

AGENDA ITEM

REPORT TO CABINET

DATE 20th JANUARY 2022

**REPORT OF SENIOR
MANAGEMENT TEAM**

CABINET INFORMATION ITEM

Leader of the Council – Councillor Bob Cook

INVESTORS IN PEOPLE (IIP) 2021 REACCREDITATION

Summary

We are proud to announce that Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council has been reaccredited with the Investors in People Accredited standard, an award we have held since 2003.

Investors in People is the UK's leading accreditation for people management and signals a high performing culture and a commitment to employee development and success. The Council has a long history of investing in its employees, building organisational capacity and driving change in the way we work to be able to respond to the evolving challenges and to ensure we are able to provide excellent services to our residents and businesses within the borough.

The IIP assessment was conducted in November 2021. It involved a combination of face to face and virtual interviews with a wide range of employees and a review of the Council's approach to people management.

Evidence gathered during the assessment provided significant examples of good practice across all Indicators of the Standard and feedback. The stand-out themes were around mutual trust and empowerment; meaningful opportunities for development; and understanding of the needs of stakeholders and communities.

It is particularly pleasing to receive such positive feedback and recognition of the Council's ambition and approach to valuing our workforce, notwithstanding the significant impact the Covid-19 pandemic continues to have and the ongoing financial challenge and change faced over the recent years.

It is recommended that the report be noted.

Detail

1. The Council has a strong track record as a holder of the world-recognised Investors in People Standard, having been accredited since 2003. The Council was last assessed in July 2018 and has had interim reviews at the 12- and 24-months stages. The Council's full assessment was due to take place in July 2021 but was postponed to support our response to the Covid pandemic and implementation of flexible working.
2. The Council was assessed in November 2021 against the following 9 indicators.



3. The IIP assessment was conducted by two external Assessors using a mixture of leadership discussions, individual and group interviews and review of documentation. An initial meeting with the Managing Director and the Director of HR, Legal & Communications took place, followed by a combination of face to face and virtual interviews with 134 employees from a wide range of roles across all Directorates, with a length of service ranging from a matter of weeks to in excess of 25 years.
4. There was also opportunity for the Assessors to review information in support of the Council's approach to people management including the proposals for the development of our Town Centres and office accommodation, the Council's Apprenticeship Programme and use of apprenticeships to support existing employee development, the Customer Service Excellence Awards, and our approach to Flexible Working.
5. The assessment provided significant evidence of good practice across all Indicators of the Standard as outlined in full in the **Feedback Report in Appendix 1**.
6. All indicators of the Investors in People Standard were met. A summary for each indicator along with anonymised comments from our Employees (in italics) is outlined below.
7. The report also highlighted some areas for development under the Indicators of the Investors in People Standard, offered in the spirit of continuous improvement. We are pleased to report that we are already working on a number of these areas and will ensure an action plan is developed to address these recommendations before our next IIP review meeting
8. **Indicator 1 - Leading & Inspiring People.**

Our Council has clarity on direction and ambition which is reflected in our Council Plan with a "golden thread" through to Service Plans and Employee Personal Objectives. Employees spoke of high levels of trust, with one employee stating, "***There are clear and consistent messages, they deliver the promises they make and explain if there is something that can't be done***". Managers were clear on what they needed to do to lead, manage and develop people.

A development area was identified to build a strategy to improve engagement with harder-to-reach employees. Whilst many of those interviewed were aware of the Council's plans and ambitions, some who worked remotely and have less access to digital communication were not as clear.

We are committed to improving access to digital communication for remote workers, providing digital skills training where required. We have already added home email addresses for 1435 of the 1578 employees who do not have SBC addresses to support digital communications and are exploring routes for providing them with access to the intranet.

9. **Indicator 2 - Living the Organisation's Values and Behaviours**

It was clear that the work delivered throughout the Shaping a Bright Future Programme had helped to embed the Council's culture statement, values and behaviours with many employees having a good understanding of their meaning and managers demonstrating good practice in interpreting them for their teams. ***"We make the Culture Statement work for different services by looking at how it can be applied to what we do"***

A development area is to build a strategy to improve engagement with harder-to-reach employees. Some remote workers were less clear on our values and behaviours although this didn't mean that they weren't displayed.

We are continuing to develop employee engagement activities to help reinforce our Culture statement, values and behaviours and ensure our wellbeing strategies are promoted specifically with those who currently do not have access to digital communication channels

10. **Indicator 3- Empowering and Involving People.** It was felt that this Indicator was one of the Council's strongest areas. Examples were given of the Council enabling individuals and teams to make decisions within the parameters of broad frameworks evidencing that our leaders trust our employees and our employees trust our leaders. Empowering and involving employees came across as a key part of our culture. ***"The general approach is to give people autonomy to do their job but know I'm there if they need support"***

A development area is to clarify how people can give feedback on the Flexible Working pilot. As some people were uncertain as to how they will be able to give feedback on their opinion of the Flexible Working pilot, we reminded employees that a survey will be sent out in the New Year seeking views from all Members and Employees with results to be shared via KYIT.

11. **Indicator 4 - Managing Performance.** Employees were clear about how their own objectives fit into the bigger picture again showing the "golden thread" from the Council plan through to personal objectives that were discussed and agreed. Many employees had positive views on 1-2-1s and appraisals, with the appraisal processes being adaptable to meet the needs of teams. ***"I've always felt valued and clear on what my role contributes too and the difference it makes"***

A development area was proposed to consider how we could monitor the impact of the appraisal process on employees rather than just compliance. We will consider this as part of our planned review of the appraisal process in 2022/23.

12. **Indicator 5: Recognising and Rewarding High Performance.** The assessment referred to our Customer Service Excellence Awards, Appraisal process, KYIT and

recognition in Teams as examples of our formal and informal reward and recognition strategies with good evidence of managers using praise. ***“The comments on my appraisal from my boss were absolutely brilliant. He told me how proud he was of me”***

A development area was suggested that we review the Customer Service Awards to strengthen the link with high performance. We recognised that the Customer Service Awards were different this year due to the additional Covid-19 recognition awards. However, as some people nominated for the 2021 awards were unclear as to why they had been nominated, we have committed to reviewing and recommunicating the criteria for nominating people for Customer Service Awards and to consider how they can be linked to our definitions of high performance.

13. **Indicator 6 - Structuring Work** There was evidence of teams collaborating especially through the pandemic. Service reviews responded to external and internal change and whilst they understandably can be unsettling people experienced extensive consultation and had an opportunity to shape the new structure.

A development area is to take a look at communication during Service Reviews. We have arranged to incorporate into Management training and to review the guidance around consultation documentation to help ensure the strategic purpose of a review is understood reducing any uncertainty around a review for employees.

14. **Indicator 7 - Building Capability** Employees are given opportunities to discuss their development and provided with support to maximise their potential through a range of development opportunities not just training. ***“I was supported to be curious about things even those things that were not directly related to my job”***. Good examples of succession planning and employees feeling encouraged and supported from managers along the way. The Council's investment in our apprenticeship programme showed positive experiences but with some inconsistencies in approaches to mentoring.

A development area is **to review our approach to mentoring for apprentices** was suggested. We have acted to develop training for all Mentors of apprenticeships to ensure a consistent approach to support an apprentice's development and to provide a named HR contact for all apprentices.

15. **Indicator 8 - Delivering Continuous Improvement** Our culture encourages innovation, ideas and challenge, to learn from mistakes and look both internally and externally for inspiration. ***“What I appreciate is the freedom to build innovation into what I do personally and what the Council does as a whole”***. We use data to evaluate impact especially in succession and wellbeing.

A development area is to strengthen the evaluation of key people strategies by identifying key impact metrics. We will build this into future developments.

16. **Indicator 9 - Creating Sustainable Success** We effectively communicate our long term and “big ticket” strategies with employees seeing Change as an ongoing activity. The way we adapted to the pandemic was widely praised. ***“I think Stockton Borough Council are a very good employer. We're very lucky. They were very supportive during the pandemic and very understanding about how people feel”***.

17. **Flexible Working Pilot:** Whilst this was not a direct part of our assessment, many employees interviews who are participating in the Flexible Working pilot referred to it, and the assessors comments in the report provide an initial indicator as to how the scheme is being applied and working in practice. It was recognised by the assessors

that we would not be able to please everyone, with many having different views as to what they would like to see in the future.

As Members know, on Monday 13th December 2021 we paused the flexible working pilot scheme to support the implementation of the Governments Plan B guidelines – to work from home where possible. Consideration will be given to the timing of the employee feedback survey in light of this, and a more detailed report to cabinet will follow with analysis and recommendations.

18. Overall, the stand-out themes from our assessment were around mutual trust and empowerment; meaningful opportunities for development; and understanding of the needs of stakeholders and communities. In particular the IIP report highlighted the following as things we as an organisation should be proud of:

Our Employees:

- spoke positively about leaders and managers throughout the Council;
- have been well supported during the pandemic;
- are personally aligned with the Council's vision and values;
- described a culture of mutual trust and empowerment;
- know what is required of them;
- spoke positively about appraisal and 1-2-1s;
- have had opportunities for career development and progression;
- have a good understanding of the future direction of the Council;
- feel valued for their contribution;
- say that ideas for continuous improvement are welcomed;
- have a thorough understanding of your stakeholders and communities.

19. It is particularly pleasing to receive such positive feedback and recognition of the Council's ambition and approach to valuing our workforce, notwithstanding the significant impact the Covid-19 pandemic continues to have and the ongoing financial challenge and change that our employees have been part of over the recent years. The report demonstrates that we have a resilient workforce who are proud to work for the Council, they understand our culture and values and are all working to provide the best possible services to the people of our borough.

Consultation and Engagement

20. Not Applicable.

Next Steps

21. The Council will work towards achievement of the IIP Action Plan to improve against the Standard and to further improve. Review assessments will take place in July 2022 and July 2023, with the Council's current IIP accreditation expiring in July 2024.

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INVESTORS IN PEOPLE™

We invest in people



Feedback

Stockton Borough Council

Project number: NOR-21-00743

Practitioners: Sheila Warren & Graeme Mills

Date: 16/11/21

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You did it!

INVESTORS IN PEOPLE™

We invest in people Standard

You're at the Standard level of our We invest in people accreditation.

Detailed feedback and recommendations inside...

- What to be proud of
- What to work on
- Our recommendations
- What's next

Key dates

Accreditation date	12-month meeting	24-month meeting	Accreditation expiry
16/11/21	12/07/22	12/07/23	12/07/24

At a glance

Stockton Borough Council has a strong track record as an Investors in People organisation, having been accredited since 2003. The Council was last assessed in July 2018 and has had interim reviews at the 12- and 24-months stages.

This Assessment involved a combination of face to face and Teams interviews with 134 people, from a wide range of roles across the Council and with length of service ranging from a matter of weeks to in excess of 25 years. Interviewees were assured that the conversations were confidential. Thanks are due to everyone for their contribution to this Assessment.

The impact of the pandemic continues to be felt, as people consider how to adapt their roles to current and emerging needs. People's experiences around working for Stockton Borough Council during the pandemic were explored at the 24-month review, which took place earlier this year. Responses were very positive, with people highlighting strong support from managers and colleagues, effective communication and good opportunities for collaboration, creativity and development. Feedback from the current Assessment confirmed that these positive experiences have been sustained.

The interviews took place after a pilot scheme of Flexible Working had been in place for over two months. Many interviewees were taking part in the pilot, and we have included some feedback of their opinions at the end of this Report.

Throughout our interviews we found that people had a positive experience as employees of Stockton Borough Council. The stand-out themes of this Assessment were around mutual trust and empowerment; meaningful opportunities for development; and understanding of the needs of stakeholders and communities.

We've included some potential areas for further development under the Indicators of the Investors in People Standard. These are offered in the spirit of continuous improvement.

Many congratulations on your re-accreditation as an Investor in People and best wishes for success in the future.

Congratulations on achieving the We invest in people accreditation!

You care about your people, and we know you're ambitious to do even more for them.

Our feedback focuses on what you need to do to keep improving.

What to be proud of

- Your people spoke positively about leaders and managers throughout the Council
- Your people have been well supported during the pandemic
- Your people are personally aligned with the Council's vision and values
- Your people described a culture of mutual trust and empowerment
- Your people know what is required of them
- Your people spoke positively about appraisal and 121s
- Your people have had opportunities for career development and progression
- Your people have a good understanding of the future direction of the Council
- Your people feel valued for their contribution
- Your people say that ideas for continuous improvement are welcomed
- Your people have a thorough understanding of your stakeholders and communities

What to work on

- Build a strategy to improve engagement with harder-to-reach employees
- Clarify how people can give feedback on the Flexible Working pilot
- Consider how you could monitor the impact of appraisal
- Review the Customer Service Awards to strengthen the link with high performance
- Take a look at communication during Service Reviews
- Review your approach to mentoring for apprentices
- Strengthen the evaluation of key people strategies by identifying key impact metrics

We've expanded on these points as Development Areas throughout this Report.

What's next?

When you've had a chance to read this report, we'll explain your results in our **feedback meeting**.

WHO?

The meeting will include Sheila Warren and Graeme Mills.

WHEN?

The feedback meeting will take place on 7/12/21.

WHERE?

We'll meet through MS Teams.

WHAT?

Together, we'll...

- **discuss your result** and our recommendations in detail.
- brainstorm how to turn our recommendations into **tangible activities**.
- develop an **action plan**, which we'll be able to review one and two years on.

To keep your accreditation, you need to:

- keep meeting (or exceed!) the **requirements** of your award.
- meet us **12 and 24 months** down the line. We won't be assessing you again, but it'll give us the chance to **chat through your progress** against your action plan.
- be **reassessed** no more than three years later.

Don't forget to celebrate!

Let your people know who how you did. **Reward them** for their hard work and **include them** in the journey you're on.

Assessment results

Your results by indicator

All Indicators of the Investors in People Standard are MET and there is some evidence that the Council is working at higher levels of the Standard in some areas. These will be highlighted in the next section of this Report.

INDICATOR	THEME	DEVELOPED
LEADING AND INSPIRING PEOPLE	Creating transparency and trust	✓
	Motivating people to deliver the organisations objectives	✓
	Developing leadership capability	✓
LIVING THE ORGANISATION'S VALUES AND BEHAVIOURS	Operating in line with the values	✓
	Adopting the values	✓
	Living the values	✓
EMPOWERING AND INVOLVING PEOPLE	Empowering people	✓
	Participating and collaborating	✓
	Making decisions	✓
MANAGING PERFORMANCE	Setting objectives	✓
	Encouraging high performance	✓
	Measuring and assessing performance	✓
RECOGNISING AND REWARDING HIGH PERFORMANCE	Designing an approach to recognition and reward	✓
	Adopting a culture of recognition	✓
	Recognising and rewarding people	✓
STRUCTURING WORK	Designing roles	✓
	Creating autonomy in roles	✓
	Enabling collaborative working	✓
BUILDING CAPABILITY	Understanding peoples' potential	✓
	Supporting learning and development	✓
	Deploying the right people at the right time	✓
DELIVERING CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT	Improving through internal and external sources	✓
	Creating a culture of continuous improvements	✓
	Encouraging innovation	✓
CREATING SUSTAINABLE SUCCESS	Focusing on the future	✓
	Embracing change	✓
	Understanding the external context	✓

What your people told us

Leading

“I have a really supportive manager. She expects us to do our work professionally and well: which we do. She is firm, fair, clear and unambiguous.” “I couldn’t ask for a better manager. She has extensive knowledge and is approachable. I can bounce ideas off her.” “We make the Culture Statement work for different services by looking at how it can be applied to what we do.” “We have values around being heard and being responsible for your own development.” “We are not afraid to try something new. We have taken this to heart and always try to come up with solutions.” “The general approach is to give people autonomy to do their job but know I’m there if they need support.” “We don’t do hierarchy in Stockton.” “The culture is very positive and there is an open attitude to communication. You can say what’s on your mind and it is treated with respect.”

LEADING AND INSPIRING PEOPLE

This Indicator covers Creating transparency and trust; Motivating people to deliver the organisation’s objectives; and Developing leadership capability.

One of the key responsibilities of leaders at all levels is to provide clarity about the direction and priorities of the organisation. Within the Investors in People Standard, this is described as the organisation’s ‘purpose, vision and objectives.’

During the Assessment, we asked your people if they understood the direction and priorities of Stockton Borough Council. Their responses were very positive and included references to planning documents such as the Council Plan and their Service Plan. They also told us about effective channels of communication including the Keeping You in Touch (KYIT) Newsletters, the Managing Director’s weekly blog and the Setting the Scene presentations.

Your people also described how they had opportunities to influence planning through team meetings, which helped shape service and team plans, and through the opportunity to ask questions of the Managing Director at the Setting the Scene presentations.

Your people also spoke of high levels of trust being built up and expressed their confidence in the plans. When asked what built up trust within the organisation one person (not a manager) said, “It’s because there are clear and consistent messages, they deliver the promises they make and explain if there is something that can’t be done, and if they get it wrong, they’ll hold their hands up.” This is a good insight for the organisation and its leaders.

The clarity around direction was widely expressed by your people. Managers were able to provide the most detail, being more likely to be engaged in planning processes, but people in all roles expressed some understanding of the Council’s ambitions.

Some people who worked away from the main offices and those who worked more remotely, for example in Waste and Care teams, were less engaged with the Council’s ambitions. Access to communication channels may have been a barrier in these cases - people in these roles often did not have a Council email address (or even a personal email address) and some were not particularly digitally literate or possess a computer or smartphone. There were some actions taken to help mitigate these challenges, such as presentations during the group appraisal meetings, but there remain some barriers to engagement with these groups.

Your managers told us that they were clear as to what was expected of them to manage and develop people. Some referred to the behaviours which underpinned Shaping a Brighter Future and others spoke

about management development activities such as the management apprenticeship, which helped them understand what a ‘good manager’ was within the Council. Several managers described how they had to adapt their approach to meet the need of individual people and teams, understanding that “there’s not a single blueprint.” Overall, your managers seem to understand the broad principles and processes that provided a framework for their role.

There was evidence of management development activities being based around your behaviours, values and culture statement. A specific example given was the Level 3 Supervisor training designed by Middlesbrough College.

Beyond the Standard

Although this Assessment was carried out against the ‘Developed’ level of the Investors in People Standard, there was evidence that Stockton Borough Council is likely to be working at higher levels of this Indicator. Examples included line managers supporting people to achieve objectives, people having the opportunity to provide feedback on how they are managed and developed (for example through evaluation and surveys), and high levels of mutual trust.

Development area

We recommend that you build a strategy around reaching those groups that may be less engaged with the Council’s plans. This should consider the communication messages (how can we make them relevant to these groups?) as well as the methods in which they are communicated (how can we overcome barriers to digital communications?). Digital inclusion is increasingly important to the Council in respect of providing services to residents, and it’s important that people’s digital skills are developed to enable them to fully engage as residents (as many of them are) and as employees.

LIVING THE ORGANISATION'S VALUES AND BEHAVIOURS

This Indicator covers Operating in line with the values: Adopting the values; and Living the values.

In high-performing organisations, values shape the behaviours and decision making at every level. They influence how a Customer Services team member engages with members of the public and influence strategies developed by senior leaders. In addition to creating clarity around organisational ambitions, a key function of leadership is to create clarity around the organisational values and behaviours. Consequently, we asked people about the values, principles or behaviours they associated with Stockton Borough Council.

People frequently referred to two connected definitions - the value statements in the Culture Statement and the behaviours associated with Shaping a Brighter Future. These were communicated widely throughout the organisation and regularly referred to in communications such as Setting the Scene and KYIT.

A very small number of people said they were not aware of either Shaping a Brighter Future or the Culture Statement. It was unlikely that these statements had not been communicated but the messages may not have engaged or stuck with these individuals. As with communicating the organisation's ambitions, it was those in Waste and Care services and had less access to digital communications, who were likely to be less clear about the values and behaviours (although this didn't mean they weren't displayed). It has recently been determined that Shaping a Brighter Future is embedded in the organisation and will be 'business as usual' moving forward. It is suggested that discussions about the values and behaviours are embedded in day-to-day activity too, to ensure that they remain memorable.

Your people were able to describe how the values and behaviours were influential. They described how they were used in appraisal with people having to reflect on them before discussions or how they supported recruitment by using interview questions based around behaviours and values. People also stated that they were directly linked to the Customer Service Awards in broad terms but not specifically i.e., they believed the Awards themselves were not directly related to the Culture Statement values - although this wasn't always clear to some, even those nominated (see Indicator 5). Your people clearly believe that the values and behaviours influence how they serve the residents, and also were reflected in how the Council and its people have acted throughout the pandemic, especially in how people rose to the challenge of keeping people safe and looked after: there is no doubt that people have gone the extra mile throughout this period and have enjoyed strong support from leaders at all levels of the Council.

To a degree, the theme of adapting processes to service areas or team needs (as described later in Indicator 4 in connection with appraisals) is also relevant here. Some managers described how they would interpret statements in behaviours and values in a way that was relevant to their teams: "We make the culture statement work for different services by looking at how it can be applied to what we do." This represents good practice and should be encouraged.

Beyond the Standard

Although this Assessment was carried out against the 'Developed' level of the Investors in People Standard, there was evidence that Stockton Borough Council is likely to be working at higher levels of this Indicator. Examples included people being personally motivated to behave in line with the values and people doing the right thing, not necessarily the most convenient thing.

Development area

We recommend that you consider the values and behaviours as you build the communications strategy we mention under Indicator 1 - making messages around values relevant to the groups with limited (or zero) digital access or skills, and in a format that is accessible.

EMPOWERING AND INVOLVING PEOPLE

This Indicator covers Empowering people; Participating and collaborating; and Making decisions. It recognises that leadership is not restricted to those in management roles and that high performing organisations encourage all their people to demonstrate leadership in their role.

We talked to your people about areas such as delegation, ownership and empowerment. We also considered the context of the organisation and its operations. Local Authorities work within a number of regulatory frameworks and are exposed to public scrutiny. Empowering people to make independent decisions could be a challenge in this environment, but we found this to be one of the strongest areas for Stockton Borough Council. We found very good examples of the organisation enabling individuals and teams to make decisions within the parameters of a broad framework. Essentially, leaders trust people and people trust leaders.

Your people have access to the knowledge and information they need to do the job well. This is especially achieved through effective, good communication within teams, supported by people's clear understanding of the purpose of their role and in some cases considerable experience in a role or service area. Managers were described as 'open' in terms of information sharing.

Your people and their representatives are consulted about decisions which will have an impact on them: current examples include the Children's Services review which is underway, and the Flexible Working pilot.

Your people feel empowered. They are given resources (time and budget) to enable them to take on responsibilities. This helped to motivate people and enrich their role: "the level of autonomy and flexibility I got helped me to create something that has proven to be great for the Council and borough." Another person said "I've always had a good level of autonomy. If you can show your level of confidence and competence, you're left to get on with it."

Managers also recognised the importance of delegating leadership and decision making: "the general approach is to give people autonomy to do their job but know I'm there if they need support." Again, this is achieved through mutual trust. We found that managers empower their teams further through adapting process to suit team and individual needs (such as taking a tailored approach to appraisal).

Beyond the Standard

Although this Assessment was carried out against the 'Developed' level of the Investors in People Standard, there was evidence that Stockton Borough Council is likely to be working at higher levels of this Indicator. Examples included people feeling empowered to identify ways to make improvements to how they do their job and people being encouraged to take the lead and develop leadership skills, perhaps by moving into a new role. The pandemic provided some unexpected and valuable leadership development opportunities, obviously in the most difficult of circumstances.

Development area

Some people were unsure about how they will be able to give feedback on their opinions of the Flexible Working pilot. Some think that all feedback will be channelled through their manager. It's suggested that the routes for giving feedback should be communicated (or re-communicated).

There were some examples of people working in different locations who felt that their access to information and knowledge could be improved. "I sometimes feel that information and knowledge in Muni Buildings is not as well embedded elsewhere, and it's assumed that it is. It's about proximity to decision makers." "Communication could be better across Directorates. People tend to get caught up in their day-to-day work."

Supporting

“I don’t think you need to be a manager to see that your objectives are part of the bigger picture.” “I like reading the performance report. It gives you a boost seeing what the team has done.” “I’ve always felt valued and clear on what my role contributes and the difference it makes.” “I feel 100% valued. I have a good sense of wellbeing because they trust my judgement and know I am passionate about what I do.” “The comments on my appraisal from my boss were absolutely brilliant. He told me how proud he was of me.”

MANAGING PERFORMANCE

This Indicator covers Setting objectives; Encouraging high performance; and Measuring and assessing performance.

Whilst Indicator One focussed on the importance of organisations having a clear direction in order to lead people to high performance, this Indicator looks at how individuals also need clarity on what they need to achieve and how the organisation defines high performance. Individuals’ high performance is specific to the organisation, shaped by its strategic and cultural ambitions, but in order to motivate and focus your people to achieve this, there needs to be clarity on what it means.

We talked to your people about their objectives - whether they were clear, your people agreed with them, and they could see how this linked their performance to that of the Council. Your people described how the appraisal was a key process to achieve this. They described objectives that were discussed and agreed. Many were able to describe a ‘golden thread’ from their objectives to the Council Plan: “I don’t think you need to be a manager to see that your objectives are part of the bigger picture.”

Managers described how they were able to amend or “tweak” the appraisal process to meet the needs of their teams, which we see as good practice which also demonstrates that they are trusted and empowered. With such a diverse workforce, this flexible approach means that most of your people valued the appraisal as effective in supporting their development and performance. For example, those working in the environment/waste teams would attend an annual event where there would be a presentation on the Council’s performance and then invited to individual meetings with their manager to have the appraisal. Other teams changed or eliminated specific questions that were less relevant.

Although clearly an effective approach, there are also some risks. In a small number of cases people stated they had not received an appraisal and there were two people who described managers as ‘inconsistent’ in their approach. Rather than abandon the practice of process adaption and delegation, it is recommended that you consider it a management behaviour rather than a process issue and target those areas where this approach may not be working as effectively.

We also found a small number of examples of people who had not had an appraisal for some time, in some cases delayed by the challenges of the pandemic. It is clear that 121s had continued though, often with a change of emphasis to wellbeing, again reflecting the flexible approach of the organisation and its managers.

We met a small number of people who described objective setting as just reflecting their duties rather than being stretching or focussed on progress or improvements in performance - “the objectives are just basically what I do in my job.” There were also a small number who couldn’t recall their objectives and paid most attention to them around appraisal time.

In most cases appraisals are supplemented with 121s and these interactions were described as being focussed on managers providing support for their team members. There were good examples of managers investing time in supporting people to perform at their best - one person described how their manager helped them to learn constructively from a mistake made in complaint handling, and another how their manager had helped to support their work life balance that improved performance at work.

In many cases your people told us that they got more from the 121s than the appraisal itself, although most still viewed the appraisal positively and even identified some added benefits, including the opportunity to have a useful conversation with the manager and providing an opportunity to discuss the wider team performance, both of which were motivational.

Some roles have additional approaches to performance management, such as observations which focus on behaviours and attitudes. Regular supervisions (for example of social workers) provide an opportunity to discuss a range of issues, including current challenges.

Beyond the Standard

Although this Assessment was carried out against the 'Developed' level of the Investors in People Standard, there was evidence that Stockton Borough Council is likely to be working at higher levels of this Indicator. Examples included managers addressing under-performance (supported by clear HR policies).

Development area

As a key process for people development, it would be advantageous to receive regular monitoring feedback on how the appraisal is being applied in terms of impact on individuals rather than compliance to the process e.g., asking questions such as "do you think your objectives motivate you to improve or make sure you deliver your role to the minimum standard?", rather than "how many 121s have you had this year?" Having identified any areas that need further development or support, continue to target those areas and monitor progress.

RECOGNISING AND REWARDING HIGH PERFORMANCE

This Indicator covers Designing an approach to recognition and reward; Adopting a culture of recognition; and Recognising and rewarding people.

Reward and recognition strategies can help to motivate individuals and provide greater clarity to all on the performance and behaviours that are important to an organisation. We listened to your people's views not just on reward and recognition process but also on behaviours in the organisation that may help people feel their work was valued.

The highest profile element of your formal reward and recognition strategy is the annual Customer Service Awards. We spoke to people who had been or are currently nominated for an award. They described it as a celebration of high performance, with nominees and award winners made to feel highly appreciated and valued. People are clearly proud of their nomination, although often modest about it.

It was curious that many of those that had been nominated were unsure about why they had been nominated or what they had done to deserve it. This was despite others saying this had been communicated in the KYIT newsletter. When the conversation was broadened to others, there also remained some vagueness over what the criteria was for nominating someone - other than a broad understanding that it was for someone who had "gone above and beyond." Your people didn't really see a direct link to the Council's behaviours or strategies or anything that helped define to everyone (not just nominees) what high performance was by providing real examples of it in action.

Your people also described how reward and recognition was delivered through other processes such as appraisal and team meetings. One person described how, at a recent team meeting, their work had been highlighted and "the whole team gave me a round of applause." Your people also frequently described how their work would be recognised and praised through appraisal and 121s. In these circumstances, your people were much clearer on why they were being recognised (or why other team members were recognised) and in the appraisal and 121s there were links to the organisational behaviours. Within team meetings recognition was often given in the context of achieving team objectives.

There were also day-to-day management behaviours described that provided evidence of managers using praise and recognition. A simple 'cheers' or 'thank you' goes a long way in making your people feel valued and motivated. Many of your people also told us about recognition from the wider community and, in some cases, through nomination for national and sector awards. Such recognition was highly appreciated.

When asked directly if they feel valued, the response was almost universally positive. Your people mentioned being supported in difficult personal circumstances and the Council's (and their manager's) care during the pandemic as influencing how they felt.

Beyond the Standard

Although this Assessment was carried out against the 'Developed' level of the Investors in People Standard, there was evidence that Stockton Borough Council is likely to be working at higher levels of this Indicator. Examples included people being recognised for their behaviour, on a formal and informal basis, and leaders reviewing approaches to recognition and reward, for example through exploring additional benefits.

Development area

It would be useful to review and re-communicate the criteria for nominating people for the Customer Service Awards. It may also be beneficial to conduct a review of the Customer Service Awards to explore how they can be linked more clearly to your definitions of high performance (in terms of supporting key strategies or exhibiting key behaviours).

STRUCTURING WORK

This Indicator covers Designing roles; Creating autonomy in roles; and Enabling collaborative working.

Organisational design can impact on people's ability to perform at their best or collaborate with others. Poor design can slow down decision making and lead to wasteful duplication of effort. During the assessment we asked your people about how clear they were about their role, the roles of others and how different teams were able to collaborate and cooperate.

Overall, your people were able to clearly describe their role and where they fitted into a team and the wider organisational structure. Reporting lines and accountabilities were generally clear and decision making was felt to be effective. One manager described the Council as operationally "a well-oiled machine." As mentioned earlier, the ability for services or teams to adapt some processes to fit their needs was also a strength in this area.

Where your people were less clear, this was largely related to two scenarios:

- They had recently undergone (or were undergoing) a Service Review
- They had experienced changes made in response to the pandemic/working from home

Service Reviews are used widely and (relatively) frequently. Leaders described this a part of the Council's ambitions to be responsive to the changing needs of the communities it serves. The reviews help the organisation be light-footed and adaptive. We sought feedback on the approach to the Service Review of Children's Services, which reflects a change in emphasis to early intervention and support.

Many of the people we spoke to had been through a Service Review and in some cases several reviews - one person said they had been through four Service Reviews in eight years. Many described them as 'unsettling' (or used similar words) and a slightly lower number described them as 'worrying' or making them feel 'anxious' (even if managers had tried to reassure them). From a process perspective, however, people held a generally positive view. They experienced extensive consultation and communication throughout the review. Your people felt they had a say in shaping the new structure.

However, there was much less certainty over the strategic context of the Service Review i.e., why are we doing a review? What are we hoping to change? Several people said they didn't know why there was a Service Review or what had prompted it. Those people who were unsure, did not seem to be particularly concerned - "they've just become something that we normally do" - but being able to put them in context may help to alleviate feelings of anxiety. It may be that the 'why' has been explained and it may simply need a reinforcement of communications or regularly checking back against the reasons/desired outputs of the review as it is being rolled out.

There were a very small number of people who felt their Service Review had been a retrograde step but when discussed further it appeared to be more about their perception of individual managers that were put in place rather than the overall review.

We found that the structure of teams and the wider organisation enabled people to work together effectively. The desire to work collaboratively is also a feature of the culture of an organisation, and we found that your people were very positive about working with others to deliver services and improve performance. The collaboration experienced during the peak period of the pandemic provides an excellent example, as your people moved onto other duties and came together to support the community. Your people also collaborate through involvement in cross-functional workstreams and projects, which also helps to build relationships and a common understanding of the ambitions of the Council.

During one group meeting it was noted that individuals from different service areas, who all worked remotely, began swapping ideas on systems and software they used. This may be an approach to develop in a more structured way.

Many people are involved in formal collaboration with other agencies, sometimes in a co-location setting, and in general enjoy good relationships and a sound understanding of each other's roles. We encountered one example where it was felt that relationships could be improved, which was put down to individuals' behaviour and misunderstandings about the respective legal obligations which impacted on the Local Authority and health sectors.

Beyond the Standard

Although this Assessment was carried out against the 'Developed' level of the Investors in People Standard, there was evidence that Stockton Borough Council is likely to be working at higher levels of this Indicator. Examples included encouragement to collaborate, clear policies and practices which are consistently applied, and roles being designed to help people the skills they need for progression.

Development area

Make sure people are clear about the purpose of Service Reviews and are reminded throughout the review. This will help to inform their contributions and possibly reduce any feelings of being unsettled or anxious.

Improving

“If you’ve got the right attitude, you’ll fit in anywhere really.” “I was supported to be curious about things even those things that were not directly related to my job.” “What I appreciate is the freedom to build innovation into what I do personally and what the Council does as a whole.” “The whole thing (SBF) was designed to future-proof our services. Defining what we’ll look like as a Council and what skills we’ll need.” “I think Stockton Borough Council is an excellent employer: they deal with any issues sensitively.” “I think the Council has been very supportive to all employees.” “I think Stockton Borough Council are a very good employer. We’re very lucky. They were very supportive during the pandemic and very understanding about how people feel.” “I love Stockton and everything that it has going for it.”

BUILDING CAPABILITY

This Indicator covers Understanding people’s potential; Supporting learning and development; and Deploying the right people at the right time.

We look for evidence that your people have opportunities to discuss their development and are provided with support to maximise their potential. We also look for evidence that recruitment and selection supports organisational objectives.

Your people told us how appraisals and 121s are used to facilitate conversations about their development. The appraisal tends to be used for longer term development needs, including career development, with the 121 focussing on more immediate needs. Your people were very positive about this approach and there were strong examples of those who have developed their careers successfully, often with strong support and encouragement from their managers along the way. Several people told us that their career path had involved significant changes in their role and service area - for example moving from care to a digital role or from a manual trade role to a senior community role. There was a strong expression from many that careers could be ‘fluid’ within the Council and that there were a wide range of options - “if you’ve got the right attitude, you’ll fit in anywhere really.”

There were a wide range of development experiences described by your people. This included weekly CPD for some roles and for others work shadowing, higher level management training, professional and technical qualifications, and coaching from managers. People in Adult Social Care also described the ‘Festival of Learning’ that included input from service users and national speakers on social care topics. We also heard about the Workforce Development team and the work on developing new ASYE Mandatory Training. Other examples of development included membership of professional bodies; sector and regional networking; personal research; secondment opportunities; acting as mentor for ASYE social workers or apprentices, and informal buddying of new starters.

The Talent Pool was identified as an area of good practice. This identified and recorded latent skills and experiences of your people that could be used. For example, a member of staff with a skill in photography was used by another team to produce some publicity photographs. Some people felt this had lost some momentum since the pandemic and it may be an area to revisit.

You have also increased your investment in apprenticeships and there were several apprentices involved in this Assessment. We found that there were some differences in the experiences of apprentices, although overall their experience was positive. One of the key differences was the degree of consistency of mentoring. We also found that some mentors felt there could be more clarity and structure around their role - “I feel, I’m winging it a bit.”

One of your apprentices suggested it may be a good idea for new apprentices to be able to speak to those that were one or two years ahead of them, to gain an insight of the years ahead from an apprentice’s perspective.

People who participated in recruitment described how the organisation's values and behaviours played an important role in selecting new members of staff. Recent recruits described a positive and efficient recruitment process - although several did refer to the confirmation letter taking a considerable length of time to arrive, which sometimes put them in a precarious situation as it often arrived shortly before they started the new role and after they handed in their notice to their previous employer. We know that you have taken steps to make your recruitment process more efficient, effective and user-friendly for candidates, having brought it back in-house and expanded system functionality.

Beyond the Standard

Although this Assessment was carried out against the 'Developed' level of the Investors in People Standard, there was evidence that Stockton Borough Council is likely to be working at higher levels of this Indicator. Examples included people taking responsibility for their own learning and development, effective management of resource planning and the use of succession planning to ensure that critical roles can be filled.

Development area

We recommend that you review your approach to mentoring for apprentices, through providing more structure and guidance (and possibly training) for their mentors. There is also the potential to develop more experienced apprentices (or former apprentices) into informal buddying roles.

DELIVERING CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

This Indicator covers Improving through internal and external sources; Creating a culture of continuous improvement; and Encouraging innovation.

Within the Standard, continuous improvement is considered as a behavioural or cultural approach rather than a process. Consequently, we listen to your people's experiences in introducing improvements and new ideas. More broadly, we also look at how the organisation evaluates and introduces improvements to its investment in people.

You provided evidence of how you have used data to evaluate your investment in people and identify new priorities. There were some particularly strong examples around your work in health and wellbeing, where you were able to monitor the impact of your activities against metrics such as sickness absence and specifically absences due to musculoskeletal illness.

You were also able to describe how your succession planning strategy could be evaluated by the age profile demographics of the Council. Metrics such as staff retention could also be a marker of the impact of people development.

Your people are aware of how they can contribute to improving performance and ways of working, and they are encouraged to come up with new ideas. People are well aware of the financial challenges of a Local Authority and are keen to ensure that resources are well utilised. They felt that the best way to raise ideas was in the team structure and confirmed that this works well. They also commented on the ability of everyone to raise questions or suggestions to the Managing Director during the Setting the Scene presentations. These are always acknowledged and responded to.

Most people described a management approach that encouraged ideas and improvement suggestions. One of your people described the approach in the following way: "I was supported to be curious about things even those things that were not directly related to my job." In describing the approach to dealing with mistakes, one person said: "to be honest I've learned a lot from mistakes" and went on to describe how their manager had helped to convert a mistake in handling a complaint, to a learning action.

Your people are also actively involved in workstreams and major projects to support continuous improvement. Examples include involvement in digitalisation and income collection projects, and development of the LMS and recruitment portal.

Beyond the Standard

Although this Assessment was carried out against the 'Developed' level of the Investors in People Standard, there was evidence that Stockton Borough Council is likely to be working at higher levels of this Indicator. As an example, there is good use of internal and external data to shape improvements, such as the use of service user feedback in Adult Social Care, which led to changes in delivery and the inclusion of service users on interview panels. You also bring in knowledge from the outside world and share your own good practices and ideas with others.

Development area

You could strengthen the evaluation of key people strategies by ensuring that they identify key impact metrics are defined at the early stage of their development e.g., what metrics will tell you your management development activities are successful? How will you know if a project has been successful? What will change when it is implemented?

CREATING SUSTAINABLE SUCCESS

This Indicator is about Focusing on the future; Embracing change; and Understanding the external context.

High performing organisations have embedded approaches and a culture that makes them resilient and adaptable. To achieve this, there need to be an understanding of how future factors may impact on the organisation and the role of all its stakeholders in navigating the future. The responses to change need to be carefully managed to ensure all people are on board.

We asked your leaders about the long-term ambitions and impact and how they collaborated with all stakeholders, and we asked your people about how they felt change was managed.

Your leaders communicate future priorities and as already mentioned, your people can ask questions and come up with ideas which help to shape the way forward. Your people have a good understanding of the 'big ticket' elements of the Stockton Borough Council's plans for the future, including the redevelopment of the town centres and the planned changes to office accommodation. People's understanding is achieved through the effective communication channels we mentioned earlier, and through their own high levels of interest. Your people frequently referred to Shaping a Brighter Future as the approach to future-proofing services, although it is understood that SBF is moving into a new phase of 'business as usual' as it is embedded in the Council's strategy and culture.

Change is on-going and, as discussed under Indicator 6, your people mainly described the change journeys connected to the Service Reviews positively, highlighting the consultation and communication throughout the review period. From a change management perspective the Service Reviews included many areas of good practice. Similarly, the changes in flexible working were also based on consultation, trialling and gaining feedback (the 60/40 split was described as a 'test pilot' by some). The response to the pandemic was also seen as effective with the IT and HR functions being highlighted for particular praise.

Whilst the Standard expects your leaders to have a clear understanding of the stakeholders in the communities you serve, this understanding extends to the wider workforce of Stockton Borough Council. Your Culture Statement refers to serving the borough, and this was clearly identified as a shared value of your people - in all roles. Your people also described relationships with other stakeholders such as other councils in the Tees Valley, government agencies and regulatory authorities. As an example, people working in social care meet with colleagues from other councils to discuss strategies to meet social care challenges and share good practice. Your people are very conscious of needs and demands of communities and residents, including demonstrating an awareness of emerging needs as a result of the pandemic.

Beyond the Standard

Although this Assessment was carried out against the 'Developed' level of the Investors in People Standard, there was evidence that Stockton Borough Council is likely to be working at higher levels of this Indicator. Examples include people believing the Council is a great place to work; high levels of awareness of future challenges and opportunities; identification of change champions and high levels of understanding of the impact on communities.

Additional Comments

Flexible Working Pilot

It's inevitable that there are varying views about working from home and working from the office, and about the pilot being on a 60/40 basis. This suggests that the final decision on the way forward will not please everyone, whatever it is. Descriptions of the approach ranged from "futuristic" to "restrictive"> The following points were made during our interviews:

1. Some people told us they were unsure whether the 60/40 work arrangements were guidance or rules (although everyone understands that it's a pilot). In practice this means that people have observed some varying approaches in place across different teams.
2. Where a flexible approach has been taken to the pilot, team members have welcomed this. It's especially important when roles involve direct customer-facing work and liaison with other agencies. This can mean that 60/40 doesn't translate easily into 3 days/2 days but is spread across the week.
3. Even people who would personally prefer to work from home at all times acknowledged the benefits of coming together as a team and the challenges for new staff (especially those in the early stages of their careers) if their colleagues were not present in the workplace.
4. There were a couple of examples of people being frustrated by being unable to get hold of colleagues in other teams, to discuss work issues. "I think people hide behind it slightly."
5. There were some good examples of team members working constructively together to plan out the working week, building in time when everyone was in the office so that in-person meetings could take place.
6. There are some concerns about how the pilot will be evaluated: people are unsure about how they will be able to give feedback, or indeed if their feedback will be taken on board. "Sometimes they don't listen to employees, for example about the return to work. There was a lot of feedback but a lot of us weren't really listened to." An employee mentioned the Council's statement: "We are heard" and said that the response to feedback would test this: as "an acid test."
7. Many of your people expressed a preference for more flexibility. One notable insight was "It's good but I think we've learned that in many cases its irrelevant where we work and perhaps there should be no rules if we work agilely." Another said: "I am disappointed with the rigidity of the 60/40 pilot: I felt it was the sort of pilot we should have had two years ago."

In the short term, you should communicate (or re-communicate) how the pilot will be evaluated and how feedback will be sought and taken into account, perhaps with an acknowledgement that whatever is decided won't be right for everyone.

You could consider delegating decisions around the office/home split to individual teams but with broad parameters to ensure teamwork is not negatively impacted, new staff are not disadvantaged and there are options for which consider individuals' personal circumstances.

INVESTORSTM IN PEOPLE

Want to get in touch?

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