

Agenda Item	14.
Report No	RES/30/24

The Highland Council

Committee: Corporate Resources

Date: 11 September 2024

Report Title: Employee Engagement Strategy

Report By: Assistant Chief Executive - Corporate

1. Purpose/Executive Summary

1.1 The People Strategy contains a commitment to develop and implement an engagement strategy, which is also an action reflected in the Employee Survey Corporate Action plan.

1.2 An Engagement Strategy has been developed which will provide a structured framework for delivering employee engagement across the Council and embed a culture where employees feel motivated, empowered, valued and connected.

2. Recommendations

2.1 Members are asked to:

- i. **Approve** the Employee Engagement Strategy
- ii. **Note** consultation will take place with TU colleagues on implementation of the strategy.

3. Implications

3.1 **Resource:** Employee voice is embedded in fair work first principles. If the council does not continue to demonstrate the commitment to an employee voice and evidence this, financial grant allocations from other public sector bodies may be withheld.

3.2 **Legal:** There are no direct implications however lack of effective employee engagement may lead to legal challenges.

3.3 **Risk:** If the engagement strategy is not adopted there is a risk this will impact negatively on the effective delivery of other corporate programmes in the delivery plan, recruitment and retention and result negative employee relations.

3.4 **Health and Safety (risks arising from changes to plant, equipment, process, or people):** Staff absence and wellbeing may be impacted if effective engagement does not take place.

3.5 **Gaelic:** There are no implications.

4. Impacts

4.1 In Highland, all policies, strategies or service changes are subject to an integrated screening for impact for Equalities, Poverty and Human Rights, Children’s Rights and Wellbeing, Climate Change, Islands and Mainland Rural Communities, and Data Protection. Where identified as required, a full impact assessment will be undertaken.

4.2 Considering impacts is a core part of the decision-making process and needs to inform the decision-making process. When taking any decision, Members must give due regard to the findings of any assessment.

4.3 Integrated Impact Assessment - Summary

4.3.1 An Integrated Impact Assessment screening has been undertaken on 27.8.24. The conclusions have been subject to the relevant Manager Review and Approval.

4.3.2 The Screening process has concluded that the engagement of employees will promote a positive culture which has no bearing on any of the protected characteristics. Members are asked to consider the summary in **Appendix 1** to support the decision making process.

4.3.3 Impact Assessment Area	Conclusion of Screening/Full Assessment
Equality	Sex – no impact Age – no impact Disability – no impact Race – no impact Religion or belief – no impact Sexual orientation – no impact Gender reassignment – no impact Pregnancy and maternity – no impact Marriage and civil partnership – no impact
Socio-economic	Prospect and opportunity – positive impact Places – potentially positive impact Financial – positive impact
Human Rights	No impact
Children’s Rights and Well-being	No impact
Island and Mainland Rural	No impact
Climate Change	No impact
Data Rights	No impact

5. Background

5.1 Employee engagement is a key strand of the approved People Strategy 2022-27 with the aim of developing a strategy to set out a consistent framework for delivering employee engagement across the Council. An effective employee voice is also one

of the five dimensions of 'fair work' as set out by the Fair Work Convention. The Council has embedded the employee voice through our well established partnership working arrangement with our trade union colleagues and would seek to continue to build and promote this partnership arrangement across the organisation to ensure that all staff feel connected.

- 5.2 There are clear benefits of employee engagement. It is imperative that where the principles relating to the engagement and good practice is more widely understood, a positive change in performance and employee wellbeing can transpire.
- 5.3 The organisation is going through a significant period of change which will require effective employee engagement and the employee strategy has been developed to facilitate and promote this.

6. Current Engagement Position

- 6.1 The council has good data from the 2022 employee survey and can use the high level of neutrality to influence change with the implementation of an engagement strategy. Evidence of positive work inclusion, treatment of employees from their peers and line managers, a workforce who believe they have skills to do their job and trusted to carry out their work effectively provides an excellent base to build on.
- 6.2 The ambition to have employees who are engaged, flexible, motivated and dedicated can be achieved through an effective engagement strategy to deliver the organisation and service needs.

7. Content of Strategy

- 7.1 The proposed Strategy is contained in **Appendix 2**. Key objectives of the strategy are:
- inform employees of the Highland Council's ambitions and values
 - optimise employee engagement and communication levels across the Council
 - align the culture to the Council's goals and values
 - equip line managers and senior managers with the skills and tools to successfully engage their workforce, particularly during times of change
 - bridge the divide between management and workforce
 - provide a consistent message and provide the means to give employees a 'voice'
 - offer transparency and increase effective communication
 - enhance employee's sense of well-being by ensuring appropriate work life balance is attained
 - increase productivity through positive and continued engagement
 - create and improve opportunities for employees to develop autonomy
 - ensure policies and guidance documents are clear, accessible and fit for purpose
 - ensure that promises made are promises kept or provide an explanation and understanding as to why not.
- 7.2 There are a range of enablers to support the implementation of the strategy namely: a strategic narrative; engaging with managers; employee voice and organisational integrity.

7.3 What success will look like:

- support the achievement of the Highland Council's organisational values
- foster positive attitudes and behaviours through genuine commitment to employee wellbeing
- endorse responsibility, create accountability and manage consequence at every level
- develop and increase staff loyalty, productivity and motivation
- encourage the workforce to respect their colleagues at all levels to provide a supportive, transparent, holistic and safe environment for employees to work
- encourage peer and workplace recognition
- enhance the employee's sense of wellbeing and belonging within the workplace
- provide a voice for our employees, encourage us to listen and provide feedback
- allow us to understand how employee's values and needs shift and respond appropriately
- support employees to invest in their own career development to reach their full potential
- encourage best practice for employees at all stages of their career development
- establish and embed outstanding work practices for Managers and develop them to be great leaders
- promote the Highland Council's ambition to be an 'Employer of Choice' in the local labour market
- support the [Engagement and Partnership Working Framework](#) with Trade Union organisations to ensure the staff "voice" is heard.

7.4 Talent development and employee wellbeing will also assist in the success of employee engagement as demonstration of valuing our staff.

7.5 The Strategy also outlines a range of commitment to engagement activities such as: policy and guidance to support health & wellbeing and flexible & agile working; two-way communication using corporate and digital systems; use of staff forums and acting on feedback; developing effective change management; communicating employee appreciation; promoting employee rewards and salary sacrifice schemes; promotion of council values and undertake pulse surveys.

Designation: Assistant Chief Executive - Corporate

Date: 22.8.24

Author: Elaine Barrie, Head of People

Appendices: Appendix 1: Integrated Impact Screening Summary
Appendix 2: Employee Engagement Strategy

Appendix 1: Integrated Impact Screening Summary

The screening highlighted overall positive impacts from this Strategy.

Socio-economic impact

If employees are engaged and motivated, they are more likely to have the confidence to apply for promoted posts resulting in higher earnings. When staff are engaged, productivity increases which may have a positive effect on service delivery to these areas. Improved income may enable staff to remain or be located in rural areas.



Human Resources
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Employee Engagement Strategy

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Introduction

This Engagement Strategy recognises the Highland Council's requirement to manage and improve people approaches and supports the delivery of corporate aims. It is one of the 5 strategies supporting the delivery of the overarching [People Strategy](#). The framework of HR strategies is inextricably linked, striving for best practice and placing people at the very heart of the organisation.

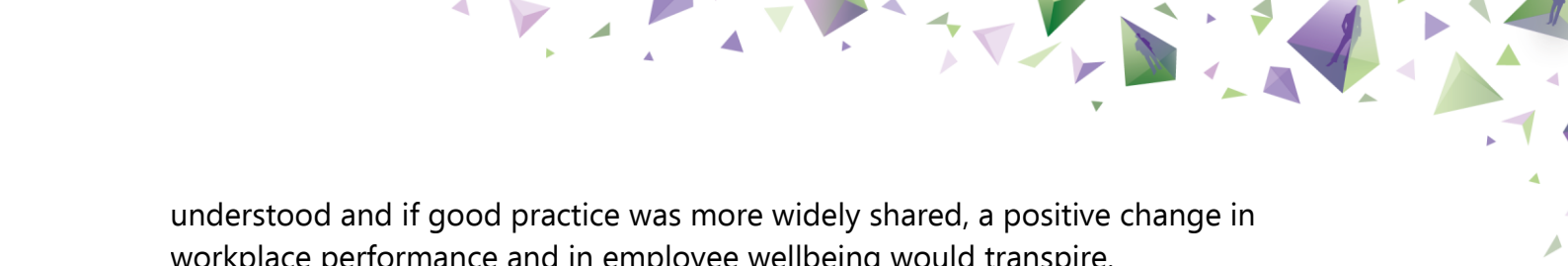
The Council is ambitious for a sustainable and connected Highlands. We recognise that people are our most valuable asset both in terms of physical and financial resource. To build a strong organisation we need to support our employees to be ambitious and grow, enabling them to embrace change. This strategy will provide a framework to support the foundation to build an 'ambitious, sustainable and connected' culture within the organisation.

A number of staff surveys, engagement sessions and transformation workshops have reaffirmed that our people are committed to the Council's vision to be ambitious, sustainable and connected. The 2022 staff survey clearly indicated that our staff enjoy working for the Highland Council, are invested in what they do and want to stay working for us. This lets us know that there is a real appetite from our people to support the organisation to achieve its priorities. We know leadership and managing change is challenging, but the survey also indicated key areas where we can make improvements and only by engaging in a meaningful way, where we ask, listen and continue to ask, do we present a golden opportunity to understand, feedback in a constructive way and take action to improve motivation and increase individual capability at all levels.

What is Engagement?

Engagement is more than simply job satisfaction. True employee engagement comes from an employee when they have a strong identification with an organisation, its corporate aims and organisational objectives and an emotional state which benefits both the organisation and the individual.

There have been a number of reports commissioned over recent years to try and understand the benefits of employee engagement. The findings all conclude that if employee engagement and the principles that lie behind it were more widely



understood and if good practice was more widely shared, a positive change in workplace performance and in employee wellbeing would transpire.

The Chartered Institute for Personnel & Development (CIPD) refers to employee engagement as an umbrella term, where employees show:

- vigour (energy, resilience and effort)
- dedication (enthusiasm, inspiration and pride)
- absorption (concentration and being engrossed in one's work).

To increase engagement with Highland Council employees, the Engagement Strategy embraces the above principles to include:

- organisational commitment (in particular supporting employees' psychological wellbeing)
- organisational identification (how employees psychologically associate themselves with their organisation)
- work motivation (the factors that lead people to be interested and committed to their job).

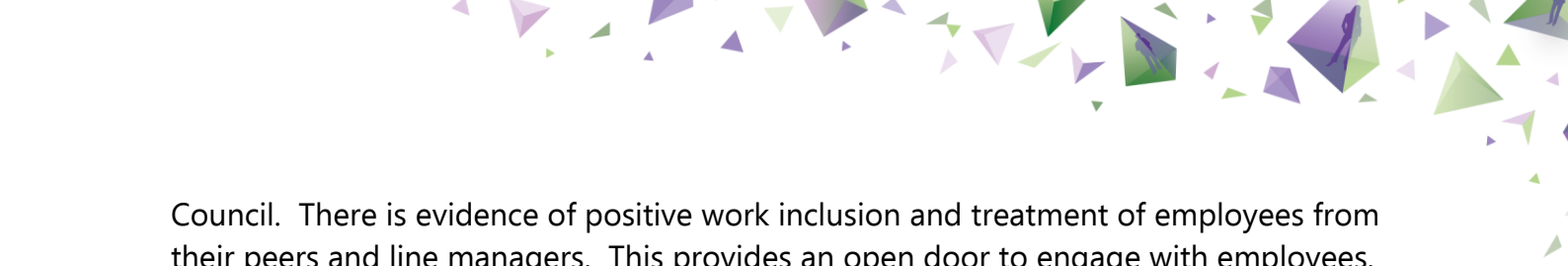
Current Engagement Position

Measuring Employee Engagement is key to identifying how engaged our employees are and will enable us to implement improvement where required.

The most recent employee engagement survey was conducted in 2022 and generated a response rate of 46.7%. The previous survey was undertaken in 2015 and presented limited opportunity to benchmark. The 2022 survey now provides us with a place to build on to improve engagement going forward. We know that leadership has a strong connection to engagement, and that management play a critical role in promoting engagement across the Council.

What are we doing well?

The latest Employee Engagement Survey (2022) provided evidence that overall, employees are invested in the work they do and find their work interesting. They believe they have the skills required to do their job and are trusted to carry out their work effectively. In addition, they have a desire to continue working for the Highland



Council. There is evidence of positive work inclusion and treatment of employees from their peers and line managers. This provides an open door to engage with employees.

Neutrality

It is worth noting that Education and Learning reflected a strong influence on the results and in particular around communication, leadership and managing change.

The overall results indicated a high level of neutral responses. Senior managers are the key influencers and enablers; our leaders have the ability to build concrete service plans around the required deliverables and inspire and motivate our people to succeed. We have a real opportunity to truly engage with our employees at all levels and to influence those that are neutral or undecided to have a more positive work experience.

What could we improve?

The survey results show that there is an opportunity to develop the visibility of leaders and create a forum of open, transparent 2-way communication. At the time of the survey, employees did not feel able to challenge or contribute to change which affected them. At a team level, they felt well informed about what was happening but at a more strategic level, it was felt that leaders were not visible and therefore an employee didn't get the opportunity to influence or contribute to change. The geographical area and remoteness of some of the work locations of the Highland Council may have also impacted the perception of visibility of leaders.

Our Ambition

Our ambition for the Council is to have employees that are engaged, flexible, motivated and dedicated, therefore we must be engaged, flexible, motivated and dedicated. During Covid, we evidenced our ability to react and create change by implementing alternative service delivery models and we must continue to strive for excellence by promoting and implementing alternative ways of working embracing Flexible Working Arrangements. We have the opportunity to harness this way of thinking and deliver a defined corporate Council approach to Engagement to meet both organisational and service needs. Our workplace ambition is to be high performing, with a connected culture that will showcase the Council as the 'employer of choice' for the Highlands.

Aims and Objectives

The overarching aim of the Engagement Strategy is to support the delivery of the People Strategy by providing a uniform and structured framework for delivering employee engagement across the whole Council to bring about a culture where all employees feel motivated, empowered, valued and connected.

The objectives of the Engagement Strategy are to:

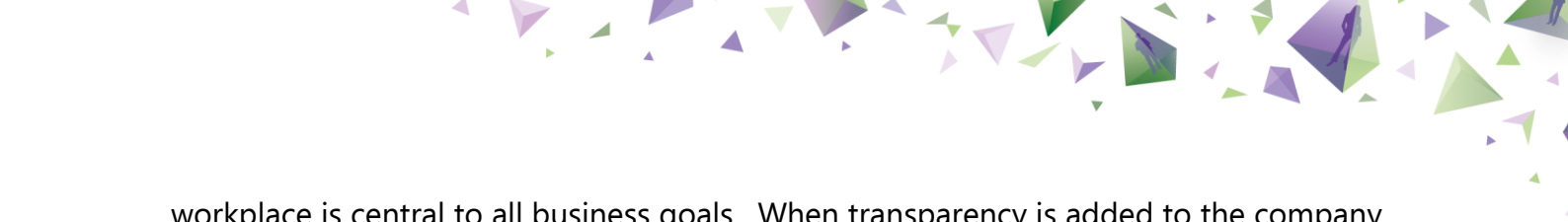
- inform employees of the Highland Council's ambitions and values
- optimise employee engagement and communication levels across the Council
- align the culture to the Council's goals and values
- equip line managers and senior managers with the skills and tools to successfully engage their workforce, particularly during times of change
- bridge the divide between management and workforce
- provide a consistent message and provide the means to give employees a 'voice'
- offer transparency and increase effective communication
- enhance employee's sense of well-being by ensuring appropriate work life balance is attained
- increase productivity through positive and continued engagement
- create and improve opportunities for employees to develop autonomy
- ensure policies and guidance documents are clear, accessible and fit for purpose
- ensure that promises made are promises kept, or provide an explanation and understanding as to why not.

Enablers of Engagement

There is not a 'one size fits all' approach nor a principal model to follow for successful employee engagement, however, research by Engage for Success has suggested the following four enablers, if taken together, can help organisations assess the effectiveness of their approaches:

Strategic Narrative

Visible, empowering leadership that provides a strong and deliberate message about the organisation, where it's come from and where it is going. Communication in the



workplace is central to all business goals. When transparency is added to the company culture, employees will be more engaged and committed. The Council's culture and values are important because they define the kind of organisation we strive to be. They represent a commitment to abide by and are a set of principles to guide our employees in the way they work, the decisions they make and how they behave towards others in the course of their duties.

Engaging Managers

Encourage managers to focus on their people and give them the scope to recognise and respect their people as individuals. Provide coaching, mentoring and facilitating development of their people.

Employee Voice

To reinforce and enable employees to challenge views. Research has confirmed that employees are central to the solution of creating the right culture. They want to be involved in what is taking place, listened to and invited to contribute their experience, expertise and ideas.

Organisational Integrity

The foundation to how the organisation operates and the values that underpin our day-to-day behaviours. Increased transparency and communication ensuring that promises made are promises kept, or an explanation given as to why not.

Implementing the Strategy

Implementation of the Engagement Strategy will:

- support the achievement of the Highland Council's organisational values
- foster positive attitudes and behaviours through genuine commitment to employee wellbeing
- endorse responsibility, create accountability and manage consequence at every level
- develop and increase staff loyalty, productivity and motivation
- encourage the workforce to respect their colleagues at all levels to provide a supportive, transparent, holistic and safe environment for employees to work
- encourage peer and workplace recognition

- enhance the employee's sense of wellbeing and belonging within the workplace
- provide a voice for our employees, encourage us to listen and provide feedback
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Talent Development

For Engagement to be successful in practice, the Highland Council must cultivate an environment of opportunity and autonomy. Our aim is to establish an ethos where all managers continuously progress career development and training opportunities for their staff. This may include:

- promotion of the People Development platform ([Traineasy](#))
- training and career opportunities through their annual Employee Review and Development ([ERD](#))
- access to qualifications, charterships, membership of professional bodies
- Service specific programmes for example, Grow Your Own, Management Development Programme, undertaking LGV driving licence, etc.
- secondments and deployment
- ICT and Digital Learning opportunities, including Digital Champions (see Digital Strategy).

Health & Wellbeing

The wellbeing of our employees is a priority and the cultivation of an inclusive workplace is paramount to employee engagement. The Highland Council encourages and supports employees to achieve a healthy work-life balance and by nurturing a culture of flexibility and agility will:

- allow staff to attain the work-life balance they desire
- develop resources to increase awareness of the [Flexible Working Arrangements](#), with a particular focus on wellbeing of staff

- promote Health & Wellbeing resources through the [Employee Assistance Programme](#)
- encourage open, transparent and honest 2-way communication, for example weekly health and wellbeing check-ins for all staff regardless of work location.

Employee Engagement Activity

In addition to developing management practices the Highland Council will commit to the following Engagement activities:

- develop policy and guidance to support health & wellbeing and flexible & agile working and ensure additional resources are current and relevant and accessible for all
- develop effective 2-way communication utilising the available corporate communications, digital systems and social media ([Staff Connections](#), [Viva Engage](#))
- improve insight using staff forums and endorse engagement by acting on feedback
- develop an effective change management framework to ensure transparency, clarity and encourage employee voice through the promotion of campaigns such as “speak up if not right”
- improve and develop a Recognition and Reward programme by introducing and communicating employee appreciation
- promote employee rewards through the [Employee Benefits platform](#) (lifestyle savings and local benefits)
- promote salary sacrifice schemes (My Money Matters, Cycle to Work and Tusker car schemes)
- ensuring the Highland Council’s values are communicated at every opportunity supporting the aim to be Ambitious, Sustainable and Connected
- undertake pulse surveys to gain an insight into employee engagement levels.



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