

Using a Research Approach in Human Resources

Identification and analysis of Employee Voice within Tai Tarian Housing Association

Name: Sarah Cosker

Student Number: 1905443

CIPD Membership Number: 53581196

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Signed: *SL Cosker*

Date: 10.11.2020

Executive Summary

Tai Tairan Housing Association is one of the largest social landlords in Wales with responsibility for over 9,000 properties across the Neath Port Talbot County Borough. As of July 2020, currently employing 517 staff.

The purpose of this report is to identify and analyse the Employee Voice mechanisms within Tai Tarian, and identify and recommend future developments for stakeholders.

Employee voice is integrated within the CIPD new professional map, within the specialist knowledge section, under employee experience, *“Employee experience is about creating a great work environment for people. It involves understanding the role that trust plays in the employment relationship and making sure people are listened to and have a voice in issues that impact them”* (CIPD,2020), making its importance at the forefront of an HR practitioners working lives.

During the research, the Employee Voce mechanisms were investigated by a cross-sectional, confidential employee survey, the use of secondary data from current monthly / annual reports (devised by the HR team which are used to report to the Senior Management Team and board), relating to headcount, absence, and employee relations cases. Comparative research was used from data produced by the Community Housing Cymru (CHC), along with theory and background gathered from reliable sources such as the CIPD, ACAS and People Management.

Tai Tarian provides of a range of employee voice mechanisms, both individually and collectively, it would suggest that the organisation is providing what the IPA (2020) states as ‘best practice’. But there is some disparity with comments such as “Communication and planning are very poor”, “frustrations are echoed through staff surrounding pace of change and communication” and “expectations change without structure” which were collected through the Employee survey.

The majority of results received from the confidential employee survey undertaken for this particular report shed a positive light on the organisation, but it cannot be unnoticed that communication mechanisms may be in place, but are not being delivered effectively, with a small percentage of employees who may be disengaged.

In light of the findings of the report, a re-launch of the tools available for Employee voice and communication should be a priority, if means allow, with an employee voice forum set up to ask what employees expect from the tools provided, truly considering the suggestions and letting employees have say in what is to be implemented.

Investment in line manager coaching in relation to communication, listening and how to deliver valued 1-2-1’s should be considered to add value to the current Performance Management process, with encouragement sought to those employees who do not tend to input, to gain ideas from a wider breadth of the organisations employees.

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Introduction

Tai Tairan Housing Association is one of the largest social landlords in Wales with responsibility for over 9,000 properties across the Neath Port Talbot County Borough. As of July 2020, currently employing 517 staff, comprising of four main departments, Assets, Housing, Finance and Chief Executive & Corporate services.

The organisation has both direct downward and direct upward Communications, this is through all staff email, a weekly newsletter called “the Advisor”, and access to a confidential suggestion system. Along with the use of skype, zoom, and the recent development of a staff Facebook group. Line managers are encouraged to hold regular 1-2-1’s and team meetings as forms of direct two-way communication. Tai Tairan also uses the form of indirect voice through the recognition of two unions, Unison and Unite.

“Employee voice is the means by which people communicate their views to their employer. It’s the main way employees can influence matters that affect them at work. For employers, effective voice contributes toward innovation, productivity and organisational improvement. For employees, it often results in increased job satisfaction, greater influence and better opportunities for development.” (CIPD,2019).

Effective approaches for employee voice should, according to the CIPD (2020), include, two-way communications, joint consultation, employee attitude or engagement surveys and a 'partnership' style of working, thus building trust, increased job satisfaction and physiological wellbeing (CIPD,2013).

The importance of employee voice is evident; therefore, the aims and objectives of this research are:

1. *To identify and analyse the employee voice mechanisms within Tai Tairan*
2. *To identify and analyse both positive and negative effects that current employee voice mechanisms may have at Tai Tairan*
3. *Identify and recommend future developments of employee voice for stakeholders*

Literature Review

Wilkinson and Fay (2011) state that *“In general, the term employee voice refers to the extent to which employees are, able to have a say regarding work activities and decision-making issues within the organisation in which they work”.*

MacLeod and Clarke (2009) expand on this stating that employee voice is when *“Employees’ views are sought out; they are listened to and see that their opinions count and make a difference. They speak out and challenge when appropriate. A strong sense of listening and of responsiveness permeates the organisation”.*

As a result of the Information and Consultation of Employees (ICE) Regulations 2004, in the UK, all employees in businesses with 50 or more (ACAS,2020); have a statutory right, to have, and request information and be consulted on change (Ellis,2016). The regulations were put in place to improve communication for employees , although, Ellis(2016), notes that the regulations can be interpreted in a way in which employees could be involved with consultation of change, but not necessarily have true influence over future plans. Nevertheless, ACAS (2020) refers to Information and consultation as being *“the basic building blocks of every effective organisation”*, highlighting its importance.

Organisations with strong information and consultation benefit from improved trust, engagement and productivity, innovative ideas and problem solving from the workforce, along with improved retention of staff and fewer workplace disputes (CIPD,2020).

There is a large amount of literature and research on Employee voice and its benefits but according to the CIPD,2013) *“voice still remains in the shadows, in many organisations never getting beyond the annual employee survey”*.

Wilkinson and Fay (2011) concluded that the benefits of Employee voice are:

- *“improved employee attitudes, behaviours, loyalty and more co-operative employment relations*
- *improved organisational effectiveness, including increases in productivity and individual performance*
- *improved systems by tapping into employees’ ideas, knowledge and experience and promoting greater diffusion of information”*.

Employee voice is integrated within the CIPD new professional map, within the specialist knowledge section, under employee experience, *“Employee experience is about creating a great work environment for people. It involves understanding the role that trust plays in the employment relationship and making sure people are listened to and have a voice in issues that impact them”* (CIPD,2020), making its importance at the forefront of an HR practitioners working lives.

The Taylor Review (2017) highlights that if employment is *‘fair and decent’* (Taylor, 2017) and companies invest in their employees, productivity will be largely improved, in order for this to be achieved - *‘workers must have a voice’* (Taylor, 2017).

Dromey (2016) identified, that *‘no matter what job you’re doing if you feel involved, you feel you have autonomy, a role in decision making...you’ll care more about what you’re doing and hence the company will have better results’*. Bingham (2016) reiterates that employee voice is *‘an essential ingredient for employee engagement and commitment to an organisation’*.

In conclusion, evidence suggests, if truly enabled and considered within an organisation, employee voice can only add to its development and success.

Methodology

Anderson (2013) cited in Perkins & Woodham (2016) describes four basic methods of research, they include Cross-sectional, Case Study, Action and Comparative.

The methodology used for the report consisted of a cross-sectional confidential employee survey, this was used as is cost-effective and to ensure completion within a short timeframe. Anderson (2013) identified that this method may cause issues as its success is reliant on response back.

The use of secondary data from current monthly / annual reports (devised by the HR team which are used to report to the Senior Management Team and board). These relate to headcount, absence, and employee relations cases.

A Comparative research method was used of data produced by the Community Housing Cymru (CHC), the CHC represents more than 70 housing associations in Wales, which Tai Tarian is in partnership with to ensure 'best practice' across the sector. As the title suggests, Comparative research methods are used to make comparisons (Anderson, 2009).

When studying both primary and secondary data collected any personal information was retracted from the report, the questionnaire was anonymous (to encourage honest feedback), consent from management was obtained to ensure the data could be used.

Findings

1. Employee survey results

A total of 98 out of 517 employees participated within the employee survey, totalling 18.96% of total staff (Appendix 1.1). This was made up of 53% of Assets, 36% of Housing & Corporate services, 3% of Finance and 8% of Chief Executive departments (Appendix 1.2).

The participants were made up of 49% of Administrator / Groundworker, in comparison to 30% of Team Leader / Inspector, 17% of middle management and 4% of senior management (Appendix 1.3). 40% office based and 60% community based or trades (Appendix 1.4). Looking at the figures there is a variety of participants from across all departments, at all levels of job role, with both office and community-based roles.

The main Employee Voice Mechanisms in place at Tai Tarian consist of a *"Speak in Confidence"* tool, *"Making a difference dialogue (MADD goals)"*, and a weekly *"Advisor"* newsletter.

The *"Speak in Confidence"* tool is a virtual, confidential, suggestion box, Barber (2018) states these are *"rarely productive"*, which is shown with 78% of participants confirming they have never used it (Appendix 1.5). When asked

“why”, the comments ranged from “*Never needed too*”, “*didn’t know about it*”, “*Not confidential*” and “*pointless using it as nothing changes if you do*” (Appendix 2.7).

The comments suggest the tool is “*pointless and nothing changes*” and employees “*didn’t know about it*”, indicating that it may have been developed as a tick box exercise, which “*will breed cynicism and distrust*” (<https://www.ipa-involve.com/employee-voice>, 2019) having more of a detrimental effect than not having employee voice mechanisms at all (CIPD 2013).

“*Communication at workplace defines organizational goals and helps co-workers collaborate. This is a step towards a fundamental business practice for a committed and productive workforce*” (Kashyap, 2019). The weekly Advisor goes out to all employees via email and can also be found on Tai Tarian’s intranet site, all employees are encouraged to read to ensure they are aware of upcoming changes and future plans. This is the most used communication tool for Senior Management to inform employees of key changes, so the results that 57% always read the contents are encouraging, but the 36% sometimes and 7% Never read, show that key messages may be being missed (Appendix 1.6). This could be the reason that only 25% of employees feel that they receive effective communication about changes to Policies and Procedures (Appendix 1.7), maybe they have missed communications by not reading or it may suggest that the communication via this method is not effective for changes in Policy and Procedure.

Inevitably, organisations will have certain people who speak up and those who do not, which may lead to missing ideas and a void between colleagues (Reitz and Higgins, 2019). Organisations should encourage a voice from all, ensuring to praise and acknowledge ideas and act on them in the future

As reiterated by the CIPD (2020) “*Voice is not just about providing the opportunity to have a say, but also about encouraging participation, using the insight obtained and about providing genuine transparency*”.

The Making a Difference Dialogue (MADD goals) is Tai Tarian’s Performance Management Tool. 87% of participants rate the MADD system as either excellent, good or fair, giving a positive outlook on the system, although there is a small percentage of 13% that state the system is poor or very poor (Appendix 1.8). 16% of the participants state they have 1-2-1’s every 6 to 12 months (Appendix 1.9), Rushmore (2017), suggests this length of time between each is not fit for purpose. More frequent meetings such as on a monthly basis, can add value and more meaning to meetings, as they are timelier in response to achievements or issues (Rushmore, 2017). 4% of participants state they never have 1-2-1’s (Appendix 1.9), 18% never feel comfortable being open and honest with their manager (Appendix 2.0) and 8% never receive constructive feedback from their manager (Appendix 2.1), 11% describe their relationship with their manager as very poor or poor (Appendix 2.2). These statistics may link with why 13% of participants state the performance management system is poor or very poor (Appendix 1.8). Solomon (2016) states that “*Two-Thirds of Managers Are Uncomfortable Communicating with Employees*” this could potentially be another factor to consider, and perhaps a training need for managers had been identified through the results.

The report *“building productivity”* by ACAS (2015), concluded that out of a varied group employees participants across different sectors that “just one in three (32%) – say that *“managers are good or very good at allowing employees to influence decision making”*. Dromey (2014) states that *“this is a significant cause for concern”*. Survey results of Tai Tarian revealed that under a quarter (18%) stated that their managers never include them in decision making (Appendix 2.3?), showing a positive comparative in relation to the ACAS report.

The survey results revealed that participants feel that there is always 48% of strong teamwork in their immediate team(Appendix 2.4), in comparison 22% feel that there is always a strong feeling of teamwork in the organisation as a whole (Appendix 2.5). This suggests a disjoint between immediate teams and other departments, suggesting that departments may not talk to each other causing frustration.

Feedback from the survey included *“I am frustrated by how information is communicated throughout the organisation, the slow pace of change and the disparity between different areas of the organisation”* along with *“Communication and planning are very poor”*, *“frustrations are echoed through staff surrounding pace of change and communication”* and *“expectations change without structure”*(Appendix 2.8).

Just over half (54%) of participants rate the Overall communication throughout the organisation as Excellent or good, with 37% rating as fair, 9% as poor or very poor (Appendix 2.6). Along with results previously discussed, this suggests that there are some employees who are disengaged within Tai Tarian.

Barber(2018) states *“A disengaged workforce that lacks a proper mechanism for meaningful dialogue will instead exacerbate those pressures as they look for means to vent the frustrations that they have no legitimate means to express”*.

Recent research conducted Gallup claims that, *“three quarters of UK workers are not engaged”* (engageforsuccess.org,2019) it is no surprise that there may be Tai Tarian employees who fall within this demographic. Furthermore, according to Gallup *“companies must achieve a 4-to-1 ratio of engaged to disengaged employees in order to counteract the negative effects of disengaged workers”* (Riley,2019).

“Disengaged employees exhibit decreased productivity and contribute to more negative customer experiences. Company culture and morale decline.....disengaged employees can significantly affect an organisation’s success – or lack thereof ... Research shows that disengaged employees are less likely to work hard, feel motivated, or meet expectations for their role, and they cause 60% more errors and defects in work performance” (Riley,2019).

Showing that disengagement *“can have a greater impact than many of us realised”* (Riley,2019).

2. Absence and Staff turnover statistics

Lack of adequate employee voice mechanisms has been linked to higher absence rate and staff turnover, positive health and well-being and decreasing sickness absence and turnover due to work related stressors and frustrations, as reported by the Involvement & Participation Association(IPA),(www.ipa-involve.com,2018).

As highlighted in Appendix 2.9 which shows Tai Tarian's rolling 12-month absence rate from April 2019 – March 2020, with a comparison to data produced by the Community Housing Cymru statistics (chcymru.org.uk, 2019), It is clear that Tai Tarian's absence rate is generally below that of the CHC average(chcymru.org.uk, 2019). There was a spike in January 2020, where a high number of employees were absent with cold/flu like symptoms, which is relatively usual for this time of year.

As confirmed by the Involvement & Participation Association (IPA), there is a link between high absence rate, high turnover, and poor employee voice mechanisms. Looking at the absence rates, suggest otherwise, but this is contradicted by the turnover rate as is generally above that of the CHC's (Appendix 3.0). This may indicate that voice mechanisms are failing somewhere, and potentially the lower absence rate may be due to presenteeism rather than positive effects of fair employee voice. The CIPD (2018) has reported that *"Presenteeism, or people coming into work when they are ill, has more than tripled since 2010"*, so this raises the question if this is in fact happening within the organisations when looking at the disparity of Absence / turnover and CHC comparison. *"The presence of voice arrangements is associated with higher levels of organisational commitment (Forth and Metcalf, 2014); and lower levels of voluntary quits (Bryson et al, 2013)"*.

3. Employee voice mechanisms and Employee relations cases

The CIPD (2020) suggests that there may be a correlation in the decline of Employee Relation cases and effective employee voice mechanisms in place. Investigation into this theory shows that since Employee Voice Mechanisms have been introduced over the past 3 years, there has also been a large decline in Employee Relation cases (Appendix 3.1). This may be also be due to the re-structure and implementation of a new HR Team, where all policies, procedures and process' are being looked at and developed. The HR team has focused on developing key relationships across the organisation and insuring to be transparent, fair and consistent with their approach, encouraging informal process to resolve conflict instead of pursuing formal action which was the organisation previous reaction to all issues, needed or not.

Conclusions and Recommendations for change

The IPA (2020) states that *"Overall, a multi-channel approach to voice will always be best for organisations – important to have direct voice through line managers, by all means have an annual engagement survey, but don't neglect to also have some structure for collective, representative employee voice as well"*(www.ipa-involve.com). Looking at Tai Tarians provision of a range of employee voice mechanisms, both individually and collectively it would suggest that the organisation is providing what the IPA(2020) states as 'best practice', although some negative comments, as mentioned, and comments such as *"I have complained on many occasions that I am not happy that I am treated differently to another member in my team, that I feel I have to carry this person a lot, ... why hasn't something been done?"* from the employee survey suggest that something is amiss.

The majority of results received shed a positive light on the organisation, but it cannot be unnoticed that communication mechanisms may be in place, but are not being delivered effectively, with a small percentage of employees who may be disengaged.

Inevitably, the true power of voice will rely on senior management and line managers recognising its credibility and continuing to implement varied employee voice mechanisms. As well as developing relationships with staff to encourage those who do not speak up to do so. Andriotis (2016) *states “one of the biggest causes of demotivation, however, is the relationship between managers and their teams”*, in light of the findings of the report, investment in line manager coaching in relation to communication, listening and how to deliver valued 1-2-1's should be considered. Employees *“are more likely to go ‘beyond contract’ or that ‘extra mile’ for the organisation if managers behave in ways that stimulate and encourage positive attitudes”* (Purcell et al,2013).

A fit for purpose system to record and provide clear survey results to be acted upon straight away would be invaluable, not only to act on employee suggestion and show the organisation is truly listening, but to also gain in depth further analysis, such as if the disengagement runs across all departments / those that are office based or trade.

A re-launch of the tools available for Employee voice and communication is recommended, with an employee voice forum set up to ask what employees expect from the tools provided.

Limitations

Initially when planning the research project, the aim was to also include group discussions in relation to employee opinions of voice. Unfortunately, this was cancelled due to the sudden change in working as a result of the global pandemic of coronavirus and its implications on the organisation. Over 300 staff were furloughed between March – June 2020, the remaining working from home. In turn the primary quantitative data collected was from the employee questionnaire, with that of secondary qualitative data, comparative data, background theory and evidence compiled together to produce the findings. The large amount of data collected by the employee survey was also difficult to streamline as Tai Tarian do not have a sophisticated survey platform, which proved time consuming to collate with the need to manually input into charts for the Appendix.

Reference

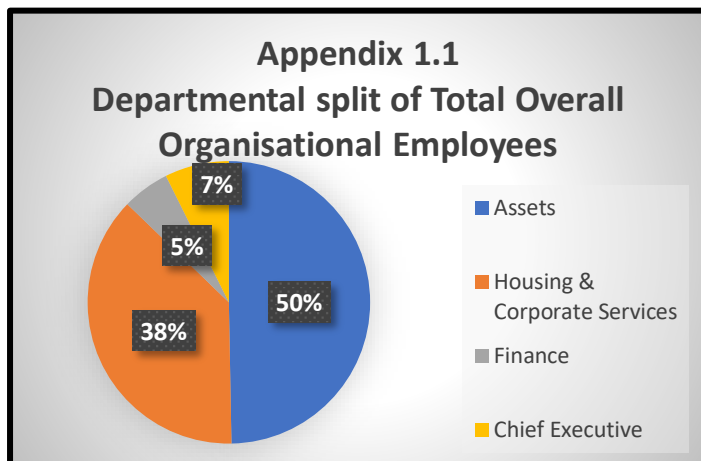
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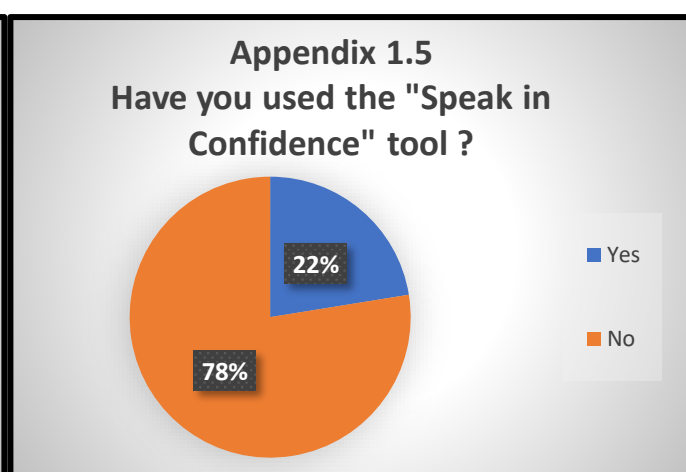
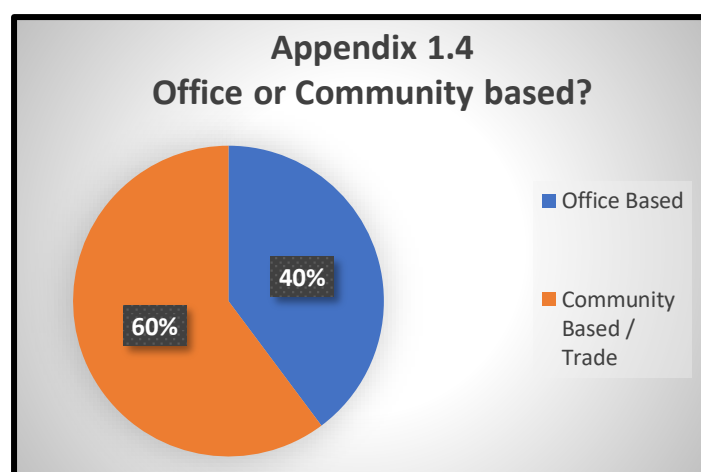
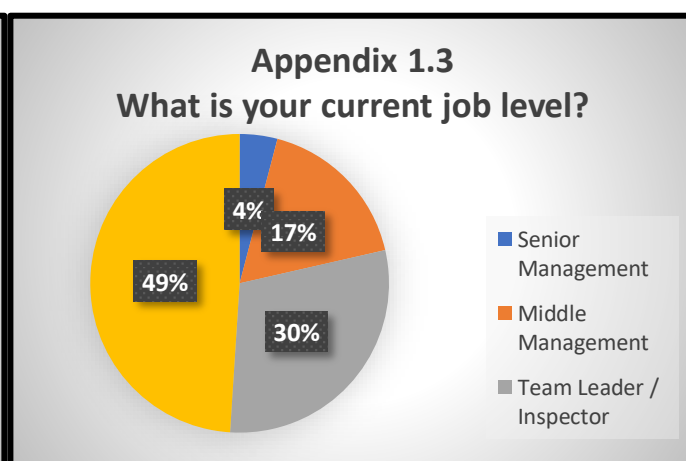
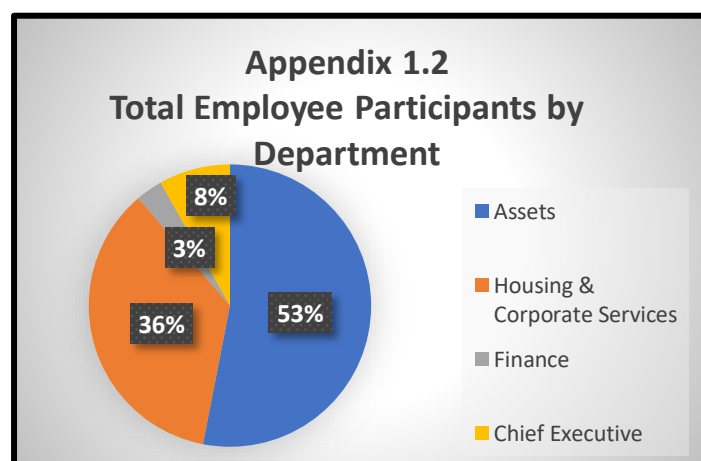
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Appendix

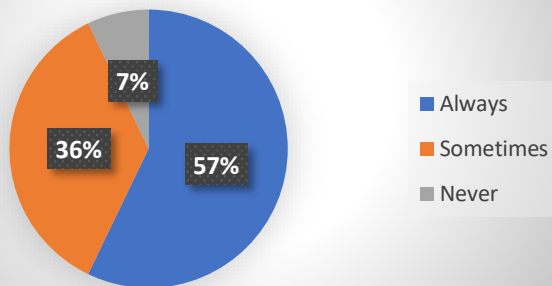
Total Organisational employees by Department



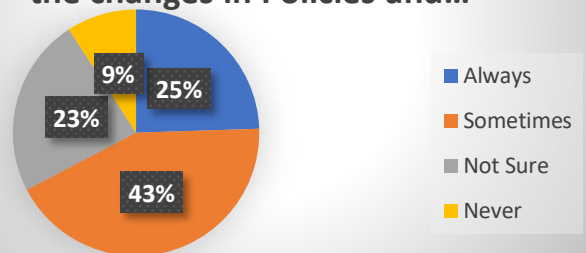
Collated Data from confidential Employee survey



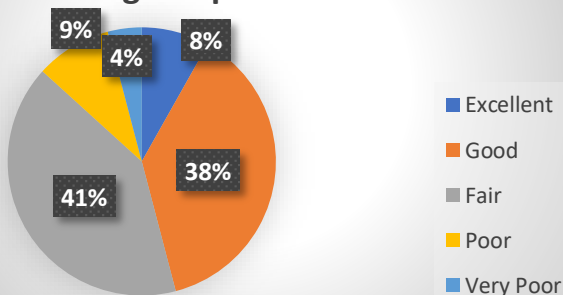
Appendix 1.6
Do you read the Advisor?



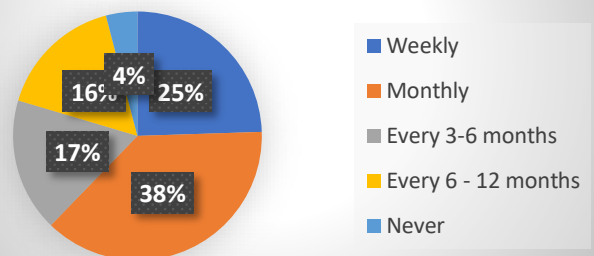
Appendix 1.7
Do you feel employees receive effective communication about the changes in Policies and...



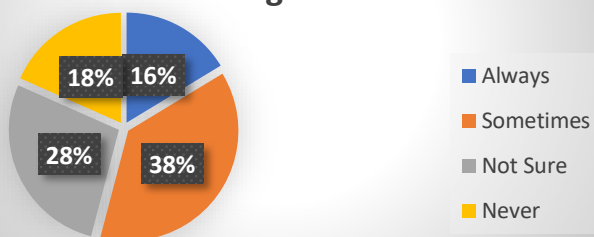
Appendix 1.8
How would you rate the MADD goals process?



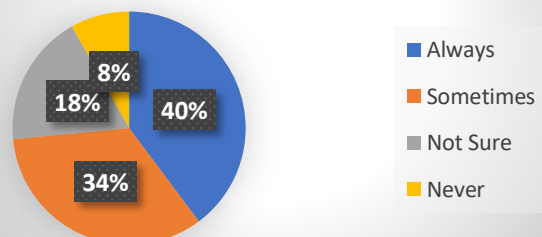
Appendix 1.9
How often do you have 1-2-1's with your Manager?



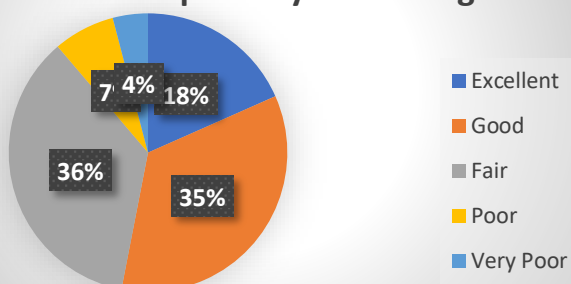
Appendix 2.0
Do you feel comfortable being open and honest with your Manager?



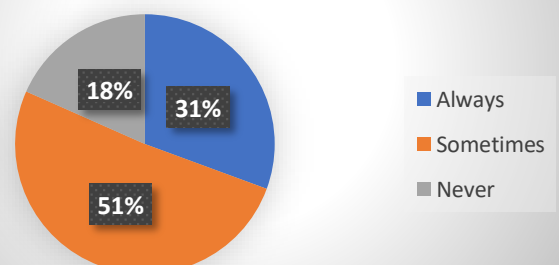
Appendix 2.1
Do you receive constructive feedback from your Manager?

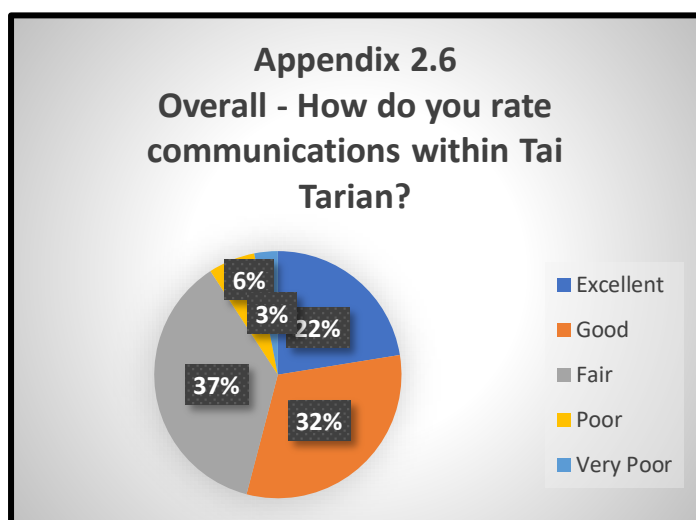
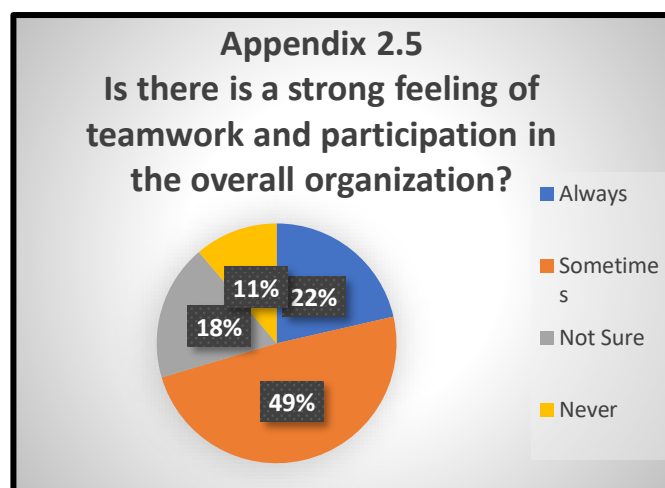
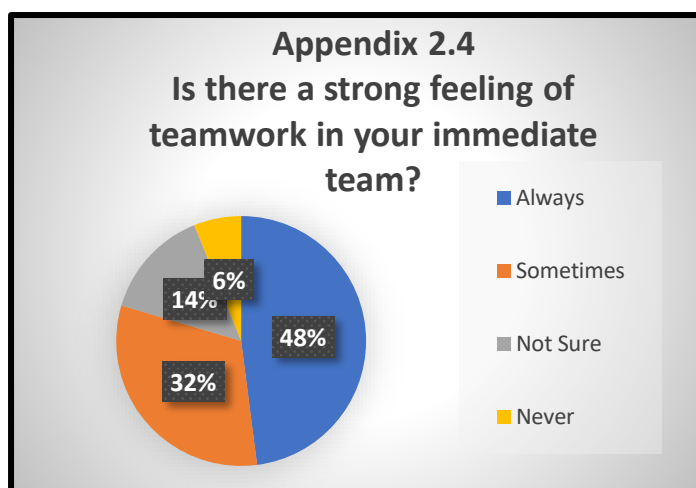


Appendix 2.2
How would you describe your relationship with your Manager?



Appendix 2.3
Do you feel your Manager includes you in decision making?





Written comments/ feedback from Survey

Appendix 2.7 – Comments and feedback

78 participants confirmed they do not use the Speak in confidence tool, 35 participants gave a reason.

Please confirm why you do not use the Speak in Confidence tool??	Total Participants with the same/similar answers
Comments:	
<i>Not confidential</i>	8
<i>I did not know about it</i>	3
<i>Never needed too</i>	1
<i>I have not been sent log in details</i>	2
<i>pointless using it as nothing changes</i>	7
<i>I did not think it was still going</i>	4
<i>I will just email my suggestions to the team</i>	1
<i>Will talk to my manager instead</i>	1
<i>I could not understand it</i>	2
<i>Not able to log in</i>	2
<i>Not sure what it is</i>	2
<i>Never been shown</i>	2

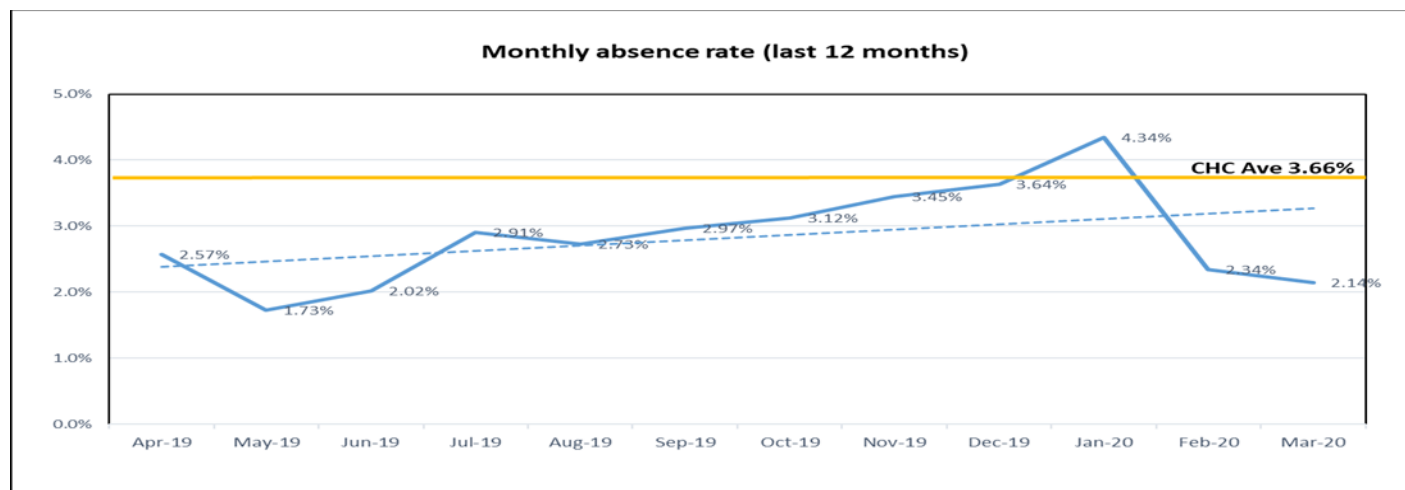
Appendix 2.8 – Comments and feedback

98 participants completed the survey, 13 commented to the free text option.

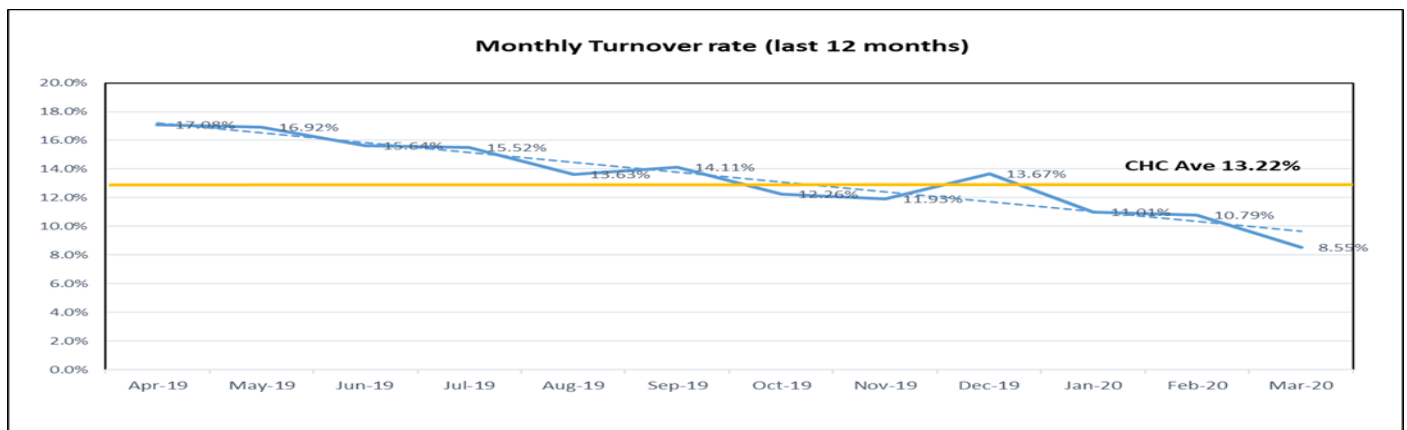
Please provide any feedback about communication in the Organisation you may have:
Comments:
<i>I am frustrated by how information is communicated throughout the organisation, the slow pace of change and the disparity between different areas of the organisation</i>
<i>Communication and planning are very poor</i>
<i>frustrations are echoed through staff surrounding pace of change and communication</i>
<i>expectations change without structure</i>
<i>its ok in my time but I have no idea what's going on in other parts of the organisation if I'm honest</i>
<i>I do not mind; I just want to get on with my job and go home</i>
<i>Sometimes it's good, sometimes bad, same as anywhere I suppose</i>
<i>There is no help from other departments. Communication is generally quite poor</i>
<i>Sometimes information is not shared freely within the organisation, I think seniors need to make it clear what we are doing and why</i>
<i>I spend most of my time answering questions via email and chasing people, it can sometimes be difficult to get a response.</i>
<i>Internally communication is not great</i>
<i>Seniors do things without prompting and do not clarify what they expect from us on an operational level.</i>
<i>Change is not really communicated well in the organisation.</i>

Data from Tai Tarian monthly reports with comparison to Community Housing Cymru (CHC)

Appendix 2.9 - Absence



Appendix 3.0 – Employee Turnover



Appendix 3.1 – Disciplinary cases by year compared to Introduction of Employee Voice Mechanisms

