

## Case Study Pro-forma

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Name: Newcastle City Council  
Size: 15,000 (inc. schools)  
Sector: Local Government  
Location: NE

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### The organisation

Newcastle City Council employs approximately 15,000 staff. The council is subdivided into five main Directorates: 1) The Chief Executives Office; 2) Neighbourhood Services; 3) Adult Services; 4) Children Services and 5) Regeneration. A sixth division, 'City Services', is responsible for back office issues such as IT. UNISON has around 6,500 members and the GMB around 2000. The TGWU, UCATT, AMICUS, NASUWT, NUT and ATL also have lower levels of membership.

### The history of workplace dialogue

The general industrial relations environment between management and trade unions within the council is described as "very good", and dialogue over learning and skills development as "exceptional". However, this has not always been the case. In 2001 the relationship with trade unions was poor, tensions were high within the workforce and there was little workplace dialogue. A staff satisfaction survey around this time revealed that just 11 per cent of the workforce felt that they had their learning and development needs identified.

This perceived gap in training needs analysis, alongside recognition that workplace relations were deteriorating, were to act as spurs for improvements in workplace dialogue, particularly in respect of training issues. The unions took an initial lead, through the award of monies from the Union Learning Fund (ULF); these funds were matched by management who entered into a learning agreement with the unions. In recognition that workplace learning would require both management and unions working together, the council provided physical resources to house a community learning centre, called the Brinkburn Centre in an old library building within the community, as well as five other 'learning zones' within council premises, which were funded for three years by the ULF and council resources. Courses were initially focussed around skills for life, such as basic numeracy, literacy and IT. Management also took the opportunity afforded by this partnership building approach to re-visit its relations with the union more generally.

### How are training and skills discussed?

The learning agenda was perceived to be in the interest of all concerned. Ethically, learning was seen to be good and right. There was a joint commitment for learning to infiltrate all levels of the organisation from the bottom-up and from the top-down, and structures were put in place to ensure this.

At the corporate level, management took the lead in establishing a Joint Negotiating Committee, with responsibility for general employment relations issues, although issues of staff development are periodically covered. A Workforce Learning Development Board was also established, with specific responsibility for issues of learning and work-related training. This comprises councillors, executive directors and lead trade union representatives.

Policy decisions made at these levels are put into practice through the Learning Council Project Management Team, whereby the Head of Learning and Development, the Deputy Regional Union Convenor and union branch officials are engaged in almost constant dialogue. One member of the management team is also a union activist and has taken on the role of ensuring that the council and trade union learning agenda are compatible, and that differing interests are taken into account.

For non-managerial staff, skill needs are identified through annual appraisals and, the recently introduced, performance development plan (PDP) which allows individual development to be linked to broader council strategy. This asks employees to outline their training needs for the coming year and to consider their longer term career progression. Employees can also discuss issues with ULRs, which number over 100. ULRs hold an annual conference and meet quarterly to highlight areas of difficulty and new training ideas. Basic and more advanced ULR roles are also being formalised between management and the unions. Thus, a ULR co-ordinator, paid for by the Council, offers support and guidance to ULRs, as they require it.

### **What have been the benefits from dialogue on training and skills?**

- The council are looking at new ways to quantify the benefits for the organisation created by improved workplace dialogue, although they believe that the benefits are apparent in every-day working life. Management feels there are real improvements, in terms of: people feeling more positive in their work, improved job satisfaction, productivity and performance benefits; and lower levels of sickness and higher staff retention.
- Staff surveys reveal that satisfaction over the identification of learning and development needs has increased from 50 per cent in 2003 to two-thirds in 2006.
- Both union research and independent evaluation report tangible benefits from enhanced workplace dialogue over training and skills. The council budget for training has experienced growth and training has increased whilst budgets in most other areas of the council have been cut.

- Improvements in performance and cultural change have contributed to an embedded commitment to workplace dialogue. Management has also secured mainline Council funding to operate the learning centres, and ensure their sustainability.
- The unions are perceived as having a positive role to play, because of their skills and ability in supporting and providing training at the workplace.
- Workplace dialogue over training is seen as generating mutual benefits and has resulted in improved dialogue over other employment issues.

### **Key challenges and top tips**

The key challenge for senior management has been 'getting line managers on board'. They exhibited a degree of resistance and scepticism, due to their operational imperatives to meet targets and deliver services. Senior management rectified this through re-establishing their support for workplace dialogue and training and development on a personal, one-to-one, basis with line managers. Further evidence was also collected to illustrate the link between basic skills issues to wider performance issues. Additional training was given to line managers.

The unions faced the challenge of how to adequately grasp the opportunities that increased workplace dialogue around training and skills could bring. Through openness in their dialogue with management, the unions have maintained their autonomy, whilst also challenging views of their ability to act in a cooperative way. Management and the unions are now looking to use the structures and dialogue on training to improve training within the community, with a particularly focus on Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) groups.