

Womens Voice – a brief modern history!

- In 2017 the women’s staff network held its AGM. It was clear the network provided a support network but for a small number of women, they have been involved in it for some time, and it was managed through email communication which excluded a number of women in the Council.
- A new chair and steering group was established made up of senior women from across the directorates to drive forward the newly named **Womens Voice** (WV).
- We developed a vision and a mission

OUR VISION:

Leeds City Council is a role model organisation for women and a great place for women to work, where women’s contribution is celebrated

OUR MISSION:

Challenge assumptions
Foster commitment
Provoke thought
Make change

USING:

Strength
Inclusivity
Confidence
Collaboration

- We developed a wo-manifesto by holding focus groups with groups of women, especially those who were not digitally connected, worked in remote locations and were more likely part-time and low paid. Feedback was collated and themed which gave us our 5 pledges for the manifesto. This was launched in 2018 – Centenary year.

The 5 manifesto areas were:

1. GROW WOMEN’S VOICE

Women want:

- To be engaged, asked for opinions on things that concern them and to be listened to and valued.

We pledge to:

- Give a greater voice to women through our network’s communications, including the virtual BAND group and informal get-togethers.
- Create opportunities for and support women to be heard.
- Listen to women and show how women are working together to have a greater voice.
- Develop and publicise a calendar of events, activities and learning opportunities.
- Identify ‘go to’ individuals who will be ambassadors for women at work.

2. HAVE THOUGHTFUL IMPLEMENTATION OF CURRENT WORK/LIFE BALANCE POLICIES

Women want:

- Managers to apply the Council policies and decisions consistently on sickness/special leave/ rostering / flexi-working /tea breaks/change in hours.
- Adequate support when returning to work after being off sick
- More flexibility/ support for those with caring /parental responsibilities or disabilities
- Support with stress connected to caring/parental responsibilities, work pressures & needing to manage home budgets

We pledge to:

- Consult women and influence the review & development of Council policies affecting employees.
- Set up more ways for women to see what the Council’s policies offer them now and to help women get advice / share experience of how Council policies are & can be used.

3. ADDRESS GENDER GAPS

Women want:

- Female-cut work uniforms, proper provision of female toilets/locker rooms/sanitary products
- To be shown how to use heavy equipment with no assumption that we can't or don't want to
- To be given all relevant information that others get online at work and not to miss out because we happen to work part time
- To be helped to find the confidence to handle managers and bad behaviours well
- More support for and wider awareness on the effect of going through the menopause
- Variety and enrichment in our roles

We pledge to:

- Provide information on the menopause for all colleagues, to widen the understanding of how it can impact on work.
- Lobby for all staff to be online and digitally connected at work
- Ask that the Council only uses providers able to cater for the needs of female employees as standard.

4. RECOGNISE GENDER DIFFERENCES TO IMPROVE EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES FOR DEVELOPMENT

Women want:

- To be made aware of training that's available and to be able to genuinely access that, with the support of managers to do it
- To be offered more training and help in computer skills so we don't feel 'held back' & can apply for jobs on-line
- To be encouraged and supported to apply for jobs, including those filled mostly by men in the past
- Staff appointments to be made with people with the right skills/experience, so as not to put pressure on others

We pledge to:

- Provide a good mentoring opportunity for every woman that wants one, to help her work towards her goals.
- Set up ways for all women to get equal access to hear about learning opportunities
- Establish which roles / service areas employ significantly disproportionate numbers of men and provide challenge and support to improve the balance of male and female employees.

5. CHANGE BEHAVIOURS SO ALL WOMEN ARE RESPECTED IN THE WORKPLACE

Women want:

- Not to be taken advantage of through increased pressure to absorb more work & to cover gaps and absence
- To be able to discuss female issues in private with managers who understand those things
- To be more respected & valued at work through an elimination of 'banter', bad language, sexist or aggressive/abusive behaviours
- Informal catch-ups to be valued and to know our breaks are for us first rather than a chance for supervisors to brief us

We pledge to:

- Signpost women to advice and support on what to do if they experience poor behaviour
 - Use Womens Voice to challenge the organisation and influence change across the council
 - Include male colleagues in conversations and actions to improve the experience of being a female employee.
- 2018 saw a new chair of the network and during 2018 and 2019 there was lots of activity with many successes, including a WV Facebook page which has well over 1000 members on it:

A year of activity



- In 2019 we developed 3 areas for action:
 - Challenging sexist behaviour
 - The digital divide
 - Career progression
- 2020 also saw a new chair again and the start of the pandemic.
- Women were significantly affected by the lockdown. But amid valid concerns for the elderly, BAME and clinically vulnerable, women became invisible.
 - A much greater percentage of women work in care settings and hospitals, and retail. They were going out to work every day at greater risk of catching the virus and potentially taking it home to their families. There were a lot of concerns from women about this.
 - Equally women who could work from home did not sometimes benefit from what we thought was offering a more flexible approach to working. In 90% of homes, women still take on the lead responsibility for sorting the home and children even when they work themselves. This became even more acute when WFH and home-schooling children. It was not uncommon to hear a woman's day start at 5 am to do a couple of hours work, before getting the children up and fed and doing some schooling with them. They would then have to make lunch and prepare the afternoon for their partner to take over so that could do a few more hours work. At teatime they would break to make food, get children ready for bed, and then work up to 10-11 pm the evenings.
- For the network, our challenge was keeping in touch. We still tried to develop an action plan of work, but essentially developments were put on hold during COVID.
- In 2021 the chair left the Council. We have been without a chair for over a year, a certain reluctance for anyone to take it on mainly because of time pressures. However, the steering group rallied and have maintained a presence for WV by working together and taking on different aspects of the work.
- We have had a couple of people interested in the chair and will look to fill this next year.
- We are having a growing number of women getting in touch with the network asking about being an ambassador and requesting to join the Facebook group.
- We are slowly returning to life and will look to come back stronger in the new year, with a plan for International Womens Day on 8th March.

- Our message to colleagues:

Women's Voice has at its heart a belief that much of the help, support and advice we all need from time to time is already out there among colleagues you just haven't met yet. We provide a mechanism to help women widen their networks and have ready access to more colleagues regardless of grade, where you work or what your job is. We look out for each other. We share what we know. We give a hand up. There are lots of us able to do that and the network will flourish as more of us join it.

We have a Facebook page - [Women's Voice \(Leeds City Council\)](#) on there, you'll see the newsfeed, announcements and a calendar of events. No-one owns or controls any of these – they are simply a facility for members to use in a way that works for them to share posts with other women.

In addition to providing a facility to bring more of you together, the network also provides a collective voice for women and will itself be taking the lead in addressing the issues women have raised with us.

We are led by a steering group, supported by network ambassadors and male allies from across the council. To find out more about these roles please reach out to the network.

Come and join us, we'd love you to be part of it. womensvoice@leeds.gov.uk