimed at attracting candidates from diverse backgrounds. With an emphasis on recruiting individuals who understand and can relate to the issues faced by different communities.
- **Improving Organisational Reputation:** Employees highlighted the potential for enhancing the council's reputation within the wider community, with inclusivity as a key driver

Mental health and wellbeing

- Important to address mental health concerns effectively and ensure the overall wellbeing of employees, particularly in the context of remote working (citing the blurring of boundaries between work and home environments, leading to increased stress and decreased relaxation time)
- Important to provide emotional support and understanding to colleagues dealing with mental health challenges

“So far down the road compared to other councils...for me personally with what I'm going through has been an absolute godsend.”

“Working from home especially means we need more welfare checks.”

“I had a load of family coming over 2 weeks later, I had the funeral and I knew I was just going to be an emotional wreck. I booked in as compassionate leave and my manager said no, you were meant to take your compassionate leave straight afterwards. And I just thought, I'm sorry, I didn't feel sad on the right day.”

Work life balance

- Participants value the flexibility offered by remote work arrangements, particularly in terms of managing their time around their day-to-day lives, including family commitments.
- The extent to which working for the council provides a good work-life balance depends on individual workload and how effectively employees manage their time.

“If somebody needs to go pick the kids up, you put your TOIL in and you know it's OK...I don't mind working a longer day because I know I can finish early on a day that I need to and there's no questions about that. So the work life balance, I completely appreciate it, but it does depend on what team you're in, and stress, and deadlines.”



Valuable opportunity and experience

- Participants expressed appreciation for the research being conducted by an independent party, recognising the importance of having an impartial platform to voice their opinions and concerns.
- Felt that their participation in focus group discussions allowed them to express their views, share feedback, and contribute ideas for improvement.
- Value of in-person engagement, noting that they appreciated the opportunity to participate in face-to-face discussions rather than virtual meetings.



Comments

Feedback survey: 89% said the experience of taking part in the groups was very good or good (overall 17 responses)

“There were representatives from many different service areas. It was very interesting to hear different perspectives, experiences from those attendees.”

“I felt valued and listened to. The time of the sessions was just right.”

“Enjoyable experience, good to share own opinions and what is working well within my team and learn from others. Opportunity to make new contacts in other teams as well.”

“The environment was very welcoming and open, and was clearly intended as a way to get staff feedback to support meaningful change. A balanced amount of focus on the 'bad' as well as the 'good'.”

