

Employee Engagement at West Kent Housing Association

WEST KENT

April 2013

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Introduction

This Case study was commissioned by West Kent Housing Association (hereafter West Kent) to examine and understand their approach to employee engagement.

The research was undertaken by Joe Dromey, Head of Policy and Research at the IPA between 25th February and 8th March. This included interviews with senior managers at West Kent; a focus group and interviews with members of staff; analysis of written material; and analysis of West Kent's staff survey.

Background

West Kent is a not for profit housing association regulated by the Homes and Communities Agency. It was established in 1989 to accept the transfer of 6,300 homes from Sevenoaks District Council. This was one of the earliest large-scale stock-transfers in the country.

In addition to the housing association, it has two subsidiaries; West Kent Extra, a charity, and West Kent Ventures Ltd.

West Kent aims to be *'more than just a landlord'*, focusing as they do not just on the homes they provide but also on the wider community. They claim to *'put residents at the centre of everything that we do.'* West Kent is committed to being a good employer.

Unlike some larger housing associations which are spread across the country, West Kent has chosen to focus on a relatively small geographical area. Its stock is concentrated in Swanley and Sevenoaks, as well as Medway, Maidstone and Ashford. Hilary Knight, Business Services Director explained that this is a conscious decision on the part of West Kent, driven by a belief that focusing on a relatively discrete local area allows them to better understand and build the local community.

Despite the challenging climate for housing associations, West Kent will continue its growth over the coming years, with its stock increasing from just over 6,300 in 2012 to 6,811 in 2015.

Engagement at West Kent

There is a strong and consistent focus at West Kent on employee engagement. Amongst the senior leadership team and the organisation as a whole there is a recognition that engagement is vital for the wellbeing of staff, for the quality of service they provide, and ultimately for the success of West Kent.

Frank Czarnowski, the Chief Executive of West Kent identified the benefit of engagement as twofold. First, it improves customer service; *'when you're a customer, you recognise an engaged member of staff and your experience is so different from with a disengaged member of staff.'* West Kent is focused on delivering a high quality of service to its customers. Having an engaged and motivated workforce is a key part of this. And they are clearly doing well here; West Kent was the first housing

association to be rated 'excellent' by their regulator. Their last resident survey in 2011 found that 88% were satisfied with the service they received. In 2012, West Kent also achieved outstanding results in their Customer Service Excellence reaccreditation. In addition to the impact on customer service, Frank also highlights the benefits for employees; *'you spend a lot of time at work. If you're an engaged member of staff who feels like you're able to enjoy work, it is so different from seeing the week as some great slog.'* This was reflected by Lisa Knowles, an Income Recovery Officer who said that engaged staff are *'determined to do a good job, you enjoy coming to work, and hopefully all of that will rub off on those around you. It makes for a more positive workplace.'*

West Kent is evidently doing well. Their staff demonstrating a high level of engagement, both in person, in the way they talk about their roles and the organisation; and in their staff survey. They have also achieved external recognition for their effective employee engagement. Having first been accredited by Investors in People in 1994, they were the first employer in Kent to receive Gold accreditation in 2009. This was awarded again in 2012. Investors in People described employee engagement as *'a particular strength at West Kent'* and explained that *'the engagement and involvement of members of staff is integral to the strategy and plans of the organisation.'*

Supporting engagement in challenging times

West Kent has faced some significant challenges in recent years. Most notably, the reduction in public spending has had a considerable impact on the organisation. Substantial cuts to the local authority budgets have been passed on, impacting on the Supporting People services West Kent provides. As Frank Czarnowski described, *'it's been hard for everyone; hard for managers, hard for the staff and hard for the organisation.'*

West Kent has had to face a series of re-organisations over the last few years in order to increase efficiency and manage the funding cuts without a negative impact on service quality. This has included some compulsory redundancies, the first in West Kent's history.

Challenging times such as these can have a significant negative impact on employee engagement. This was evident in the dip in the engagement scores of the Lifeways team who were most affected by these changes. But senior leadership at West Kent have endeavoured to mitigate this. At every step they have explained why change has been necessary, communicated thoroughly with staff, and actively involved them in decision-making. As Alex Mash, the Lifeways Team Co-ordinator explained; *'there were a lot of opportunities for people to air their views [on the reorganisation] and express their thoughts at every step of the way. Management went out of their way to get the feedback and to take it into account. They dealt with the situation effectively and positively.'*

The cuts from the local authority have had a significant impact on the Emerald Team which provides accommodation and support services for older people. West Kent's response was to engage with staff and involve them in the service redesign so that they could, as far as possible, both protect jobs and preserve the standard of service. Marion Gilchrist, a Manager working with the Emerald team put this well when she said; *'they could have just dictated where to cut, that would have been easier. But they gave the team the chance to come up with ideas of how we could do things with less resources but protect jobs.'* The focus from staff was to preserve jobs so they devised a solution under which hours were shared between employees; *'this was all led by staff.'* This was echoed by

Hilary Knight, Business Services Director who said that the whole process was *'led by staff and there was a high degree of empowerment. The initiative came from and was owned by them. It was collegiate and democratic.'*

Supporting engagement through change

In addition to the changes brought about by the challenging funding situation, West Kent has also undergone significant change in the last 18 months in order to improve its customer service. The driver for this was a recognition that in the 2008 and 2011 resident surveys, while rating overall service as good, residents often struggled to find the right person to speak to. The separate teams were not joined up, they didn't share enough information and they relied too heavily on paper records; meaning residents found it difficult to resolve their issues quickly and easily. As Manager, Steven Bennett explained, the structure of the organisation *'made it too easy for people to palm-off enquiries rather than taking responsibility themselves.'*

Management recognised that this was a problem and brought together a wide group of staff to share their views and examine how they could improve customer service. They wanted to *'enhance the culture, to make sure that the person who took the call became a problem-solver.'* This project developed into the Customer Access Strategy, which, according to Steven Bennett *'has been one of the biggest transformational culture changes that we've ever had here at West Kent.'*

Such wholesale change programmes, if handled poorly, can be detrimental to employee engagement. However, both the senior managers and those leading on the programme have ensured that staff are fully involved and that the process has actually helped improve engagement.

First, the process was given a timescale of 18 months, starting in 2011 ensuring that it was not rushed and there was plenty of time to bring staff with them and gradually change the culture. Steven Bennett who was appointed to manage the change programme, started by going out to the teams and individuals who were going to be affected by the change to ask what their priorities were, what the risks were and how they could find the route of least resistance. Mindful of the anticipated sensitivities and feelings associated with change, West Kent produced detailed plans to address the potential reactions among staff. As Steven explained *'we took people's concerns on board and worked out what we could do to mitigate the risks. The process of engagement was very proactive and positive.'* As well as engaging with staff early, those leading the Customer Access Strategy ensured that they communicated regularly and openly; *'we've been very active in pumping out information on this; about why we're doing it, who's doing it, and what we're doing; using all our various channels of communication.'*

A key part of the process was the engagement of the senior leadership. As Suzanne Smith, the Communications and Marketing Manager explained; *'change doesn't happen by accident. It takes hard work and commitment from the senior team.'* Managers had regular 'small conversations' with their staff to set out the reasons for the change, explain the progress and encourage them to ask questions, including *'what's in it for me'*, and to express their views on the process.

A key part of the Customer Access Strategy was the procurement of a new and integrated Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system. This would ensure that any member of staff speaking to a

resident would be able to access their information and documents, understand their issue and resolve it appropriately. Learning the lessons from a previous large-scale procurement for their Housing Database, West Kent decided to involve their front-line staff in the process. A group of about 20 staff was drawn from across the organisation and they interviewed the potential suppliers of the CRM system. This not only ensured that they used the experience and knowledge of staff to pick the right system, but they also helped ensure that staff were bought-in to and involved in the process. This has helped the roll-out go remarkably smoothly; *'we're only a week in and we've got over a thousand contacts already logged,'* said Steven.

The Enablers of Engagement at West Kent:

The MacLeod review of employee engagement, [*Engaging for Success*](#), identified the four key enablers of engagement as a strategic narrative, enabling managers, employee voice and integrity. It found that if you got these things right, they would help build engagement in your organisation and deliver the benefits associated with this. The approach to engagement at West Kent is clearly aligned towards the enablers of employee engagement. Below we will consider each of them in turn.

1. The Strategic Narrative

Employee engagement at West Kent is underpinned by a strong, coherent and well-understood strategic narrative.

West Kent sets out to be *'more than just a landlord.'* Their vision is to be the leading community provider of affordable homes in Kent and they aim to provide affordable homes to those who struggle and to nurture the community around their homes. They also aim to *'put residents at the centre'* of everything they do.

The workforce at West Kent demonstrates a high degree of identification with the organisation's strategic narrative. This was emphasised by the Investors in People assessor who found that *'all members of staff fully embrace the mission and values of the organisation and endorse the principle of West Kent being "more than just a landlord".'* This was brought out in some stakeholder perception research conducted by an independent organisation. One partner said; *"West Kent puts residents at the heart of everything they do – this is a reality and embedded in the way the organisation works, it's not just corporate jargon."*

As staff explained, the targets set out in their annual Personal Development Reviews and monitored in meetings with their line manager, are aligned with the organisation's goals, allowing them to *'put our aims and achievements alongside those of the organisation.'* As was acknowledged in the Investors in People report, the effect of this is that individual employees *'have a very clear line of sight between their own objectives and key performance measures and those of their department and West Kent.'*

There is a strong sense of social purpose that is key to the strategic narrative at West Kent. All the staff recognise how their individual work and that of the organisation as a whole aim to provide local

residents with affordable and decent accommodation. As Sue Ludbrook, Office Services Manager said *'there's a reason for us being here. It's not just a job at the end of the day. You can make a real difference to a tenant's life, to a person's life.'*

Part of the success in achieving such a strong and well-understood strategic narrative has been the way in which it is communicated. Everything West Kent does is explained with reference to their residents. The narrative is communicated regularly and clearly. As Frank Czarnowski explained, *'our narrative has been quite consistent across the years. It all comes back to a focus on our residents, and a sense of place.'* What's more, given the nature of the organisation and the fact that most roles are resident-facing, it is easier for staff *'to see what they're doing'* and understand the part they play.

The degree of confidence in the strategic narrative is evident. The latest staff survey found that 77% of the staff believe that the senior management team have a clear vision for the future of the organisation, a massive 23% above the average figure for housing associations nationally.

2. Engaging Managers

The role of managers in supporting employee engagement is well understood at West Kent.

A key part of the culture at West Kent is the freedom granted to managers, to teams and to individual employees. Frank Czarnowski recognises that *'I can't sit in my office, pull the levers and make things happen. It's about the managers and wider staff understanding and buying into the narrative and making it happen.'* This aversion to the 'command and control' culture ensures that managers have a lot of space to do their job. Similarly, engagement is not something driven by and from the top of the organisation. In the words of Hilary Knight, Business Services Director, *'It's not seen as part of the HR team; it is owned by the business.'* Managers are therefore given both the space and the responsibility to engage their staff.

However, there is also a recognition that managers need to be supported to carry out their role. In addition to the formal training that managers receive to carry out their role, they are supported to develop the capabilities of engaging managers including the *'softer skills like how to have challenging conversations.'* As Frank Czarnowski explains; *'you might not be approaching it from a traditional skills training point of view, but it's important nonetheless.'* Acting on feedback from the 2011 staff survey, managers set up the Line Managers' Network. This was a recognition of the importance of the role and it has allowed managers to come together, share knowledge and learn from each other.

The management culture at West Kent is very open and inclusive. All managers, right up to the Chief Executive have an open door policy. This is both well understood and appreciated by staff. Annette Major of the Customers Services team said; *'I find all the managers approachable. I've worked at places where you don't see or speak to managers. But here they're all on a level and it's easy to approach them.'* This approach was highlighted by the Investors in People report which commended the management for being *'extremely visible and approachable, operating a truly genuine open-door policy.'*

The success of the management approach at West Kent is demonstrated by their most recent staff survey results. Two thirds believe that the organisation as a whole is well managed, above average for housing associations. Four in five members of staff feel their manager does a good job, again above the benchmark for housing associations. Investors in People identified management as a strong point at West Kent, finding that they act as *'strong role models in their behaviours and motivate, challenge and support members of staff, treating people with respect and appreciation.'*

3. Employee Voice

There is a strong and influential employee voice at West Kent that contributes both to employee engagement and to the success of the organisation. The senior leadership team fully recognise the importance of allowing and indeed encouraging staff to have their say.

The effectiveness of voice at West Kent is due both to infrastructure and culture. In terms of infrastructure, there are a wide variety of ways in which staff can express their views and get their voice heard.

All staff attend a Team Brief meeting once a month. There are seven meetings at various times within the week that the monthly team brief runs, so whatever their working pattern, every members of staff has a window to attend.. Each is led by a member of the Executive Team. They provide staff with a wide-ranging picture of what is happening in the organisation, including a quite detailed focus on business priorities, all couched within the overall organisational narrative. The sessions are highly interactive with staff encouraged to share their views, and given a question to take away, consider and feed-back on next time. Staff members are also able to feed-back on the delivery of the sessions and what they would like to see as part of them. Employees said they welcome the opportunity both to understand what is going on in the business and to get together with colleagues from across the organisation.

In addition to these organisation-wide meetings, staff regularly meet with their line managers, with their individual team and as smaller project groups; all providing them with the opportunity to express their opinions and contribute ideas.

In terms of more formal structures, there is a Staff Consultative Committee (SCC) which includes representatives from across the business. The purpose of the SCC is, according to Steven Bennett who was part of the original group, *'to get our views heard on the highest table.'* The senior leadership at West Kent find the SCC to be an effective way of engaging with staff and they often act on its suggestions. One such example was feedback from the SCC which led to the training programme for managers being developed and enhanced.

As with many medium and large scale organisations, West Kent runs a bi-annual staff engagement survey. However, just running a survey does not in itself help engagement. If nothing is done in response to the survey findings, this can actually undermine engagement and lead to cynicism. West Kent ensures that they get the most out of their staff survey and that it really contributes to driving engagement. Senior management feed-back on the results to staff in an open and honest way, including acknowledging where there are particular issues. The organisation then responds to any issues identified, with the Staff Consultative Committee playing a part in developing an action plan.

Finally, as well as taking action, there is robust feedback on what has been done with ‘You Said, We Did’ messages to show that issues have been addressed. All this helps to build confidence among staff that they are being listened to; as one member of staff put it, *‘you feel that they are reading the staff survey and doing something about it.’*

In addition to these various formal channels for communication at West Kent, their approach and organisational culture play a significant part in supporting employee voice. As Frank Czarnowski acknowledges, *‘you need to put the infrastructure in place, but there is also the whole point around culture.’*

A key part of this culture at West Kent is about being open and approachable. As Frank Czarnowski explains; *‘I don’t mind any member of staff coming in to my office and telling me what they think, what is good and what is bad. They know they’re able to do that.’* This is helped by what Hilary Knight calls a very ‘flat’ structure under which there are not too many layers between shop-floor staff and the Chief Executive. This is clear when you talk to members of staff, many of whom talk about the ‘open door’ culture. Alex Mash described how *‘there’s no barrier at all if you want to discuss something or get your voice heard, there’s no need to jump through hoops... it’s more about the culture than the channels of communication’.*

The commitment to employee voice is evident from West Kent’s approach to solving business challenges. In addition to staff leading on the changes to the Emerald service, mentioned above, West Kent also brought together employees to develop a solution to their problem with ‘voids’ – properties left empty for a long period between tenants. Instead of planning a response themselves, management brought together a wide team of staff from across the organisation to give their views, share ideas and develop a plan. The effect of this was to dramatically increase the speed of re-lets leading to a reduction in the number of voids, benefitting both residents and the organisation. In the words of Hilary Knight; *‘it was an example of a business issue that was not going to be solved in a Director’s office. It’s very much about getting the right people together to work collaboratively on a solution.’*

4. Integrity

Finally, integrity is central to West Kent’s approach. Integrity represents one of their key values; as they put it *‘letting your moral compass keep you on the right track.’*

The senior leadership team at West Kent understand the importance of integrity. Frank Czarnowski says that it is *‘absolutely vital; you need to do what you say you are going to do.’* Employees tend to recognise and value integrity at West Kent. They understand that West Kent genuinely lives by their values and really does *‘put residents at the centre of everything that we do.’* This was echoed in the Investors in People report which found that *‘West Kent truly practices what it preaches in its mission statement’* and that *‘the leadership demonstrated by the Executive Team is totally consistent with West Kent’s core values.’*

Staff acknowledge that West Kent acts in an open and honest way; *‘when the organisation gets it wrong, they hold their hands up, admit it and try to learn from their mistakes.’* This was demonstrated in their response to the staff survey in 2011 which, though results were good overall,

included some challenges for senior management. These were fed back to the staff in a transparent way, allowing for issues to be addressed and remedied together.

Another example of integrity in action is West Kent's approach to the upcoming welfare reforms that will affect many of their residents. Lisa Knowles explained how West Kent were *'going out and warning people, doing everything we can. It's a huge task but we're putting our full weight behind it to ensure that all our tenants are fully aware of how they will be impacted and what they might be able to do.'* This includes employing a new member of staff who has been doing outreach work to tenants to get them ready for the changes in April. As Lisa said; *'I think it's an example of where we are showing true integrity.'*

Perceptions of integrity at West Kent are influenced by the other enablers of engagement; particularly the strategic narrative and employee voice. For example, it was explained that it is *'easier to demonstrate integrity when you have a straight forward strategic narrative that people understand.'* Also, according to Frank Czarnowski, *'part of that integrity is about people being able to hold you to account by being honest and open to comments and suggestions.'* Therefore, having a strong and active employee voice both maintains and promotes a sense of integrity within the organisation, building employee engagement.

Conclusion

The focus on employee engagement at West Kent is absolutely integral to the organisation's success. Employees at all levels understand the importance of engagement, and they recognise the benefits; for residents, for the organisation, and for staff themselves. The focus on engagement means that West Kent is customer-focused, innovative and able to adapt to change. Engagement is seen as a key part of their business model, something they're willing to work on and invest in to get right.

West Kent have demonstrated how, through engaging with their staff, they have been able to cope with significant funding cuts without resorting to mass redundancies or compromising service quality. By engaging with staff to harness their expertise and experience, West Kent have been able to deliver substantial business change – such as the Customer Access Strategy – for the benefit of residents and the organisation as a whole.

High levels of engagement at West Kent are by no means an accident. They have a considered approach which addresses each of the four enablers of engagement. There is a clear, coherent and well-understood **strategic narrative** which guides everything that West Kent does, with *'residents at the centre.'* The organisation always acts with **integrity**, ensuring there is no gap between what it says and what it does. There is a culture of **employee voice**, with staff encouraged to contribute views and suggestions as to how the organisation should be run. Finally, West Kent has well-regarded **engaging managers** who involve and support their staff, building engagement across the organisation.

Employee engagement has underpinned the organisation's success, ensuring it has weathered the recent challenges and is well placed to continue growing and succeeding in the future.