

Citizen Engagement Project

Employee Carers Network – Merthyr Tydfil

Introduction

Many 50+ people have difficulty with work / life balance. Not only do these people often have full-time work commitments but they may well also have caring responsibilities for disabled children, elderly parents, and other family members.

They have a very full economic and home life. Often, that leaves them with no time or energy to participate more formally as citizens. For example, they may not take part in the decision-making processes for health and social care services, which impact directly on their caring role.

This pilot was originally for employees who are over the age 50 and are carers. The aim was to empower them to become fully involved in the decision-making processes about the relevant carer services and to influence change in the workplace for themselves and other carers. To ensure that the Local Authority was not seen to be discriminating against employees of the County Borough the initiation was extended to all carers. We however envisaged that those attending would be predominately 50+.

This pilot addressed the barrier raised due to lack of time. The people involved were caught in a double bind. Both work and caring commitments contributed to their lack of free time to become engaged citizens.

What is Engagement?

In the context of this project engagement refers to how Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council as the employer keeps its staff informed directly about work related issues.

What is Citizen Engagement?

In terms of this project citizen engagement refers to employees being fully engaged in any decision making process and how staff feel about their ability to become active citizens within their workplace. The task and finish group set up to oversee the project felt that this was an excellent opportunity to demonstrate to the Local Authority how meaningful engagement with members of their staff can have huge benefits to the conduct of their business.

What type of engagement did we deliver?

A network for staff that have caring responsibilities and are employed by the Local Authority. The aim of the Carers' Network was to get together for mutual support and to influence the development of a long awaited Carers' Policy. The invitation was open to all staff that met the definition of a "carer". It gave the Local Authorities an opportunity to acknowledge the commitment that carers show to their work in context of a very demanding lifestyle.

A series of seven meetings were held over a period of four months. These meetings were organised over the lunchtime period.

For the first meeting Audrey Jenkinson former actress and author of "Past caring" began discussions with the group about her experiences of caring for her parents. Feedback from members who attended the meeting was very positive – those who responded found it useful to meet other carers and to listen to another carer's perspective.

The second meeting was held in conjunction with a planned event – Keep Well this Winter/ Carers Rights day on the 7th December. Although not totally suitable for people who work because of the time, 10.00am to 2.00pm, it enabled those who attended (three members of staff) the opportunity to access relevant information.

The third meeting was better attended as a result of further publicity and word and mouth new members joined the group. Members were relieved to know that the needs of carers were being recognised within the workplace. Most of those who attended were ignorant of the fact that the County Borough had a Carers Strategy, which is actually in its third year and that the Local Authority now has a duty to have a Carers Policy. Most members were keen to have an input in developing such a Policy. They felt that if carers were to be better supported in the workplace, then it was vital that carers were involved in the development of this Policy.

The other four meetings concentrated on carers making recommendations for a draft Carers Policy.

How did we get staff involved in the process?

The Network was advertised in a number of ways:

- Staff Intranet site
- Posters in all Council buildings
- Email to Heads of Service
- Word of mouth

It was recognised that not all staff have access to electronic information and occasionally those who do, are often too busy to take real notice. If time had

permitted information regarding the Network could have been publicised in the weekly and monthly wage slips. Prior notice was required to make use of this service.

Once the initial meeting had taken place it was easier to encourage more people – via word and mouth.

Who was involved?

A number of employees attended with a good mix of men and women from different Directorates. 22 members of staff attended, 19 of which were over the age of 50, two of the remaining three were close to 50 years. It was decided at the planning stage that it would have been discriminatory to advertise the Carers Network as 50+. However, it was anticipated that the majority of people attending would have met with the objective of the 50+ Citizen Engagement project.

The coordination of the project was overseen by:

The Strategy Coordinator for Older People
Administrator for the Older Persons Strategy
The Health Alliance Coordinator
The Carers Development Officer
The Older Persons CHAMPION
The Carers CHAMPION

With additional support by the Citizen Engagement Project Officer and the Research Fellow designated to the project by Welsh Institute of Health and Social Care

How much time did it take?

The overall time allotted to the pilot stage was four months from the planning stage through to the seven organised meetings.

The planning stage was undertaken in two meetings. In addition the individual officers coordinating the project spent a significant amount of time.

Time was spent on:

- Organising venues and refreshments
- Organising guest speakers
- Liaising with members of the Local Authorities Executive Board and Human Resources (reimbursement of staff time to attend the meetings).
- Liaising with Union members for support
- Facilitating each meeting
- Advertising meetings and sending out reminders

- Coordinating the input of members into drafting a Cares Policy
- Evaluating the project

Was there a clear Agenda?

The initial focus was getting staff interested in a network when their time was already precious. This was achieved by encouraging people to get together to share their experiences and to establish a common goal. It was decided to invite Audrey Jenkinson. Firstly, because of her experience of working and caring for her parents and secondly because being an author it was hoped that it would encourage a greater audience.

At this meeting those present were asked to shape the agenda for future meetings. Members were keen to draft a Carers' Policy but wanted advice on carer's rights.

From the third meeting onwards it was very clear that members of the network were keen to make a difference and were fully committed to contributing their time.

How much money did we have?

We were allocated £2000 from the project fund but have only used £1700. This was used to fund lunch, refreshments and the cost of Audrey Jenkinson who launched the pilot project.

Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council absorbed the cost of the room hire, cost of publicity materials and of the staff involved in its coordination. The Local Authority also allowed members of the Carers Network additional paid time over lunch, which over seven meetings equates to ten and a half hours per member of staff.

What other resources were required?

The main resource required for this project is staff time. Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council like many other Local Authorities have access to their own meeting rooms, have the internet for publicity and other means of making information available to their staff.

Officer time was required to establish the Carers Network and to facilitate the meetings. It would not require a dedicated member of staff working solely on a Carers Network to sustain it but would require some on-going commitment, we estimate half day per month for a monthly meeting.

The information packs used to inform members of their rights were obtained free of charge from Carers UK.

What have we learnt from our experiences?

In general;

- The Local Authority often assumes that staff are well informed about services and initiatives implemented within their organisation when in reality they are as likely to be uninformed. In this case, many members of staff were unaware that Merthyr Tydfil Borough had a Carers Strategy that is accessible via the intranet.
- Staff want to contribute to their workplace to ensure better conditions.

From the pilot project:

- More time is needed to ensure that all the finer details are ironed out fully before beginning a project and raising expectations. In this case, receiving written confirmation that staff were able to claim back the time from the start instead of having to wait until midway through the project would have been helpful.
- More time would have enabled those involved in the project to advertise the Network more thoroughly. Ideally it would have been good to utilise the weekly and monthly pay slips as a means of advertising however the use of this space needs to be planned three months in advance.
- More time would have enabled the meetings to be spread over a longer period and allowed members to attend more meetings. It did not help either that Christmas fell in between the pilot period.

What went well in this project?

- The commitment of both the staff involved in its coordination and the members of the Network who fully supported it from the beginning. The latter especially drove the agenda to ensure a better outcome for other members of staff who have caring responsibilities. At all meetings those involved showed a real enthusiasm to make a contribution.
- It was also good to have the support from the Executive Board, from Directors who showed clear support for the pilot project and of the involvement of staff in developing a Carers Policy. Also support at a political level was greatly received from both the Older Persons Champion and the Carers Champion.
- It was good to have the opportunity to demonstrate to members of the Carers Network how active citizenship can work in the workplace and how important it is that they have a say in the running of the organisation.
- The pilot project has enabled a new means of engaging with people who are 50+ and reaching those in the workplace. This project is something that will be replicated in other organisations.

How innovative was this as a pilot project for Merthyr Tydfil?

- From the employers perspective it was the first Merthyr Tydfil Council Policy to be drafted from scratch by employees! It was also the first opportunity to coordinate a support group for employees who are informal carers. Some carers were grateful for the recognition; for some it gave them a sense of not being alone in juggling work and caring commitments.
- The pilot project gave members of the Network an opportunity to have information on the rights of carers and on what was happening on their doorstep. It was surprising that some were so badly informed about the services available for carers and about the new legislation in relation to the Work and Families Act 2006. They had rights as employees that they didn't know they had!

Overall the pilot project has been instrumental in producing a comprehensive draft policy for Carers, which is truly a bottom up approach, written by those whom it will directly affect. From the Local Authorities point of view it demonstrates the value in involving its workforce in the running of the organisation.

Following on from the Pilot Project a recommendation has been made that the Carers Network continues in both a supportive capacity and in reviewing the implementation of the Carers Policy once it is fully endorsed by the Local Authority.