

Report title: Your Voice Focus Groups 2018 – Summary Report	
Report to: Corporate Policy and Scrutiny Committee	
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Introduction

Employees undertook the biennial Your Voice engagement survey in March this year. This was completed by 4,099 employees – a response rate of 58%.

The headline Employee Engagement Index score from this survey was 60%. This score relates to the degree that employees feel proud to work for the Council; they are committed to its goals; and they feel motivated to do their very best. This score of 60% is 2% lower than our last survey in 2016.

Two areas of particular interest raised in the survey were:

- A perception that change could be managed more effectively at ECC.
- A perception that customers aren't at the heart of everything ECC does.

Following the survey, CLT have been met several times to review its findings and to plan action. As well as the top-down approach, each individual Function and the teams within them have been asked to review their own survey results, and to suggest and make changes in their local areas to improve employee engagement from the bottom-up.

Alongside this, Gavin tasked the Employee Experience team with running focus groups to delve deeper into the Your Voice survey findings – particularly in the areas of interest mentioned previously.

Approach for the focus groups

In July and August, a total of twelve sessions were held across the county, covering each of the six major office hubs: Chelmsford; Colchester; Harlow; Basildon;

Clacton; Brentwood. Each session was deliberately kept small, so that each participant would have plenty of opportunity to speak.

Individuals were able to book onto sessions through adverts placed on the intranet, One News and through Gavin's blog. The team also used random sampling to generate a list of employees across different geographies, teams, grades, and length of service. These employees received an invitation to a focus group as well. This combination of self-selection and random sampling was chosen to give everyone the opportunity to join a focus group who wanted to, as well as hearing from a range of individuals who might not normally sign up for a place by themselves.

80 employees in total attended the focus groups, with good representation from each Function at ECC. Each session was hosted by a member of the Employee Experience team. Several members of CLT also joined sessions as hosts.

Participants were encouraged to have an open conversation about their experiences at ECC. The host committed not to share anything from the sessions which would be personally attributable to anyone. No topic was off the table, but the host prompted them to consider in particular:

- The perception that change could be managed more effectively at ECC.
- The perception that customers aren't at the heart of everything ECC does.

Key themes

Seven key themes emerged from the focus groups, namely:

1. Managing change
2. Customer service and technology
3. Leadership and management
4. Innovation vs. bureaucracy
5. Mobile and flexible working
6. Communications
7. Environment

The following section summarises the employee feedback in the focus group sessions related to these themes and provides some examples of comments made in the focus group sessions which relate to them.

Focus group findings

Managing change

There was a general perception that this could be improved at the Council, but there were very few tangible suggestions shared. There was a strong sense that change was managed better in areas where employees felt more like they were listened to and able to influence the change. In some areas, structural change had felt secretive.

“We’ve got the expertise, but feel we’re not trusted or listened to.”

“OD has been secretive in my area, I haven’t felt able to influence it”

“I’ve had three careers – to me, change doesn’t matter”

“Everyone is very passionate about their jobs, and just want it to be as good as possible”

Customer service and technology

Technology was identified by employees as the biggest barrier to putting customers at the heart of everything ECC does. Employees expressed frustration at failings in internal systems which then have an impact on working with customers. As well as this, there was a belief that we don’t offer modern digital solutions which would benefit our customers.

“Technology is the most important factor in customer focus – we need to be able to operate remotely, but phones are out of date. Customers won’t believe in our technological and digital solutions if we don’t make it truly part of our culture from within”

“We’re not good at asking the customers what they want”

“We need to use plain English with our customers”

“Smart phones would make us more accessible to our clients, and also enable us to demonstrate apps to them”

Leadership and management

Senior leaders at ECC are well thought of by many but a desire was expressed to see more of them in local offices – particularly outside of Chelmsford. The employee roadshows hosted by Gavin and the Leader were praised and employees wanted instead to see more of their Heads of Service and Directors. There was a sentiment raised that employees don't always feel able to be honest with managers, who in turn shy away from difficult conversations.

“Capability means difficult conversations, and I think managers shy away from this”

“We don't feel able to be honest with our senior managers”

“We need to see Heads of Services – no-one ever comes to see us” (Stanwell House, Colchester)”

Innovation vs. bureaucracy

A feeling echoed in several focus groups was that there is too much governance at the Council which hinders innovation. Some employees feel that their decisions are questioned frequently and they consequently do not feel empowered to deliver for their customers.

“We're risk averse, there's too much governance”

“Habits and mindsets hold us back – we need to get out and be empowered”

“I'm a professional social worker, but my decisions are questioned all the time. Everything is down to finances.”

Mobile and flexible working

Employees have mixed experiences of mobile and flexible working. This is natural for different types of work, but in some cases the only variable seems to be the manager's own preferences. In the main, this is an area which has improved for employees, leading to greater feelings of job satisfaction and self-motivation.

“Flexible working gives me empowerment and self-motivation”

“Flexible working needs to be managed carefully within a social work setting, as sometimes people have a bad experience and need support of their manager and colleagues”

“I’ve been told I can’t work flexibly”

Communications

Two types of employee emerged – those who want communications as early as possible, even before there is clarity on the issue, and those who prefer to wait for communications which have the detail. It isn’t possible to completely please both types. However, there was a broad consensus that corporate communications could be less generic, clearer about the impact on individuals, and more transparent.

“Generic emails don’t have the impact intended/messages aren’t clear”

“Don’t send us anything until you have something substantial to tell us”

“I appreciate an early heads up, even if the details aren’t yet known”

“Communications don’t always feel honest”

Environment

Employees want to take pride in their surroundings, which is difficult in some of the Council’s offices. This is felt particularly by those working in premises visited by customers, outside of Chelmsford.

“Some of our buildings just aren’t fit for purpose”

“We need to be able to have personal pride in our surroundings. Customers can feel that”

“A building gives a sense of identity”

Next steps

Actions to improve employee engagement is continuing across all functions. The Employee Experience team is preparing an engagement plan for CLT which has been designed mindfully with the feedback from the focus groups. Both this report and the proposed engagement plan will be shared with CLT for their consideration and action.

Gavin has committed to sharing an update on the actions from Your Voice at the next round of roadshows in the new year.