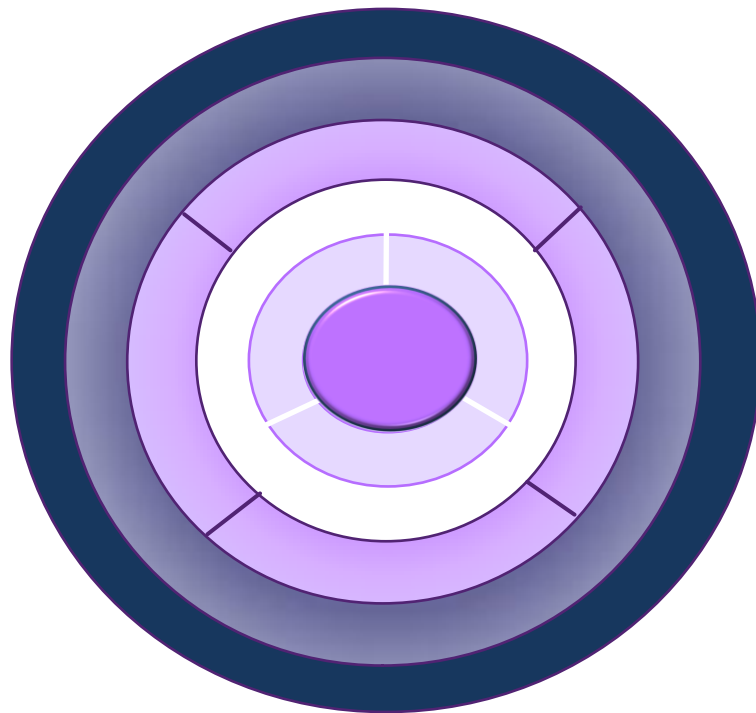


Rethinking employee voice

Voice at United Welsh
Housing Association



tomorrow's
company

Voice case studies overview

We want to understand the value of employee voice to both employers and employees in companies operating within the UK.

Although the literature, and in particular the WERS survey, shows the spread of voice across UK workplaces, and the number of voice practices in workplaces, it is not able to show the relationship between different voice mechanisms, the organisational culture and the perceived value of voice to workplace actors. Moreover, the pace of change within UK workplaces has meant that the academic literature has yet to fully capture recent innovations in voice such as the introduction of legislation requiring greater consultation and the continued expansion of online communication and the spread of social media.

The case studies, therefore, enable us to firstly map some of the voice arrangements deemed to be effective for employers and employees in different sectors of the economy. Secondly, they will allow us to explore some of the dynamics between the different voice mechanisms and also the cultural context in which they exist, including management approaches.

The case studies are not intended to be representative of the UK economy, nor of UK practice. They are explicitly designed to identify good practice, by which we mean practice that is seen as valuable to employers and employees.

In particular we aim to understand:

- What structures and cultures a range of different organisations have in place to harness employee voice
- What factors enable and inhibit employee voice
- What benefits are associated with employee voice
- Whether there are any tools or techniques that can be applied in other companies.

Part 1: Introduction

This case study describes the structures and underpinning culture of employee voice at United Welsh Housing Association. It also explores the values placed on voice by both the business and employees and identifies the factors that inhibit and enable it.

United Welsh Housing Association (hereafter called United Welsh) is a not-for-profit organisation providing housing and related services to people in South Wales. Based in Caerphilly, United Welsh manage over 4,700 properties. As well as providing social rented housing and a shared ownership scheme, United Welsh also provide housing support services for residents with additional needs.

Employees (as of Dec 2011)	160
Customer facing roles	97
Proportion of male/female employees	34.4% male/65.6% female
Employee turnover in year to date	14%
Average length of service	5,6 years

Part 2: Background of voice at United Welsh

There is a clear recognition of the importance of employee voice at United Welsh. In the words of Tony Whittaker, their Chief Executive, it is “*absolutely key to business success*”.

One of United Welsh’s core values as set out in their Corporate Strategy is ‘partnership’ which they define as “*working together in productive relationships both internally and externally*”. Their commitment to partnership is central to how they approach employee voice. They recognise that cultivating a good relationship with their staff and the union enables the organisation to make swift decisions when needed. They also understand the role employee voice can play in informing their services and business decisions. Staff expertise and experience is used to guide decision-making and the direction of the business.

They’ve developed a distinctive approach to cultivating voice which they call Choice Based Engagement. This focuses on building and maintaining employee voice in order to develop trust. They see trust as crucial in terms of managing difficult decisions when they arise.

It is clear that employee voice is taken seriously at all levels within the organisation. From the Chief Executive and Senior Management Team right down to line managers and front-line staff; all employees see voice as important to the success of the organisation. Instead of being something addressed separately, voice is mainstreamed into all of the work United Welsh does.

The effort and resource that go in to supporting voice demonstrates the commitment at United Welsh to engaging with their employees. It is clear that their approach has delivered tangible results as staff demonstrate high levels of engagement and the organisation has maintained steady growth.

Part 3: Voiceat United Welsh

Choice Based Engagement

United Welsh describe themselves as having been on a 'journey' in terms of voice and engagement. It began 10 years ago with the signing of a Partnership Agreement with their trade union, Unison.

In 2001 United Welsh adopted [Option Based Consulting](#), a method developed by IPA. The method, highly valued by United Welsh, provides a framework for consulting with stakeholders – including employees, forums and unions. It focuses on convincing people of the need for change, analysing the options available and building trust in order to secure a consensus on the way forward. In the words of Gareth Hexter, Director of Corporate Services, it helped *“involve people in the decision-making before the decision was made”*. Gareth explains that adopting this method *“kick-started a culture change within the organisation where we wanted that way of working to be mainstreamed and embedded within the organisation”*. To support this work, they established a new post – Partnership Manager – who is responsible for leading on spreading good practice in the organisation.

Out of their experience of using Option Based Consulting, United Welsh have developed their own model which they call Choice Based Engagement. They see this as less formal and more about engaging with staff at an early stage and allowing them to come up with the options themselves. Under the model, management and other stakeholders make clear at the outset if they have a preferred option. This ensures the conversation is open and honest – as Gareth describes, *“We recognise legitimate interest and we put that on the table”*. United Welsh believe that the Choice Based Engagement model allows them to build mutual trust and allow for a constant input into business decisions.

They believe that developing trust is key as it enables prompt and effective decision-making when needed and reduces the potential for disputes. By building trust, stakeholders would be more likely to support the end decision. And even if this is not their preferred option, they will be more likely to accept it if they trust the consultation process. In the words of Tony Whittaker, when a decision is reached, *“people can be confident that the decision is the best one”*.

United Welsh are going through a significant change process at the moment which is testing this approach. The company are looking at using their subsidiary to provide asset management services for their properties. They would then procure a third party organisation to come in and manage these services. This would involve the transfer of staff to a different organisation which has caused some inevitable concerns for those involved, particularly over pensions.

United Welsh see Choice Based Engagement as playing an important role in managing such potentially difficult change programmes. As David Williams, Partnership Manager and Union Representative at United Welsh explains, *“it gives the people actually involved the chance to develop the ideas”*. Staff have been involved from the beginning in this process. In the words of Mel Arnold, one of the Unison Reps at United Welsh, management are *“going out of the way to make sure that everyone knows what's going on, how it will affect them and how to feed in to the decision-making”*. The final decision is due to be made in December 2012.

Unionised voice

Around a third of United Welsh's employees are members of Unison. The relationship between United Welsh and Unison was previously quite strained and unproductive. Tony Whittaker Chief Executive of United Welsh described it as having fitted the adversarial 'old style' of negotiation where the union regularly opposed everything that was proposed by the company.

However, since the signing of the Partnership Agreement in 2002 this has changed significantly. United Welsh have built a positive and productive relationship with Unison and made their focus on partnership as one of their core values.

A key element of Choice Based Engagement involves engaging early with the union on key business decisions, giving them a chance to have their say. Senior managers at United Welsh and Union Reps form what they call The Partnership Group, a consultative body that meets regularly and strongly influences decision-making in the organisation.

Part of the reason for the successful relationship with the trade union has been the creation of the Partnership Manager role mentioned above. As Gareth Hexter explains, the idea behind this was to "*support that culture of partnership at work*". David Williams works part time in this role and part time as a senior rep for Unison. This innovative role and the use of job-sharing help maintain and build the close partnership working between United Welsh and Unison.

An example of partnership working between United Welsh and Unison is the recent budget setting process which included consideration of cost of living changes to pay.

United Welsh wanted to involve the union as much as possible in the process but recognised that reps and union members might not have the required expertise to understand and interrogate the proposals. To overcome this, United Welsh provided finance training to the reps, enabling them to engage with the budget setting process and scrutinise the plans. This allowed them to explain the situation to their members and come to an agreement. The willingness of United Welsh to involve the union is reflected by the reps themselves. David Williams explained that reps "*have to commit to taking on that level of education and using it. We have to be able to have conversations that are on the right level*".

This approach enabled the two sides to work together and reach a consensus. As David Williams explains, "*we present the information we have honestly and openly. People applying intelligence and common sense tend to come to the same conclusions.*" This is more than just the gut feelings of employees. They emphasise the importance of 'informed voice'. This is about engaging with staff on an adult level, involving them in complex decision-making and difficult topics. Sometimes, as in the discussions on the budget and cost of living explained above, this will require training so that employees or their representatives can make a proper contribution.

Staff Survey and Values

United Welsh's approach to voice is about more than just consulting on difficult issues such as pay. They look to involve employees in all the decisions that affect them.

One such example is the staff survey. Employees felt that the previous version of the survey was difficult to understand and wasn't focussed on the key issues. As Gareth Hexter explains, they were looking for "*a more bespoke staff survey that better represents the organisation and what they're aiming for*". As a result, United Welsh

asked employees to design a new survey. This new version was shorter and more focussed on the issues staff felt were most important including fairness, confidence in managers and senior leadership and job satisfaction. This allowed staff not only to say how they feel, but also to do so on the issues that matter to them.

The organisation performs exceedingly well in the survey with 86% saying they are happy working at United Welsh and 99% saying they feel appreciated. In addition to designing the survey, employees themselves are responsible for drafting an action plan to address any issues that come out of it that is then approved by the senior management team.

In a similar way, when it came to developing the organisation's Corporate Strategy, employees were put right at the heart. Staff were split into working groups to draft the vision and values that underlay the strategy. The ideas were drawn together and put to the entire team at a staff conference. Allowing staff to voice their opinions on this and to lead in the development ensured the values would be an authentic representation of the organisation, and that staff would 'buy-in' to them.

There is a wide array of other channels for voice at United Welsh. Being a relatively small organisation (around 160 staff), they aim to get together as an organisation at least once a quarter with a whole staff meeting and at an annual away day. These are open and inclusive affairs at which staff can bring their ideas and concerns. In the words of Mel Arnold, a Union Rep at United Welsh, *"you're always encouraged to say what you think could be done... I was quite surprised. The stuff we brought up there, they did"*.

United Welsh understand the importance of line managers to engagement and voice. They have developed a leadership training programme with Henley Business School which has been delivered to the Senior Management Team and Heads of Service and is due to be rolled out to all managers within the organisation. It clarifies expectations for managers in terms of engagement and equips them with the tools to facilitate voice. Managers also have the support of David Williams, the Partnership Manager, who is able to help out and offer advice on engagement where needed.

Being largely office based, United Welsh make good use of both email and intranet to inform staff and solicit their opinions. There is a 'Tell Tony' section on the intranet which is open for suggestions from staff.

Related to the above, authenticity lies at the heart of the approach to voice at United Welsh. As Gareth Hexter argues, accessing voice and working in partnership with employees and their representatives has to be more than a cosmetic exercise. A lack of authenticity is transparent; *"people will know very quickly if the discussion is not genuine"*. For example, engaging in a consultation when a decision has already been made can undermine trust. Asking opinions and then not responding to or acting upon them can engender cynicism.

As United Welsh have recognised, it is vital to take voice seriously and embed it into your work, rather than undertaking it as a hollow exercise. Gareth explains that at United Welsh, *"transparency is integral to voice... People expect to be told the truth"*.

Part 4: Factors influencing voice at United Welsh

Structure, ownership and organisation

The structure, ownership and organisation of United Welsh do seem to have an impact on how they approach employee voice.

Being a relatively small organisation, based over a small geographical area, it is possible for all employees to get together periodically for all-staff events. As it is a relatively 'flat' organisation – with few levels between the senior leadership and front-line staff – it is also easier to have direct communication between staff, managers and senior leadership. This helps aid the expression of voice by employees and the accessibility of voice for senior leadership.

Although United Welsh is a non-profit making organisation it still has commercial drivers, with the requirement to meet covenants with private lenders and maximise its use of financial resources. Ultimately its purpose is not to maximise profit, but to provide a high quality service to its customers and to deliver a social benefit. As shown above, United Welsh recognises that in order to deliver a quality service, it needs to treat staff well and voice is key to this.

The fact that there is union representation at United Welsh also seems to influence how they approach employee voice. Roughly one in three of their staff is a member of Unison. The presence of the union and their progressive relationship with United Welsh makes them an important part of the voice picture.

Customer relationships

As mentioned above, the prime purpose of United Welsh is to provide high quality housing services to its customers and to deliver social value. This is reflected in the company's mission statement; 'Best for our People, Best for our Communities'. United Welsh understand the causal link between employee engagement and customer service. By ensuring effective employee voice, they can drive engagement and deliver high quality service.

Success in delivering high quality services is tested every other year through a customer survey in which all tenants are actively encouraged to participate.

Leadership style

The senior leadership at United Welsh clearly recognise the contribution voice makes to their business success. Their commitment to employee voice is evident and they always ensure that staff have their say on all the key decisions that affect them; from

things such as the employee survey and the corporate strategy, to more difficult discussions around pay levels. Their approach demonstrates a genuine commitment to engage staff in a meaningful way in the important decisions facing the organisation, rather than just paying lip-service to voice.

In terms of leadership style, United Welsh emphasise the importance of 'informed voice'. As Tony Whittaker, the Chief Executive explains, their approach is about *"enabling people to understand the business needs of the organisation and giving them the skills to engage properly"*. When employees and representatives are supported properly to understand the organisation, this can significantly add value to the employee voice they are able to contribute.

Finally, the leadership style at United Welsh demonstrates the potential of a partnership approach. Their commitment to partnership, as explained below, is integral to their approach to voice.

Purpose and values

Partnership is one of the core values at United Welsh. It is clear that this value informs their approach to employee voice.

The relationship between United Welsh and Unison demonstrates the benefit of partnership working. Through regular constructive dialogues, managers and the trade union are able to work together to secure both the on-going success of the organisation and the welfare of employees. The joint role held by David Williams – who acts both as Partnership Manager and as a Senior Union Rep – demonstrates this partnership approach and allows for the maintenance of a productive relationship.

United Welsh also demonstrate a partnership approach with their employees. As well as consulting on major decisions such as the procurement project mentioned above, they cultivate an on-going dialogue with employees and involve them as much as possible. Take the staff survey or the corporate values mentioned above; both were designed by employees themselves.

Part 5: Benefits

Senior management at United Welsh are evangelical about what they see as the benefits of employee voice. Over the past 10 years, the period since the signing of the Partnership Agreement and during which they have been dedicating effort and resources to developing engagement and voice, the organisation has experienced a 120% growth in turnover and 72% growth in Revenue Reserves. They expect this growth to continue in the following decade.

United Welsh's Chief Executive Tony Whittaker believes that their focus on employee voice has been one of the main reasons behind this growth. He believes that far from slowing down the decision-making process, cultivating employee voice on an on-going basis enables an organisation to act quickly, especially when one is faced with a difficult decision. Through engaging with employees and developing trust, one can achieve *"much stronger buy-in for changes"*. In his view, employee voice shouldn't just be about consulting on difficult decisions, but also *"investing in decision-making up front to make it quicker"*.

As well as enabling rapid decision-making and maintaining staff buy-in, United Welsh also see employee voice as contributing to the quality of service and therefore to their business success. They identify with the 'John Lewis model', arguing that *"If you look after people they will deliver for your customers and make the difference to your business"*.

United Welsh recognise the potential for employees to influence business decisions for the better. They understand that the accumulated experience and knowledge of staff can be an asset when it comes to decision-making. This can be both in terms of contributing innovative ideas to improve the organisation, or acting as a sense-check on decisions; *"it's in the management's interests that they're able to give us that challenge"*. In the words of Gareth Hexter *"it's absolutely obvious to us that when you engage, decision-making is better; it's common sense"*.

For employees the benefits are visible and thoroughly understood. Judith Say, an area supervisor with the team which delivers services to older people, commented on a project to improve those services. *"The need for change was originally identified by the team. We all knew that we had a voice and could influence the outcomes as much as we knew that we had a responsibility to use that voice to reach the right conclusion for the service."*

In addition to the strong and consistent growth of the organisation, results from the staff survey imply the value of employee voice. 86% of staff are happy to work at United Welsh, 96% believe people are treated fairly and 99% feel appreciated. There is also firm confidence in senior management with nine in ten saying that they visibly live the United Welsh values.

Conclusion

United Welsh understand the potential for employee voice to contribute to their business success. They recognise that it can both inform decision-making and reduce the scope for conflict by enabling staff buy-in for changes. What's more, they understand that when staff feel their voice is listened to, they tend to have higher levels of engagement and performance.

The organisation is clearly committed to facilitating voice and this is something that United Welsh dedicate time, effort and resource to. They have a clear partnership approach which is consistent with their values and maintains good relationships with their staff and the union. They also understand that voice is most effective when mainstreamed in an organisation. Rather than being a separate exercise, voice should shape the direction of an organisation and inform all decision-making.

Their approach is demonstrably successful. The results from their staff survey are hugely positive. Employees feel satisfied with their roles, they feel people are supported and treated fairly, and they have confidence in line managers and senior leadership. It is clear that through a consistent approach to voice, they've managed to develop high levels of employee engagement and this has fed through into sustained business success.