



# Annual review report

## STOCKTON BOROUGH COUNCIL

Project number: NOR-19-00980  
Accreditation valid from: 12/07/18  
Review conducted by: Sheila Warren



## Approach to Annual Review

Stockton Borough Council was most recently accredited as an Investor in People on 12<sup>th</sup> July 2018, following a comprehensive assessment process. On-going accreditation requires an annual review, and this was carried out on 22<sup>nd</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> July 2019. I held an initial meeting with the Managing Director and the Director of HR, Legal & Communications. This meeting provided an excellent opportunity to discuss the Council's progress and achievements since the 2018 Assessment, including updates on 'big ticket' items such as the new hotel, the Globe Theatre project and investment in the town centre.

I met with 33 further people, in small groups and on an individual basis. The selection of people for interview was based on a range of criteria, including involvement in the Council's apprenticeship programme and involvement in employee Health and Wellbeing activities. I also met with the CEO of the Council's Health and Wellbeing provider: Redcar & Cleveland MIND. I'd like to thank everyone for their involvement and obvious commitment and to send a special thanks to Liz Purdy, who oversaw the Review.

## Findings from the Review visit

This short summary report captures the main points emerging from my meetings.

### **Indicator One: Leading and inspiring people**

There was strong evidence of people being well supported in their development, in some cases leading to career progression and a change of direction. There are high levels of confidence in senior leaders' ability to continue to drive the Council forward. The Review took place shortly after the departure of the former Chief Executive, and there was agreement that the transition to a senior team led by the Managing Director had been smooth.

Stockton Borough Council has a strong track record in developing leaders through formal programmes and through strong informal support arrangements such as mentoring. People who were interviewed spoke highly of individual managers, who supported development and were effective role models. *"My Director has high emotional intelligence."* *"I have an innovative manager. There is no micro-management. There is good support and knowledge."*

Communication continues to be effective. People who were interviewed were well aware of the Council's ambitions and how they personally contributed. Staff Forums, KYIT and Setting the Standard sessions were identified as good practice.

The Employee Survey generated a 66% positive response to the statement: "Communication within my Directorate is good."

### **Indicator Two: Living the organisation's values and behaviours**

Stockton Borough Council has an established suite of values which recognise the importance of public service. These promote behaviours such as working hard and being unafraid to try something new. People gave many examples of how the values were put into practice in their daily work, for example by supporting local communities through restorative practice, improving customer service and working with young people. The Employee Survey gives staff the opportunity to score statements which relate to the values and behaviours. As an example, an 8 out of 10 score was achieved when staff were asked how much they agreed with the statement: "We never lose sight of the fact that we are here to serve the people of the Borough."

### **Indicator Three: Empowering and involving people**

Feedback from the interviews confirmed that people feel empowered and are encouraged to come forward with ideas for improvement, and to participate in decision-making. There were many examples of people being encouraged to get involved in working groups (for example through Shaping a Brighter Future) and project teams. Several people who were interviewed were also heavily involved in the selection process for apprentices, through participating in assessment centres and interviews. Involvement in such activities encourages people to collaborate and to develop new skills (or apply existing skills in a different context). These are all features of the Advanced and High-Performing performance level of the Investors in People framework. People know that their contribution makes a difference: examples which emerged during the interviews included people contributing to keeping residents safe; and people suggesting efficiency improvements.

The Employee Survey generated an 82% positive response to the statement: "I have enough authority to do my job effectively."

### **Indicator Four: Managing performance**

There are plans to review appraisal in the future. Performance management remains high on the agenda, however, and people confirmed that they have regular discussions with their managers about their own performance. Team performance is also managed: as an example, managers explained how they had improved the performance of their team in the face of some resistance to change. *"I constantly explain why it is important to change, because the world has changed. We have shrinking teams and budgets."*

The Employee Survey generated a 72% positive response to the statement: "I receive regular and constructive feedback on my performance."

### **Indicator Five: Recognising and rewarding high performance**

People confirmed during the interviews that they were recognised for their contribution. Examples of recognition included praise in a team meeting; being involved in new development activities; securing a promotion and being nominated for a formal award. Stockton Borough Council continues to invest in the health and wellbeing of staff and has trained 40+ Mental Health First Aiders. The organisation has enhanced its approach to health and wellbeing through contracting with Redcar & Cleveland MIND, who have held the contract since April 1<sup>st</sup>.

People are mindful of the continuing pressures on reward (pay) in the public sector. *"Life is hard at the moment."*

**Development Point:** There are no statements in the Employee Survey which relate directly to reward and recognition. This could be an area to include in future, for example by including a statement such as "My manager tells me when I have performed well" or "I am praised for doing a good job."

### **Indicator Six: Structuring work**

This Indicator requires an organisation to be “structured to deliver the organisation’s ambition. Roles are designed to deliver organisational objectives and create interesting work for people, while encouraging collaborative ways of working.” Evidence provided at the 2018 Assessment suggested that this is an area of strength at Stockton Borough Council. The organisation continues to review its structure to meet the challenges of reduced funding and the opportunities around achieving its ambition. This 12-month Review confirmed that there are good opportunities for collaboration (for example through the workstreams which support Shaping a Brighter Future, the recruitment of apprentices and embedding of health and wellbeing strategies). Shaping a Brighter Future has come to the end of its initial 5-year implementation period and is now being embedded as a permanent feature of Stockton Borough Council. A Corporate Projects Manager has been appointed to lead on certain areas moving forward.

There are examples of policy development: a review has been carried out of the organisation’s policies on (for example) Bereavement Leave and Carers Leave. Guidance has been reworded to ensure leave is being used consistently and as intended.

The Employee Survey generated a 63% positive response to the statement: “There is a strong feeling of co-operation and teams working together in this organisation.”

### **Indicator Seven: Building Capacity**

The good practice which was noted at the 2018 Assessment continues. Stockton Borough Council’s workforce is ageing, and the organisation understands the requirement to attract and retain people who will provide the workforce of the future. The considerable investment in an apprenticeship programme is a great example of providing a wide range of opportunities for people to gain valuable experience and qualifications whilst making a meaningful contribution to organisational life. The organisation decided that Level 2 & 3 apprentices should be paid the National Living Wage, rather than the (much lower) published apprenticeship rates.

In addition to the mandatory, professional and skills-based training, which is available, exposure to new experiences plays an important role in building organisational capacity whilst driving personal development. As an example, a manager described “a blistering 12 months” as a result of role expansion and the subsequent exposure to high level strategic issues. There was also evidence that structural changes had created opportunities for people to progress their careers, in some cases into supervisory or management positions.

There is also evidence of the organisation supporting higher level academic and professional qualifications: examples included support for an MBA programme and support to CEng status.

The Employee Survey generated an 86% positive response to the statement: “I have taken the opportunity to learn something new at work this year.”

## **Indicator Eight: Delivering continuous improvement**

The examples already cited, including Shaping a Brighter Future and the apprenticeship programme support continuous improvement. The strategy to employ apprentices required an innovative approach to recruitment and selection. The publication of a comprehensive brochure and the decision to hold two town centre open days enabled the variety of apprenticeships on offer to be publicised to a wide audience, leading to 920 applications. Selection was in progress during this Review and it became clear that the selection process itself was innovative, with assessment centre tasks being designed to bring out the best in candidates by assessing their suitability for the roles through participation in activities such as building bridges with spaghetti and marshmallows and the Zombie Apocalypse activity. Feedback from interviews confirmed the success of the approach, in that offers were being made and, in many cases, a significant proportion of short-listed candidates were appointable.

The organisation's approach to Employee Assistance and Wellbeing training provision is also innovative. Comprehensive reporting from the contractor demonstrates positive evaluation of training delivery; and in-depth analysis of access to services. Feedback from interviews confirmed that people are actively involved in generating new ideas and approaches: two colleagues helpfully explained the work in progress to develop a Mental Health Framework for staff working in Community Services.

In recent years, Stockton Borough Council has pursued continuous improvement to drive efficiency, whilst facing a reduction in funding: everyone understands the implications of this in relation to their current role and the focus on their team. People proactively look for new ways of working. *"If you make a suggestion, no-one will dismiss it out of hand. We have the freedom to look at different ways of working."*

Looking beyond the current environment to learn from the outside world is achieved through, for example, benchmarking and involvement in networks. Feedback from the interviews confirmed that people are continually looking for more efficient and effective ways of working. As already noted, the culture encourages collaboration.

The Employee Survey generated an 86% positive response to the statement: "I believe that one of my responsibilities is to continually look for new ways to improve the way we work."

## **Indicator Nine: Creating sustainable success**

This continues to be an area of strength for Stockton Borough Council. Feedback from the interviews provided good evidence of people's involvement in short-term and long-term planning and there is clearly an understanding of the future challenges and opportunities which face the Council as it pursues its ambition. Several of the people who were interviewed could be described as champions, or agents, of change, through their involvement in the Talent Network or as Health Advocates. People understand and accept that change is the norm, and that it is always managed with consideration for people at its heart. The relationship between Stockton Borough Council, its partners and the local community is business critical and people confirmed their knowledge and understanding of the various stakeholders. The Council's achievements have been recognised through a range of external awards including North East Better Health at Work Gold Award (Continuing Excellence status) and Customer Service Excellence accreditation. An interviewee explained that he was the current (national) Market Manager of the Year and that Stockton-on-Tees has won three national Market awards in the last seven years.

The Employee Survey generated a 77% positive response to the statement: "I would recommend this organisation as a great place to work."

## Conclusion and Next Steps

**Stockton Borough Council continues to be recognised as an Investors in People organisation.** It's great to see the progress since the 2018 Assessment and to learn about the further plans to deliver the Council's ambitions.

It is anticipated that the 24-month Review could include some of the apprentices who are currently being recruited, to discuss their progress and opportunities. It would also be useful to review progress of the health and wellbeing strategies, and to explore the embedding of Shaping a Brighter Future as a permanent feature of the organisation.

Although Stockton Borough Council has chosen to be assessed against the Investors in People Standard (rather than the full framework, which enables higher-level accreditation), there is little doubt that a higher-level award (Silver or Gold) would be achievable if current practices continue: the organisation already has numerous metrics including those monitored through its Employee Survey. The extensive focus on employee health and wellbeing represents excellent practice, and the organisation is encouraged to review the requirements of the Investors in People Health and Wellbeing Good Practice Award, which may provide some additional areas of focus.

Many congratulations on your progress and achievements during the last 12 months and best wishes for your on-going success.

## Important Dates

Accreditation date	24-Month Review due	Accreditation Expiry
12/07/18	12/07/20	12/07/21

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