



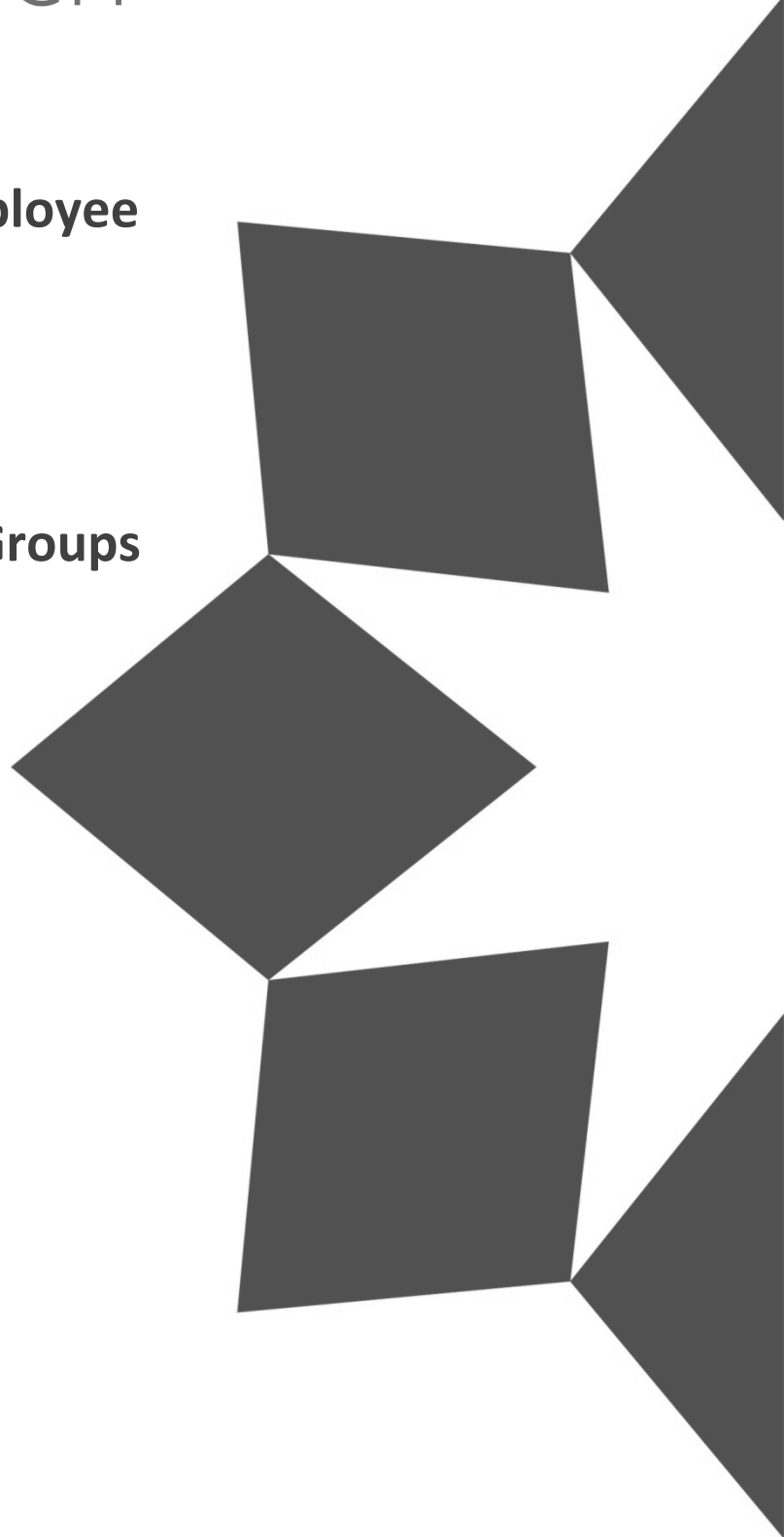
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**Your Views Matter Employee
Survey 2023**

**Follow Up Staff Focus Groups
Walsall Council**

Report

April 2024



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Project details

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Introduction

Following the 2023 Your Views Matter quantitative survey, Walsall Council organised a series of focus group discussions held with a cross-section of council employees. This qualitative approach was employed to explore key issues, and to gain richer insights into the underlying factors influencing employee experiences and perceptions.

During the Your Views Matter survey staff were asked if they would be willing to participate in further research. Using a database of those who agreed, Walsall Council successfully recruited up to 10 participants for each of four face to face focus groups. The involvement of M·E·L Research in facilitating each focus group added an element of independence to the process, ensuring impartiality and fostering an environment conducive to open and candid discussion. These focus groups served as a platform for employees to freely express their perspectives, providing valuable qualitative data to complement the quantitative findings of the Your Views Matter survey.

"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."

A total of 30 people took part, representing all directorates. During each 2 hour focus group session, participants contributed to guided discussions covering a range of core topics. These discussions delved into participants' views on the results of the quantitative survey, their perceptions of what makes Walsall Council a good place to work, and their views on communication and information sharing practices within the organisation.

The final section of individual discussions explored the themes listed below:

- Your future at the council / recruitment and retention – Group 1, 10am Wednesday 28th February
- Line and senior management – Group 2, 1.30pm Wednesday 28th February
- Direction of the council, vision and values – Group 3, 10am Thursday 29th February
- A representative, healthy workforce – Group 4, 1.30pm Thursday 29th February

Participants joined the sessions for a wide range of reasons. Some expressed a desire to discuss meaningful changes resulting from past surveys, highlighting improvements in training and recognition of the need for career progression. Others joined the session with a proactive intention to make a difference within the council, seeking a platform to voice their concerns constructively rather than merely expressing dissatisfaction. For some long-serving employees, the session provided an opportunity to address longstanding issues, such as the lack of Annual Performance Conversations (APCs), and the need for greater understanding and support from managers, particularly regarding mental health concerns. Several participants talked about the importance of taking proactive steps to effect change, likening their participation to voting in elections to influence government decisions. Additionally, the sessions served as an opportunity for remote workers to engage with colleagues from other teams and gain insights into the overall atmosphere and dynamics of the council's workforce.

Overall, participants expressed a collective commitment to being part of positive change within the council.

The following commentary summarises the key points to emerge from the discussions. All views are reported anonymously.

Reaction to the Your Views Matter 2023 survey results - covered in all groups

At the start of each group discussion, the moderator presented a selection of the key findings of the Your Views Matter survey. As the results were broadly similar to the results of the 2021 survey, there was nothing in the findings that generated a strong reaction or surprise amongst participants.

One topic that was quickly raised across all groups, and received similar comments from participants, was communication, highlighting the importance employees place on the issue.

On a positive note, there was a belief that the improvement in communication demonstrated in the data was, in part, due to the recent restructure with employees now feeling that they have a greater awareness of what is happening across the organisation.

"Staff feeling informed about what's generally going on across the campus, I think that's a positive from our point of view because it means what we're doing is working."

However not all views were positive and there was broad recognition amongst participants of the need for ongoing improvements, especially in relation to communication between departments; communicating with new starters seeking direction across the organisation, and with remote workers who are particularly vulnerable to poor communication.

"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 may be exacerbated by remote working, it's difficult sometimes to get hold of someone that you need for a particular task".

The significance of personal connections in task delivery was also noted by participants as being important, suggesting that fostering interpersonal relationships is essential to both delivery and to employee satisfaction within the workplace.

Other issues that were spontaneously discussed across the groups, again highlighting that these matter to employees include:

- The topic of remote working provoked debate with a diverse range of views that depended on role and personal circumstances. Concerns were raised regarding the potential lack of accountability stemming from the shift to remote work, highlighting challenges in ensuring oversight and maintaining productivity

"The cynic in me would say that I think sometimes working from home, and this is just my opinion, people can get away with stuff, whereas when everyone was in the office, I'd find out where your desk is and I'd go and stand next to you until you gave me the information I need. You can't do that now. It's sometimes easy to ignore an e-mail or a Teams call."

- Annual Performance Conversations (APCs) are viewed as integral to performance improvement and career development, yet are not always held as they should with all employees, and so for some do not drive meaningful change. Participants identified APCs for every staff member as a key priority for immediate attention, citing its potential to streamline the identification of opportunities for career progression and skills development, as well as to

address underperformance effectively. APCs were also highlighted as a formal avenue for providing feedback, facilitating face-to-face discussions that are conducive to meaningful dialogue

- Retention figures were discussed, but were not unexpected given the recent challenges within the Local Authority. The recurring theme of the lack of progression opportunities emerged as a key driver for employee turnover, with individuals often needing to leave their current roles or the Council altogether to advance their careers

"I have to agree with someone who said about pay scales. Certainly, within IT we are seen as being paid lower than the national average and therefore in terms of retaining staff, as well as recruiting staff, it's becoming a challenge...there is a lot of staff knowledge that leaves the organisation with that member of staff, especially if they've been a long serving member of staff."

- Participants also noted a significant increase in demand on their teams over the past year, prompting calls for expansion to cope with the workload, albeit acknowledging financial constraints faced by both Walsall Council and nationally

"The demand even from our team, even from over a space of a year, has gone upwards, but I think what's happening is - and it's not just Walsall, it's nationally - there's that financial pressures and we need to save. And really we should be expanding the team, but we can't."

- Participants also discussed the delicate balance between retention and recruitment, highlighting the importance of addressing skills gaps and providing opportunities for career development to retain talent within the Council
- Some participants expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of recognition for going the extra mile and suggested that this was more commonplace in the private sector

A number of issues were raised by individual participants including:

- A concern about the effectiveness of the questions asked within the survey relating to Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI), highlighting issues such as poor wording and a lack of alignment with contemporary EDI issues including microaggressions

"It was just talking about equality and diversity rather than particular protected characteristics or anything to trigger peoples thoughts or experiences...some staff have expressed views to me and there are points when they don't necessarily feel psychologically safe and that's not reflected anywhere."

- The unique position of early-career employees in non-vocational roles, emphasising the importance of the Council in providing opportunities for growth and advancement

- Questions on the discrepancy between high ratings for training satisfaction and the prevalence of employees considering leaving, suggesting that progression in the role might be more significant than upward mobility

"I want to progress but I feel like there is no training that I can take that's going to get me to the next level at the moment."

These discussions underscored the multifaceted challenges faced by employees and the need for strategic approaches to address issues related to accountability, workload, career progression, and talent retention within Walsall Council.

Walsall Council, an employer of choice - covered in all groups

What employees value about working for Walsall Council

Understanding the factors that contribute to making Walsall Council a good place to work is an essential factor in enhancing employee satisfaction, engagement and retention. Discussions explored employees' perspectives on the key elements that define an ideal workplace.

Participants identified several key aspects that impact their job satisfaction and overall experience within the workplace. One prominent theme is the intrinsic value of the work itself, with employees finding their roles interesting and meaningful.

The opportunity to make a difference to the residents of Walsall also emerged as a driving force behind their commitment to the Council. Additionally, the positive impact of working for a public sector organisation, coupled with the convenience of the location, were highlighted as notable advantages.

"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."

Employees highlighted the rewarding nature of their roles, emphasising the sense of fulfilment derived from delivering positive changes and building meaningful connections with members of the community.

"Ultimately as a Council, we're here to serve our residents, and I can see the difference that we make as a team, and that's a positive aspect."

Many cited personal experiences of how the council had positively impacted their lives or the lives of others, whether through educational opportunities, career progression, or the ability to make a meaningful difference in their communities.

"This place has done so much for me, which is why I tend to be quite passionate about how we treat the people here."

"For some people [residents], we'll be the only people they. They wait to speak to you, and they're pleased to see you. There's personal relationships that you make. And I know my colleagues take great pride in what they do, even though it can be a thankless task."

Participants also spoke of the value they place in the strong relationships that they have with their colleagues which foster a supportive and collaborative working environment. Flexible working arrangements, including the ability to maintain a good work-life balance, were also cited as key factors contributing to employee satisfaction.

"I think relationships has been one for me. I think to answer your question about what keeps us in Walsall Council, it's been that relationships with other people that worked."

The provision of educational opportunities, such as access to master's degrees was also seen as underscoring the Council's commitment to employee development and growth.

A small number of participants acknowledged the benefits package offered by Walsall Council, including a generous holiday allowance and a good pension plan as an attractive proposition.

"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."

Employees also appreciate the transparent and proactive communication efforts of the Senior Management Team, which keeps them informed about Council achievements and initiatives and leads to a greater level of trust amongst employees.

Discussions turned to additional factors that could contribute to making Walsall Council a better employer, beyond the existing initiatives and practices. Participants expressed several key suggestions and concerns that warrant attention to further enhance the employee experience and organisational culture.

Communication emerged as a recurring theme, with participants highlighting the need for better dissemination of information about awards and winners within the Council. While there is considerable activity on external platforms like LinkedIn, internal teams often lack awareness of these achievements. Participants emphasised the importance of greater recognition and understanding of the work done by different teams across the Council, fostering a culture of mutual appreciation and support.

Flexible working arrangements, particularly in light of the transition back to office-based work post-pandemic, were a point of discussion. Some employees felt that there was a misunderstanding regarding their reluctance to return to the office, highlighting the need for patience and understanding from senior management during this adjustment period.

One participant felt that there is a lack of consistency of management style with managers coming from a diverse range of backgrounds. Whilst this brings a wide range of experience to the Council, it can cause problems for staff. Additional training was suggested as an option to address the issue.

"Obviously every department and every service area will have their own requirements so you can't do one-size-fits-all, but I think you could have greater consistency in the way management supports the teams and in the way management encourages people."

The impact of remote work on communication and relationships within the Council was also highlighted. While flexibility and the ability to work from home were generally viewed positively, some employees expressed concerns about feeling physically distant from colleagues and the challenges of navigating online communication channels.

Furthermore, there was a shared sentiment regarding the public perception of working for the Council and the challenges of addressing misconceptions about funding and decision-making processes. Internally, there was also a need for better communication and awareness across different departments, as highlighted by the lack of understanding about internal contacts and support mechanisms within the council-owned art gallery.

Opportunities for career progression, upskilling, and reskilling emerged as crucial drivers of employee satisfaction and retention, yet these are not readily available to all employees. To address these issues, the Council should prioritise employee development initiatives, such as training programs, mentorship

opportunities, and career advancement pathways. Conducting regular assessments of workload distribution and employee feedback can help identify areas for improvement and enhance overall job satisfaction.

"I want to progress and I feel like there is no training that I can take that's going to get me to the next level at the moment."

Improving internal communication and understanding across different departments emerged as a key area for improvement. Participants highlighted the need for better dissemination of information about awards and achievements within the Council and addressing misconceptions both internally and externally. To address these concerns, the Council should prioritise internal communication efforts, such as regular updates and newsletters, to keep employees informed about developments and initiatives. Additionally, providing opportunities for cross-departmental collaboration and knowledge-sharing can help improve understanding and collaboration across the Council.

The importance of feeling valued

Feeling valued by the Council has a significant impact on employee morale, motivation, and overall job satisfaction. Positive reinforcement and encouragement were highlighted as essential factors in fostering a sense of validation and confidence among employees in their roles. Participants talked about the importance of recognition as a means of affirming their contributions and efforts.

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

For employees in customer-facing roles, recognition from the Council holds particular significance due to the challenges they face in dealing with public perceptions and occasional criticism. Being acknowledged for their hard work and dedication helps bolster morale and resilience, especially when navigating difficult situations.

"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'".

Moreover, the discussions revealed a desire for employees to feel respected and listened to by senior management, particularly concerning important decisions such as the return to the office. Recognising employees' input and addressing their concerns demonstrates a commitment to fostering a supportive and inclusive work environment.

It was also evident from the discussions that employees value recognition for going above and beyond the scope of their roles, even in geographically distinct areas such as the art gallery. Feeling appreciated for their contributions, regardless of their role's proximity to the council's core activities, helps foster a sense of belonging and pride in their work.

Participants suggested that there is a need to improve existing recognition programs, suggesting increasing face-to-face acknowledgment as one option. The Council may also wish to implement informal recognition systems, such as peer-to-peer recognition programs or appreciation events, which can help foster a culture of appreciation and boost employee morale. Additionally, involving employees in the selection process and providing clear criteria for recognition can help ensure fairness and transparency.

Annual Staff Recognition Award

The discussions provided constructive suggestions on how to improve the Annual Staff Recognition Award. One prevalent view held by participants was that current recognition efforts feel 'tokenistic', with some perceiving them as more of a box-ticking exercise than genuine praise. To address this, participants proposed various ideas to enhance the recognition process and make it more meaningful and inclusive.

"As it stands, not everyone is invited to these things, so we can't be trying to promote EDI and then not including everyone into the staff awards."

One suggestion was to increase face-to-face acknowledgment of good work, as participants highlighted the significant boost in morale they experienced when receiving verbal praise from senior management in challenging circumstances.

"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."

Another proposed idea was the implementation of a "Recognition Card" system, similar to one used in a previous workplace, where anyone could nominate their colleagues for exceptional work, fostering a culture of spontaneous recognition and appreciation.

Additionally, participants emphasized the importance of opportunities for meaningful networking and recognition at a more local level within teams or departments. Some teams already have mechanisms in place, such as regular shout-out pages or presentations, to acknowledge outstanding contributions, but there was a consensus that more formalized recognition processes are needed to ensure consistency and fairness across the Council.

"I think it should be done quarterly and I think it should be done at a directorate level. I think it will help address some of the issues that have been raised in terms of lack of communication within directorates and within teams. And I think you'll understand better about what is happening in your service and within your directorate as well."

Overall, by implementing these suggestions and addressing the identified barriers, Walsall Council can enhance its recognition efforts, fostering a culture of appreciation, motivation, and employee satisfaction. Effective recognition initiatives not only acknowledge individual contributions but also contribute to a positive work environment and organisational success.

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

Whilst employees are generally proud of the work that they do, there are negative perceptions associated with working for Walsall Council and so when they are talking about their work, a large proportion of participants 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."

Despite the reluctance to openly broadcast their council employment due to potential negative reactions, participants were enthusiastic about recommending Walsall Council as a workplace to others. They emphasised the excellent working environment, opportunities for career progression,

and attractive employee benefits package as compelling reasons to consider employment with the Local Authority.

"I've got the right manager, who has invested in me, who has seen my capabilities, my skill sets, my expertise and has pushed me. And she's helped me get to where I am now."

"This was my return to work and I've just had a really positive experience and my manager is very supportive and very understanding...I've just had a really positive experience in starting back here and being made to feel very comfortable."

Communication and information - covered in all groups

Effectiveness of communication channels within the Council

The focus group discussions shed light on the effectiveness of various communication channels within Walsall Council and provided valuable feedback on areas for improvement. Participants highlighted several key insights regarding communication practices and their impact on employee engagement and productivity.

The Intranet (Inside Walsall) emerged as a crucial platform for accessing relevant and interesting information and updates within the council. CEO videos were also well-received, offering a more engaging alternative to traditional email updates. However, some participants expressed concerns about the effectiveness of the "Time to Talk" initiative, with some employees feeling reluctant to participate due to low confidence in speaking up.

"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."

There was recognition of an over-reliance on digital communication channels, particularly the Inside Walsall, which may not reach all staff, especially those without computer access, such as cleaners. This underscores the need for a more diverse range of communication methods to ensure information reaches all employees. Concerns were raised about assuming everyone has online access, as some staff members may miss important updates or announcements.

"Some of them [the cleaners] haven't even got computers because they're not at that stage, so they're not seeing the intranet, they're not seeing everything else. So a newsletter or something like that that can go out to all staff would be far better as well - not all of us have got computers."

The discussions also revealed feelings of segregation among certain teams, such as the depot team, which faces challenges with computer literacy and physical access to online resources.

The success of communication largely depended on the approach of specific line managers, with some teams implementing regular catch-ups to keep everyone informed. However, there was inconsistency in communication practices across directorates, with some teams receiving more frequent updates than others.

Participants emphasized the need for more direct communication channels, suggesting that relevant information should be cascaded down from senior management to each directorate. While initiatives like the quarterly "roadshows" were praised for providing updates, the length of these sessions was deemed impractical. Shorter, more focused sessions were recommended to improve engagement.

Microsoft Teams was highlighted as a valuable tool for everyday communication within smaller teams, facilitating collaboration and information sharing. Regular briefings from senior management, particularly those that acknowledge mutual learning and connection, were also appreciated.

“Within Children’s Services, we have a weekly brief and it’s done by a different director each week...and that’s good.”

Moving forward, there is an opportunity to enhance communication practices within Walsall Council by addressing the feedback provided by employees. This includes ensuring consistency in communication across all directorates, exploring new formats for delivering updates, and leveraging digital platforms like Microsoft Teams to facilitate seamless communication and collaboration. By prioritising effective communication, the Council can foster a more informed, engaged, and connected workforce.

What do employees want to hear about?

Participants are generally seeking tailored communication that addresses the specific needs and interests of different directorates, as well as providing updates on community events and initiatives. Several key topics were noted as relevant:

- **Budgets:** While Council-wide budget updates are important, participants also stressed the need for tailored information within directorates. Understanding how budgets impact specific areas such as Children’s Services or Social Care is crucial for staff to grasp the implications for their work and priorities
- **Structure:** There was a consensus among participants about the importance of improving knowledge sharing and communication between different directorates. This is particularly relevant for new staff members who may be unfamiliar with the intricacies of the Council’s operations

“These structures and restructures are taking place several times over the past few years, Emma’s coming in and there’s going to be more changes, and particularly in my job, we have to know about response and business continuity.”

- **Good News Stories:** Employees expressed interest in hearing positive stories and achievements from other departments within the Council. Celebrating successes and highlighting impactful initiatives can foster a sense of pride and unity among staff members

“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.”

- **Community Events:** Participants indicated a desire for updates on events and activities happening within the local community, such as the Knife Angel installation or the Continental Market. This not only keeps employees informed but also helps them feel connected to the broader community they serve

“I think it’s important to understand what’s happening in the Community that we support.”

"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."

- Internal Videos: The popularity of CEO videos underscored the appetite for more visual communication channels. Participants suggested that other departments produce similar videos to showcase their work and provide insights into different areas of the Council
- Service-Specific Information: Employees expressed a need for detailed updates on Council services, both internally and externally. This includes newsletters tailored to specific teams, clear hierarchies for contacting relevant individuals, and transparent communication about financial information

There is an opportunity for Walsall Council to enhance its internal communication strategies by incorporating the feedback provided by employees. By tailoring communication to address the specific interests and needs of staff members, fostering knowledge sharing between directorates, and utilising diverse communication channels, the council can promote transparency, engagement, and collaboration across the organisation.

What do employees expect of Senior Leaders?

Participants expressed a key desire for more transparent, informative, and engaging communication from Senior Leaders within Walsall Council. Communication should be honest and sincere, rather than attempting to cover up shortcomings or avoid accountability.

According to participants, Senior Leaders should provide information, such as data dashboards or updates on office relocations, in a timely manner. Delayed or last-minute communication can hinder employees' ability to plan their time and resources effectively.

Participants also expressed frustration over learning important information, such as office relocations, through indirect channels like the intranet. Senior Leaders should communicate directly with employees, particularly about changes that affect them.

Many participants indicated a lack of clarity about the structure above their line managers, particularly at the directorate level. They expressed a desire for Senior Leaders to provide more information about service areas and organisational structures to improve understanding and collaboration.

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

There was also a desire amongst participants to know Senior Leaders better, including their roles, responsibilities, and priorities. Greater visibility and recognition of Senior Leaders could help foster a sense of collaboration and teamwork.

"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.'"

An interest in understanding the topics discussed in Senior Leaders' meetings, as well as their priorities and spending decisions was noted by participants. This information could help employees better understand organisational goals and priorities, enabling them to align their work accordingly.

In Children's Services, there was a specific concern about feeling unheard and unappreciated by Senior Leaders. It is therefore important that Senior Leaders listen to and act upon suggestions from employees, as well as providing regular updates and newsletters to keep staff informed.

Communication Between Directorates

Across the groups there was a mixed view on the need for communication between Directorates within Walsall Council. Some participants were not interested in communicating with other directorates whilst an equal number noted the negative consequences that may arise from poor communication.

Those concerned about the negative consequences expressed concerns about initiatives or opportunities being limited to specific directorates, leading to a lack of awareness and participation across the Council. For example, some forums, such as the Black and Asian network, were not known to all teams, indicating a need for better communication and dissemination of information.

Participants mentioned challenges in contacting the appropriate departments or directorates within the Council. This lack of communication infrastructure can hinder workflow efficiency and cause frustration among staff members seeking information or support from other areas of the Council.

Suggestions were made for implementing better support systems to facilitate communication between directorates. A desire for a more streamlined method of accessing contact information for different departments or directorates was expressed, such as reinstating an older system (which was not named) or providing additional support in navigating organisational structures.

While some directorates already collaborate, such as the Adult Social Care team and Employment team, there is room for further development of referral pathways and collaboration across the Council. Emphasis was placed on fostering a more connected group dynamic, which requires improved understanding of colleagues' roles and responsibilities.

Interest in Activities and Developments in other Directorates

Participants were interested in understanding the activities and developments in other directorates when they are relevant to their own work or when it contributes to a better understanding of broader Council initiatives, such as the Green Agenda. However, there was concern about receiving information from all directorates which would potentially contain a significant amount of irrelevant information.

Participants suggested that better signposting on the intranet could facilitate access to information about other directorates. Providing information in a way that allows employees to access it at their own pace and as needed would be more efficient and avoid inundating individuals with irrelevant information.

Being valued by the Council

While there is a consensus that line managers generally exhibit attentiveness to employees' concerns, the sentiment towards senior management (SMs) is less positive. Many employees feel that despite communicating their views to SMs, little tangible action is taken, leading to a sense of frustration and disconnection.

The role of the Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) post holder appears crucial in channelling employees' concerns to higher-level meetings, such as the Workforce Equality Board and Corporate and Quality Group Meetings. However, there's acknowledgment that not all voices receive equal attention in these forums.

Long-serving employees often feel heard, attributing their experience to established relationships, especially with managers. In contrast, newer staff members may perceive their voices as less valued, indicating a potential gap in engagement efforts for this cohort.

There is a prevailing sentiment among employees at lower levels of the organisational hierarchy that their concerns may languish unresolved as they are passed from one individual to another. This highlights a need for more efficient channels for addressing employee feedback, ideas and suggestions.

Some employees have encountered dismissive attitudes from SMs during meetings, which undermines their sense of being heard and respected. Additionally, instances where decisions are perceived as already made before seeking employee feedback can lead to feelings of tokenism rather than genuine engagement.

While communication through line managers and smaller group meetings is appreciated for updates and task assignments, there's a lack of direct contact from seniors for non-senior roles, indicating a potential gap in communication channels.

Employee Forum

There is generally good awareness of employee forums, including Digital champions, Mental Health First Aiders, and Black and Asian network, with participants recognising them as valuable sources of information.

There were mixed feelings about the terminology used, with some preferring the term "forums" while others preferred "networks." Clarity on the roles and expectations associated with these groups is desired, especially regarding how they intersect with employees' day-to-day responsibilities.

There was debate over whether accessibility to these groups should be readily available or if employees should take personal responsibility for seeking them out. Nonetheless, there was a consensus that these groups should be accessible across the Council.

While there is interest in participating in employee forums, time constraints emerged as a significant barrier. Participants also expressed a desire for clear goals and purposes for these groups, emphasising the importance of achieving tangible outcomes rather than merely voicing concerns without resolution.

The concept of an Employee Panel received positive feedback, with potential benefits including providing staff with a voice on various policy matters and facilitating collaboration among different service provisions. However, concerns were raised about the potential for the same individuals to dominate participation, highlighting the need for thoughtful nomination processes.

In conclusion, discussions have shown the importance of transparent, timely, and direct communication from Senior Leaders. By addressing employees' concerns and providing clear,

informative communication, Senior Leaders have the opportunity to foster a more collaborative and engaged organisational culture.

Moreover, the discussions underscored the significance of improving communication channels and relationships between Directorates within the council. Addressing issues such as lack of awareness, and difficulty in contacting the right departments can enhance collaboration, efficiency, and overall organisational effectiveness. By fostering a culture of transparency, open communication, and mutual support, Walsall Council can strengthen inter-directorate communication and promote a more cohesive working environment.

Additionally, the focus group discussions highlighted the need for relevant, accessible, and inclusive communication practices across the organisation. By ensuring that information is provided in a manner that respects individuals' time and preferences, Walsall Council can promote greater transparency, collaboration, and alignment across its various departments and teams.

Overall, while there are positive aspects to communication within Walsall Council, there are clear opportunities for improvement to ensure that all employees feel listened to, valued, and included in decision-making processes at all levels of the organisation. By addressing these needs and implementing targeted strategies, Walsall Council can create a more inclusive, engaged, and effective working environment for its employees.

Your future at the Council – Group 1

Employee motivation and commitment

When asked what attracted participants to work for the Council, the desire to make a positive impact on the local community and contribute to the well-being of Walsall's residents was a key motivator. A significant number of employees cited the opportunity to give back to their local area and improve the lives of others as key factors that inspired them to work for the Council.

"We all know the financial pressures and that the money's not there but we keep going because we want to serve the community."

Despite the challenges inherent in their positions, employees expressed a genuine sense of fulfilment and pride in their work, which serves as a strong motivator to continue working for the council.

Participants also noted the importance of finding their roles interesting and engaging, highlighting the crucial role of job satisfaction in retaining staff. Employees who feel stimulated and challenged by their work are more likely to remain committed to their roles and the organisation as a whole.

By understanding and nurturing these motivations, the Council can cultivate a motivated and dedicated workforce committed to serving the needs of the community.

Key Selling Points for Recruitment

Key selling points that may set the Council apart as an employer include the provision of clinical supervision for social workers, which is considered a unique selling proposition not offered by other councils. This may be used to demonstrate the Council's commitment to supporting employees and investing in their professional development, particularly in the social work field.

The Council's pension scheme emerged as another important selling point, although there were discussions about the current offering compared to other councils. Ensuring that the pension scheme remains competitive and attractive to potential candidates is essential for recruitment and retention efforts.

Retention pay was also cited as a factor that could attract individuals to work for the Council. Offering competitive compensation packages, including retention bonuses or incentives, can help attract and retain top talent, particularly in competitive job markets.

Additionally, the locality of the council was highlighted as a major selling point, with participants noting that the proximity of the Council's location can be a significant factor for individuals considering employment opportunities. A convenient commute can make the Council more appealing as an employer and help attract candidates who may be deterred by longer travel times.

"It's local, it's flexible...I think it would meet a lot of people's needs."

Above all, 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."

By leveraging these key selling points, including unique offerings such as clinical supervision for social workers, competitive compensation packages, and the opportunity to make a difference in the local community, Walsall Council can enhance its recruitment efforts and attract top talent to join its workforce.

Recruitment Strategies and Improvement Recommendations

Walsall Council wants to attract the right candidates and participants saw the need to proactively recruit individuals who are forward-thinking, adaptable to change, and aligned with the Council's values and objectives. Recruiters should focus on identifying candidates who are passionate about making a difference and contributing positively to the organisation.

One recommendation arising from the discussion is to revamp the approach to job advertising to better showcase the culture of the Council. Participants noted that current job postings tend to focus primarily on role-specific details rather than highlighting why individuals should choose to work for Walsall Council. There was recognition that efforts are underway to improve this aspect, such as exploring recruitment through social media platforms like Facebook, but there is still room for improvement. Enhancing the portrayal of the Council's culture, values, and the opportunities it offers can help attract candidates who resonate with these aspects.

Participants also suggested that the Council should actively seek out candidates who demonstrate qualities such as innovation, adaptability, and a commitment to driving positive change. By targeting individuals who possess these attributes, the council can build a workforce that is equipped to tackle the challenges of the future and drive progress.

Overall, participants highlighted the importance of proactive recruitment strategies that prioritise cultural fit, values alignment, and the recruitment of individuals who are not only seeking a job but are also passionate about contributing to the Council's vision and values.

Addressing Barriers to Attracting Top Talent

Factors that may deter individuals from considering employment with the Council, along with potential strategies to address these issues were identified by participants.

One perceived deterrent is the longstanding perception that councils are slow-moving, bureaucratic, and resistant to change. While participants acknowledged that this stereotype may not accurately reflect the reality of working within the Council, they highlighted the challenge of overcoming such deeply ingrained perceptions. To address this, efforts to showcase the Council's commitment to innovation, efficiency, and progressiveness are important. This could include highlighting successful initiatives, showcasing the impact of recent changes, and actively engaging with the community to demonstrate the Council's responsiveness and forward-thinking approach.

Another deterrent identified by participants is the perception of limited career advancement opportunities and a lack of performance-driven culture within the Council. There was a sense that regardless of effort invested, the rewards and benefits remain the same for all employees. Moreover,

the structured progression paths within the Council were viewed unfavourably compared to the private sector, where rapid career advancement is often possible.

"I honestly think it is inevitable that I will see the next level up at a different local authority and I will just go to that, because there is no way in my current team that the people above me are going to leave."

To overcome this perception, the Council could consider initiatives to promote a more merit-based culture, where performance is recognised and rewarded. This could involve providing clear pathways for career advancement, and fostering a culture of continuous learning and development. Additionally, efforts to streamline bureaucratic processes and introduce more agile practices could help dispel the perception of stagnation and demonstrate the Council's commitment to embracing change and innovation.

Concerns were raised regarding the representation of minority backgrounds within senior management positions, which could deter potential applicants who seek diversity and inclusion in their workplace. Participants talked about the importance of addressing this issue by demonstrating a genuine commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives. This could involve implementing targeted recruitment strategies to attract candidates from diverse backgrounds, providing support and resources for career development and advancement opportunities, and fostering an inclusive workplace culture where all employees feel valued and supported.

In summary, addressing the perceptions of the Councils as slow-moving and bureaucratic, enhancing career advancement opportunities and promoting diversity and inclusion within the organisation are key areas for the Council to focus on to overcome barriers to attracting top talent. By actively addressing these concerns and showcasing its strengths as an employer, the Council can enhance its appeal and attract a diverse and talented workforce.

Line and Senior management – Group 2

Skills required by line managers

When thinking of the skills that are essential for line managers, employees focus on the combination of a range of interpersonal and organisational skills that contribute to effective management.

Empathy emerged as a fundamental skill, with participants highlighting the importance of managers being able to understand and relate to the experiences and emotions of their team members. Good listening skills were also emphasised, indicating that employees value managers who actively listen to their concerns and perspectives.

Additionally, participants wanted their line managers to be able to discern the underlying messages or concerns that may not be explicitly stated by team members. This ability to understand the importance of what is not being said is crucial for building trust and fostering open communication within teams.

Effective time management was identified as another essential skill for line managers, reflecting the need for managers to prioritise tasks, allocate resources efficiently, and ensure that team members are supported in their roles.

Moreover, participants believed it to be important that line managers create a psychologically safe environment where team members feel comfortable taking risks, making mistakes, and learning from them. This aspect of leadership is crucial for fostering innovation, creativity, and continuous improvement within teams.

Performance management

Participants expressed feelings of frustration, deflation, and demoralisation, indicating a sense of disillusionment with the current approach to addressing poor performance. One common sentiment among participants was the perception that nothing will ever change or improve regarding poor performance. This suggests a lack of confidence in the effectiveness of existing management strategies and a feeling of being let down by management staff.

Transparency emerged as a key theme, with participants noting that poor performance is often evident through dashboards and historic data displaying low caseloads or records of poor performance. This transparency could contribute to employees' frustration, as they may feel that inadequate action is being taken to address identified issues.

Views on whether Senior Managers understand the challenges faced by employees

The discussion held with the second group shed light on employees' perceptions of senior managers' understanding of the challenges faced by staff within Walsall Council. While participants generally acknowledged that senior managers are in touch with the issues employees face, there was a broader recognition of the constraints and pressures imposed by external factors, particularly central government funding cuts.

Participants expressed a common sentiment that senior managers are not the primary issue, but rather the challenges stem from the significant reductions in funding imposed by central government.

These drastic budget cuts have placed considerable strain on the council's ability to maintain services and support its workforce adequately. Despite senior managers' efforts to advocate for the organisation and mitigate the impact of funding constraints, there are inherent limitations to what they can achieve within the current financial landscape.

The discussions underscored the complexity of the situation, with participants expressing empathy for senior managers grappling with the difficult task of balancing service delivery, employee welfare, and financial sustainability amid dwindling resources. While senior managers may be aware of the challenges faced by employees, the overarching issue lies in the broader systemic pressures imposed by external factors beyond their control.

Concerns were raised however on the level of engagement senior managers have with employees and participants provided suggestions on how this could be addressed.

One notable suggestion was the implementation of a "buddy system," where senior managers spend a day with junior colleagues to gain firsthand insight into their daily roles and responsibilities. This idea, borrowed from other local councils, offers senior managers a valuable opportunity to better understand the challenges and realities faced by frontline staff. Additionally, some participants suggested a similar approach, where senior managers periodically work on the frontline to maintain a direct connection with the Council's operations and employee experiences.

"When you come down to the people who are actually going through those things and you understand the pain points, then it makes sense when they are talking to you."

Another recommendation centred around the need for clear communication channels and transparency regarding the receipt and processing of information. This includes ensuring that feedback passed through various management levels is acknowledged and confirmed by the relevant senior managers, fostering accountability and demonstrating responsiveness to employee input.

Additional concerns were noted relating to the inconsistency across directorates in terms of the ability to communicate with senior managers (SMs). While some employees reported opportunities to attend senior meetings and interact with relevant service heads, directors and executive directors, others felt excluded from such opportunities.

Another notable observation was the varying levels of training and expertise among senior managers. Some long-serving SMs may lack formal training, leading to gaps in understanding the organisational culture they need to cultivate within their teams. Participants suggested face-to-face training sessions to address these gaps and ensure that SMs are equipped with the necessary skills to lead effectively.

Transparency emerged as a recurring theme, with employees highlighting the importance of senior managers clearly communicating what is feasible and what is not. Providing insight into decision-making processes and the rationale behind certain actions can help employees better understand organisational constraints and foster trust in senior leadership.

This perceived lack of transparency may have fed into the overall consensus amongst participants that senior managers do not adequately consider staff perspectives in strategic decision-making processes.

One solution proposed by the Council to address this gap is the establishment of an employee panel. The suggestion was well received with participants expressing support for the initiative, viewing it as

a valuable mechanism to ensure that staff voices are heard and considered in strategic decision-making. The panel would provide employees with a platform to raise concerns, share feedback, and contribute ideas directly to senior management.

However, while the idea of an employee panel received widespread support, participants felt that their involvement would be hindered by their current time constraints which would make it impossible for them to dedicate regular time to the panel. Some also raised questions regarding the accountability of senior staff in implementing suggested changes. Merely bringing issues to the attention of senior managers was perceived as insufficient if there was no guarantee that these concerns would lead to tangible action or meaningful outcomes.

Demonstrating a willingness to act on the results of the survey

In order to convince employees that senior managers have acted on the findings of the survey, participants focused on the importance of clear and transparent communication, as well as tangible actions taken in response to survey feedback.

One suggestion was to conduct workshops where senior managers engage directly with employees to review survey results in person. This approach would allow for real-time discussions about the issues identified in the survey and provide an opportunity for collaborative problem-solving.

Additionally, participants proposed booking follow-up sessions with employees who have provided recommendations to assess whether these recommendations have been implemented post-survey. This cyclical approach, involving employees in the feedback loop, ensures accountability and transparency in the survey process.

To enhance effectiveness, it was suggested to prioritise themes or targets for each directorate, ensuring that the action plan is tailored and focused. Having too many themes may dilute the impact of the survey feedback and make it challenging to address specific issues effectively.

Finally, participants emphasized the importance of "You Said, We Did" type communication, where the survey results are translated into concrete actions and changes within the organisation. This clear communication strategy demonstrates to employees that their feedback has been heard and acted upon, fostering trust and engagement. However, there was also an acknowledgment that not all suggestions may be feasible, and employees expressed a preference for honesty and transparency in such cases.

In conclusion, the discussion emphasised the importance of strong leadership and effective management practices within Walsall Council. Employees highlighted the essential skills required for line managers, including interpersonal, organisational, and leadership qualities, which are crucial for supporting and empowering teams, thereby enhancing productivity and morale. Additionally, there is a clear call for a more proactive and effective approach to performance management, emphasising the need for transparent monitoring, meaningful interventions, and support mechanisms to address poor performance and maintain employee motivation. Furthermore, fostering positive relationships between senior managers and employees through proactive engagement, transparency, and empathy is essential for creating a supportive work environment. Initiatives such as the buddy system and transparent communication channels can facilitate this process. Moreover, there is a recognised need for senior managers to incorporate staff perspectives into strategic decision-making processes more

effectively, ensuring accountability and meaningful outcomes. Overall, consistent communication, transparency, and ongoing training for both line and senior management are vital for creating an inclusive and supportive work environment conducive to employee engagement.

Direction of the Council, vision and values – Group 3

Views on whether the Council is a better place to work in now than it was in 2022

When asked to consider how working for the Council has changed over the last two years, the main change noted by participants related to the adoption of hybrid working. This was seen by the majority as a positive development, proving effective in many contexts, offering a more adaptable and accommodating work culture.

“This hybrid working , it works. I know it wouldn't work for a cleaning job or it wouldn't work with specifics, like a teacher can't do it. There are specifics that can't do hybrid working, but I think that it's really positive with myself.”

However, it was noted that remote work is not suitable for all roles, and there were concerns about the impact of remote work on communication and engagement. Virtual meetings were cited as particularly challenging, with communication often being hindered compared to face-to-face interactions. This decline in communication quality has been perceived as a negative change by employees, indicating potential drawbacks to remote work arrangements.

“The communication Has gotten worse, and for the last two years because everything's on teams and you don't have that personal space and that interaction, It's not the same and it's just feel you feel really disconnected and people

It was also noted that working from home may not be suitable for vulnerable people including individuals experiencing domestic violence, as it eliminates the escape from such environments that a workplace typically provides.

“Flexible work is great if you enjoy it fantastic, but if you've got domestic violence in the home, there's not that release for them to come out and go to work away from everybody.”

The feedback suggests that while remote work offers flexibility, it may not be universally beneficial and could exacerbate certain issues, such as communication challenges and lack of engagement. Addressing these concerns will be crucial for ensuring that work arrangements support employee well-being and productivity effectively. Strategies to improve communication in remote settings and provide support for employees facing difficult home situations should be considered to mitigate the negative impacts identified during the discussions.

“It's great if you like being at home, but we need to get meetings back in the civic because when we're round the table and everyone's talking to each other then you're getting more out of it.”

Additionally, employees have noted positive initiatives aimed at supporting staff development and well-being. Introduction of programs such as mental health first aid and digital champions demonstrates a proactive approach by the Council to address employee needs and enhance their skills. Continued efforts in these areas are essential to sustain and build upon the progress made thus far.

Other positive changes made by the Council include improvements to the Civic Centre which have been well-received by employees, indicating a step in the right direction towards creating a more dynamic and interactive workplace environment. Continued investments in infrastructure and facilities that support collaboration and engagement are likely to further enhance employee satisfaction and productivity.

“I think some of the configuration that they've done within the civic is good.... it's nice to see people using that.”

Expectations for the next two years

A current and quite prominent concern raised during the group was the absence [at the time] of permanent Executive Directors and the potential ramifications for the organisation's direction and stability. Employees expressed a need for assurance and security, both for residents and themselves, particularly in light of external events such as those in Birmingham where the City Council, facing a severe financial crisis, declared itself effectively bankrupt.

“I think especially what's happening with Birmingham, I think I think that has been key not only to employees, but I think to residents as well. I think we need to be showing a sense of security for both residents and for our employees as well. So, if we can have a stable executive team, and there's a vision I think that will assure people's concerns.”

Furthermore, there were calls for transparency, accountability, and consistency in organisational leadership and decision-making processes. Employees emphasised the importance of having clear communication channels and a sense of trust in leadership to navigate challenges effectively.

These concerns underscore the significance of strong and stable leadership in fostering a positive work environment and ensuring the Council's resilience in the face of uncertainty. Addressing these concerns will be essential for maintaining employee morale, retaining talent, and sustaining organisational effectiveness in the coming years. Efforts to provide regular updates, engage in open dialogue, and prioritise transparency in decision-making will be crucial for addressing these concerns and instilling confidence among employees.

Key priorities for improvement

Priorities for improvement reflected the diverse perspectives and concerns of participants:

- Employees see a need for improved communication channels within the Council. This includes both vertical communication, between senior management and staff, and horizontal communication, among different departments and teams. Clear, transparent, and timely communication was identified as crucial for fostering collaboration, alignment, and a sense of unity across the organisation
- There was a consensus regarding the importance of investing in leadership development initiatives. This involves providing training, mentorship, and support programs to equip managers and senior leaders with the skills and capabilities needed to effectively lead and inspire their teams. Developing a culture of empathy, active listening, and accountability among leaders was highlighted as essential for promoting employee engagement

- Employee well-being and mental health needs to be a priority for the Council. Participants called for supportive policies, resources, and initiatives aimed at promoting work-life balance, managing stress, and fostering a positive work environment. Implementing measures such as flexible work arrangements, access to mental health support services, and promoting a culture of appreciation and recognition were identified as key strategies for enhancing employee well-being
- Promoting diversity, equality, and inclusion emerged as a critical priority for improvement within the Council. Participants highlighted the importance of fostering a diverse and inclusive workplace culture where all voices are heard, valued, and respected. This involves implementing diversity training programs, addressing biases and barriers to inclusion, and actively promoting diversity in hiring and promotion practices.
- Simplifying processes and removing unnecessary layers of bureaucracy were also identified as key areas for improvement. There is a perceived need to streamline and improve organizational processes to enhance efficiency, effectiveness, and service delivery. This includes identifying and addressing bottlenecks, reducing bureaucratic barriers, and leveraging technology to automate routine tasks and workflows

Overall, the key priorities for improvement identified by employees reflect a holistic approach to enhancing organisational performance, employee engagement, and service delivery within the Council. Addressing these priorities will require a concerted effort from leadership, managers, and staff at all levels to drive meaningful change and create a positive and productive work environment.

Suggestions on spending reductions

To reduce spend while addressing the growing financial strain faced by the Council, participants believed that the primary focus should be on improving efficiency and prioritising critical areas. Employees offered several suggestions including:

- Promoting Collaboration and Knowledge Sharing: Fostering a culture of collaboration and knowledge sharing across departments to identify opportunities for joint projects and resource optimisation. Initiatives such as quality champions visiting various service areas and cross-departmental forums were highlighted as effective strategies for facilitating communication and collaboration. By leveraging existing assets and resources more effectively, the Council can maximise public benefit while reducing unnecessary expenditures
- Preventative Approach to Social Services: There was a consensus regarding the need for a preventative approach to social services to mitigate the financial strain caused by crises in adult social care and children services. Investing in preventative measures aimed at addressing issues before they escalate to crisis points was identified as a critical priority. By focusing on early intervention and support services, the Council can potentially reduce long-term costs associated with crisis management and intervention

“It’s about prevention. So you know the biggest drain or in terms of services that go over their budgets tends to be Adult Social Care and Children’s Services. And you can understand

that because of the care plans and all the support that needs to go in there. But we don't need to get to crisis point with adults, we need to do better preventative work beforehand in Children's."

- **Tough Decisions for Financial Sustainability:** There is cause to make tough decisions, such as recruitment freezes and pay freezes, to reduce spending and ensure financial sustainability. While acknowledging the challenges associated with implementing such measures, employees felt that promoting fiscal responsibility would help to safeguard the Council's long-term financial health. By implementing targeted cost-saving measures, the Council can mitigate budgetary pressures and allocate resources more efficiently to support essential services

"Take some tough medicine. Look at outputs, management and productivity. They need to look at a recruitment freeze, a pay freeze...People need to say, 'well, I want to pay rise, but I accept that in the bigger picture you need to do it [pay freeze] because then at least I've got a job."

Overall, the suggestions provided by employees underscored the importance of strategic planning, collaboration, and proactive decision-making in addressing financial challenges within the Council. By adopting a preventative approach, promoting collaboration, and making tough decisions when necessary, the Council can achieve greater efficiency, effectiveness, and financial sustainability while continuing to deliver quality services to the community

Views on the core Council values – Professionalism, Leadership, Accountability, Transparency and Ethical working (PLATE)

Overall, there was a consensus among participants regarding the enduring importance of consistent values in shaping organisational culture and guiding behaviour. Participants felt that it is important for the core values to remain stable and not change frequently. There was also the view that while the wording of values may evolve, the underlying essence and principles should remain consistent to ensure clarity and alignment across the organisation.

"The problem with values is they change all the time, which they shouldn't. The values should be the same from the year dot."

There was a shared understanding that the Council's values play a pivotal role in shaping its culture, decision-making processes, and interactions both internally and externally. Values such as professionalism, leadership, and transparency were regarded as essential elements that define the Council's identity and guide employees' conduct in their roles. Participants felt it important to uphold these values in all aspects of the Council's operations to foster trust, credibility, and accountability.

There was a strong belief that core principles such as integrity, fairness, honesty and accountability should also contribute to the organisation's ethos.

"We all need to be professional. We need to be leading. We need to be accountable."

Participants also provided a consensus on the importance of ethical, transparent, accountable, fair, and psychologically safe values. Additionally, there was a reflection on the balance between speaking

up and conforming to organisational norms, underscoring the need for a culture that fosters psychological safety.

Participants felt that the Council's values should reflect their own personal values and expectations regarding ethical behaviour, integrity, and transparency. There was a recognition that values serve as a guiding framework for employees' actions and decisions, influencing their perceptions of organisational culture and leadership effectiveness. Ensuring alignment between the Council's stated values and employees' expectations is crucial for fostering a positive work environment and enhancing employee engagement and morale.

The discussions also promoted the concept of psychological safety within the Council, where employees feel comfortable speaking up, sharing ideas, and expressing concerns without fear of reprisal.

"You talk about getting people's ideas and stuff, but does it come a point where you speak up too much, it just goes against you."

Participants highlighted the need for a culture that encourages open dialogue, constructive feedback, and learning from mistakes. Psychological safety fosters innovation, collaboration, and employee well-being, contributing to organizational effectiveness and resilience.

The discussion reaffirmed the enduring relevance and importance of the Council's current PLATE values. By maintaining consistency, clarity, and alignment with employee expectations, the Council can reinforce its commitment to ethical conduct, accountability, and transparency while promoting a culture of integrity and professionalism.

A representative, healthy workforce – Group 4

Equality, diversity and representation

Discussions within the fourth and final group looked at what equality and diversity mean to employees in the workplace, and what a representative workforce would look like. Several key themes emerged, reflecting participants' views on the importance of fostering an inclusive, diverse and equitable working environment:

- **Equal treatment and opportunity:** Employees spoke of how important it is to treat everyone equally and to provide the same opportunities to all individuals, regardless of their background, identity, or characteristics. They expressed a strong desire for fairness in hiring, promotion, and career advancement processes, highlighting the need to eliminate biases and barriers that may prevent certain groups from accessing opportunities or experiencing equal treatment

“We have got equality champions and the equality championing network is being developed and there are training courses, that's the first step. But I just want to say we've still got a lot of work to do”.

“Equality, diversity, inclusion should also be reflected as part of the new values and the culture of the organisation. Ensure that it meets the needs of people from protected characteristics as well as the wider workforce.”

- **Respect and Recognition:** Respectful treatment and recognition of diversity were highlighted as essential components of an inclusive workplace culture. Participants emphasised the importance of valuing and respecting differences among colleagues, including differences in race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, age, disability, and more

“So in my younger self, if I was asked a question about equality and diversity my standard answer would be treating everyone equally. But my older, more experienced self now realises that it's absolutely not, it's about the individual.”

- **Awareness and Education:** These aspects were identified as 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. The establishment of an Equality Championing Network and the implementation of training courses were identified as positive steps towards fostering inclusivity and raising awareness of diversity-related issues. However, there was also recognition of areas requiring further improvement and support, particularly regarding LGBTQ+ inclusion
- **Representation and Visibility:** Employees see the importance of diverse perspectives within the workplace and believe that representation is needed at all levels of the organisation, including leadership positions, to ensure that different voices are heard and considered in

decision-making processes. Participants also highlighted the significance of having a council workforce that is representative of the community it serves as this improves the council's ability to understand and respond to the need of its residents

"I've seen some of the stats when it comes to senior leadership and we're making progress towards more diverse management. But hearing disabled people, have we got any in management roles? That's an area that's often overlooked. What about other characteristics? What's being done to address those?"

- **A Need for Genuine Engagement:** While the existence of an LGBTQ+ group was acknowledged, some employees felt that its current status appeared to be more of a symbolic gesture rather than a meaningful initiative embedded within the council's culture. There was, therefore, a call for additional support, resources, and recognition to demonstrate the council's genuine engagement and commitment to equality and diversity initiatives

"There is already the LGBTQ+ group, but that still needs to be developed and built upon. It can't just be a case of saying, OK, because we've got this, we've ticked the box."

- **Accountability and Action:** Employees spoke of the need for accountability and action to address inequality and promote diversity in the workplace. They called for clear policies, procedures, and mechanisms to address instances of discrimination, harassment, or unfair treatment. Additionally, they highlighted the importance of leadership commitment and proactive efforts to drive meaningful change
- **Ongoing Improvement:** While there was acknowledgement of the councils existing efforts to promote equality and diversity, participants did highlight a need for continued improvement. They called for a sustained commitment to diversity initiatives, focusing on the importance of ongoing evaluation, feedback, and adaptation to ensure effectiveness. Additionally, employees underscored the need for concrete actions and tangible results to demonstrate progress in advancing equality and diversity goals

"I think about what the Council needs to do, and then, more importantly, how is that monitored so that it keeps moving forward."

- **Provision of Resources:** Participants highlighted the need for better provision of resources, particularly for individuals with disabilities. There was a consensus that the council should ensure that necessary equipment and facilities are available to support staff with disabilities in their work
- **Strategies to Enhance Diversity:** Employees suggested several strategies to enhance diversity within the council, including targeted recruitment efforts aimed at attracting candidates from diverse backgrounds. They emphasised the importance of recruiting individuals who understand and can relate to the issues faced by different communities. Additionally, offering apprenticeships and development opportunities was highlighted as a way to nurture diverse talent and promote upward mobility within the organisation. Participants also highlighted the need to address overlooked areas of representation, such as those with hearing impairments, and advocated for intersectional approaches to ensure comprehensive diversity and inclusion initiatives

- Improving Organisational Reputation: There was recognition that becoming an inclusive authority could have broader implications beyond the internal workforce. Employees highlighted the potential for enhancing the council's reputation within the wider community. They identified inclusivity as a key driver for building trust, fostering positive relationships, and driving positive outcomes for the council

"It could come full circle for Walsall if they've got some of that right actually. And if it got the reputation as being a really inclusive authority that could be a massive attraction, sometimes above pay."

Mental health issues

Participants highlighted the importance of addressing mental health concerns effectively to ensure the overall well-being of employees. They spoke of the concerns they have, particularly in the context of remote work arrangements. These related to the potential blurring of boundaries between work and home environments, leading to increased stress and decreased relaxation time. They expressed concerns about the risk of burnout when the home environment becomes solely associated with work, diminishing its role as a place of relaxation or sanctuary. Participants stressed the need for measures to support employees in maintaining boundaries between work and personal life to safeguard their mental and physical health.

"I don't think mental health is handled particularly well, and the reason I'm saying that is because there's a lot of people who work from home and work on their own and their house is no longer their home. It's their office. That has not been addressed, and is not being addressed."

Participants noted the importance of providing emotional support and understanding to colleagues dealing with mental health challenges, particularly in the context of bereavement or other traumatic experiences. They recognised the need for empathy, compassion, and a supportive environment to help individuals navigate difficult circumstances and cope with emotional distress effectively.

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

The importance of flexible time off policies that accommodate the varying needs of employees during times of trauma were discussed and participants suggested that the Council should adopt policies that allow for additional time off or flexible working arrangements for employees who require extra support. By offering flexibility and understanding, the Council can demonstrate its commitment to supporting employees during difficult times.

Regular welfare checks were suggested to ensure that employees receive ongoing support and assistance, especially in the aftermath of a traumatic event. These checks could involve periodic meetings or check-ins with managers or designated support personnel to assess employees' well-being, offer assistance as needed, and provide a compassionate and supportive environment.

"Working from home especially means we need more welfare checks."

Participants felt that mental health should be treated as a priority and given the same level of attention and importance as physical health and highlighted a perceived need for increased awareness and sensitivity among line managers and team members regarding mental health issues. Participants

suggested that training and education initiatives aimed at promoting awareness and understanding of mental health issues could help create a more supportive and inclusive work environment.

One participant talked about the need for better, more flexible support to address the personal and varied nature of bereavement experiences. They highlighted the challenges of relying solely on standard time off policies, which may not adequately meet the diverse needs of employees coping with loss.

“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.”

Recognising that everyone responds differently to bereavement, participants suggested that support measures should be tailored to each person’s unique circumstances and requirements. Participants also stressed the importance of ongoing support for employees dealing with bereavement. They suggested that beyond providing time off, the Council should offer continuous support and resources to help individuals cope with grief and navigate the challenges associated with loss. This could include access to counselling services, support groups, and other mental health resources designed specifically for bereaved employees.

In summary, participants saw the need for a holistic approach to emotional well-being that addresses the diverse needs of employees. They suggested that the Council should consider introducing additional initiatives and resources aimed at promoting overall emotional health and well-being among staff. This could include mindfulness programs, stress management workshops, resilience training, and other initiatives designed to enhance emotional resilience and coping skills.

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. Working from home allows employees to have greater control over their schedules and adapt their work hours to accommodate personal responsibilities, thus contributing to a better work-life balance for many individuals.

“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.”

However, 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. While remote work offers flexibility, employees must still manage their workload efficiently to ensure a healthy balance between work and personal life. Effective workload management practices can help mitigate stress and prevent burnout, contributing to overall well-being.

Participants suggested that the Council should continue to implement measures to support employees in achieving a healthy balance between their professional and personal lives. This may include

initiatives such as flexible working arrangements, telecommuting options, and access to resources for managing workload and stress effectively.

It is important to recognise that perceptions of work-life balance may vary among employees based on individual preferences, roles, and responsibilities. While some employees may find that working for the Council offers a good work-life balance due to the flexibility of remote work, others may face challenges in balancing their professional and personal commitments depending on their workload and circumstances.

In conclusion, the discussion brought to light several key themes that are critical for fostering a positive work environment within the Council. These include the importance of adopting a comprehensive approach to health and safety, prioritising equality and diversity initiatives, enhancing communication channels, redefining equality to encompass individual needs, promoting workforce diversity and representation, and implementing supportive measures for employee well-being and work-life balance. By addressing these areas and prioritising proactive measures, the Council can create an inclusive, supportive, and healthy workplace culture that reflects the needs and values of its employees and the community it serves.

Additional comments

The group discussions provided employees with an opportunity to share additional comments and 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.

Employees also spoke of the significance of having their voices heard and valued in discussions about the direction of the council. The opportunity to participate in focus group discussions allowed them to express their views, share feedback, and contribute ideas for improvement.

Some participants highlighted the value of in-person engagement, noting that they appreciated the opportunity to participate in face-to-face discussions rather than virtual meetings. This personal interaction facilitated more meaningful communication and collaboration, allowing for a deeper exchange of ideas and perspectives. In-person engagement can foster a sense of connection and belonging among employees, contributing to a stronger sense of community.

While acknowledging that not all comments made during the focus group discussions may be directly relevant to every aspect of the council's direction, employees valued the opportunity to share their insights and experiences. They recognised that their perspectives, even if not universally applicable, could still provide valuable insights and contribute to a broader understanding of council dynamics and challenges.

There were questions raised about the frequency of employee surveys, with some participants advocating for an annual survey cycle. This allows sufficient time for implementing changes based on survey results, ensuring that feedback leads to tangible improvements in the work environment.

An incidental observation highlighted the value of in-person networking, as evidenced by employees sharing emails after the focus group. This underscores the importance of fostering collaboration and communication among employees across different departments and teams.



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