

# **Independent Investigation into Allegations of Mistreatment of Staff at Ryedale District Council.**

**Draft Report for the Overview and Scrutiny  
Committee.**

*by*

**John W Raine & Eileen Dunstan**

**(Emeritus Professor, and former Research Fellow, University of Birmingham)**

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## Preamble

This report is the outcome of a short commission by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee of Ryedale District Council to gather evidence in support of the Committee's investigation into allegations of bullying and other such mistreatment of staff that we understand to have been made over a period of at least two years. The Committee took the view that, because of the sensitivity attaching to the subject, it would be appropriate to seek independent assistance in the process. Accordingly, following a selection process, we were appointed to design and undertake evidence-gathering, which has involved both an anonymous (on-line) survey for staff to complete, and also the conduct of a series of confidential interviews – some by telephone and others face-to-face – with those who, through the survey, indicated a wish to contribute further to the investigation by providing additional input.

In this report the main findings of that evidence gathering are summarised ahead of our presenting conclusions for the Committee and our thoughts on the most appropriate ways forward.

We wish to begin by thanking all those who have helped us in the process; responding positively and trustfully by sharing their observations on, and experiences of both positive and negative behaviours in the workplace, via the on-line survey and/or through subsequent telephone and/or face-to-face conversations.

We hope that this report is accepted by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and, subsequently, by Council as providing an appropriately authoritative, trustworthy and impartial account of the nature and extent of these issues at Ryedale. As many have told us, various allegations and complaints have been made over a period of years, and rumours about bullying have persisted within and around the organisation for too long. This must have been both unsettling and damaging both to morale internally and to the Council's reputation externally - to say nothing of the unpleasantness and potential harm for any victims of bullying behaviour. Accordingly, we also hope that this report will preface a new chapter at Ryedale in which there is concerted commitment to ensuring a positive, collaborative and productive working environment throughout the organisation (i.e. both among the staffing structure and the councillorship).

## Introduction

Ryedale District Council has the distinction of being both one of the smallest district councils in the country in terms of population size (the ninth smallest, we understand, with a population of circa 53,500) while also being one of the largest in terms of geographical area (the 11<sup>th</sup> largest, and covering 581 square miles: source: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ryedale>). However, in other respects, it is much like every other local authority in the UK in that it has had to reduce its annual budget and become more efficient year on year in response to successive and on-going cuts in the grant it receives from central government. Also, like all other councils, it has had to develop and implement a more strategic approach, adopt new ways of working, and learn to do more with less. Its 'Transformation Programme (Towards 2020)' was prepared in 2015/16 and, since then, a new five year Council Plan for 2017-2022 has sought to refresh the vision, values and priorities for the organisation.

Again, like other councils, it has also followed and taken advice from others in the local government sector and, an LGA Peer Review report prepared in 2016, included the following comment:

*“Ryedale is a small but ambitious council with committed staff who are focused on delivering the best possible service to meet local needs, in partnership with others where possible in order to improve capacity. Staff are proud to work for the council and have an excellent understanding of the local context.”*

One of the conclusions of the peer reviewers, however, was that internal communication needed to be significantly improved for staff and members. In this respect, the report suggested *“There is a lack of professional communications expertise at RDC, and this has manifested itself in different ways, including a perceived lack of communications about the T2020 programme by staff; and members feeling excluded from information prior to decisions at full council.”* The report also argued that *“Sometimes the methods used may not be the most appropriate or effective, and monitoring and guidance from communications professionals should help this to improve”*.

These comments from the peer review particularly chimed with us as we embarked on our commission to assist the Council’s Overview and Scrutiny Committee in investigating allegations of mistreatment of staff at Ryedale – on the one hand, the ‘pride’ among staff in working for a Council to which there has been a tradition of loyalty and commitment, and, on the other, the apparent shortcomings in communication and the sometimes inappropriate methods deployed in this regard.

Both through the interviews we have conducted with staff, and through the responses we received via the on-line survey, during our evidence-gathering, we have certainly noted signs of a strong sense of loyalty towards, and pride in working for, Ryedale District Council (a council, we have learned, that has been employer to more than one member of several families, either simultaneously or at different periods). Indeed, several respondents talked of the Council as being *“like a family”*. At the same time, however, we have wondered if the negative comments made by the peer reviewers about communication, and the associated methods deployed in that context, were referring, in part at least, to the persistent allegations and lingering concerns about instances of mistreatment of staff and other such negative behaviours at Ryedale.

Such allegations led last year to the addition of a question specifically about ‘knowledge of bullying within the organisation’ in a staff survey. In answer to that question more than half of the 104 respondents indicated awareness, in increasing percentages a) within the preceding two years, b) within the last year, and c) within the last 6 months. The subsequent report<sup>1</sup> of the staff survey findings described this as *“a disappointing response which requires action”* and emphasised the importance of awareness of the Council’s harassment policy, urging those experiencing any bullying to report incidents. It also promised an Action Plan *“to ensure that the policies are reviewed to ensure they are fit for purpose”* and confirmed that the issue would be *“a standing item on the regular management and union meetings”*.

Several months on, however, the Overview and Scrutiny Committee decided a further investigation of the subject was called for, and agreed to commission the more in-depth evidence-gathering exercise that is the subject of this particular report.

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<sup>1</sup> The report of this survey, we understand, is an internal document, but we were kindly provided with a copy by the chief executive.

Because of the sensitivities involved, and the need for people to trust the process and be confident that speaking up would not lead to any subsequent difficulties for themselves or for others, our evidence-gathering has been done under a condition of strict confidence. And, as part of that condition, we have not published any names, nor other information about sources, in this report. That said we did seek to ensure that our process of evidence-gathering was as open and inclusive as possible for staff at Ryedale, notably by requesting that the survey be drawn to the attention of each and every one on the payroll at Ryedale.<sup>2</sup>

## Modes of Evidence Gathering and Background to the Response

As indicated, our evidence gathering took two main forms: first, an anonymous on-line survey, targeted at all staff currently on the payroll of the Council; and then, second, the opportunity for follow-up interviews, either by telephone or face-to-face. Indeed, the final question in the survey invited respondents to volunteer for such follow-up interviews should they wish. Accordingly, in our research design, we intended that all follow-up interviews would be with individuals who had already answered the questions in our survey – although, because of the anonymous format, we would not be able to identify or attribute sources to any of the written responses. A number of respondents, however, indicated to us, both in the survey and in the follow-up interviews, that it would probably be helpful for us to talk additionally to some former staff members – and indeed several current staff chose to approach one or more former colleagues with whom they were still in touch to suggest that they make contact with us. This enabled us to take further evidence (by telephone or face-to-face interview) from a small number of recent former employees as well.

We clearly needed to ensure against multiple responses being made to the survey by the same individuals and accordingly applied a system restriction of ‘one response per source’. However, we decided against using ‘personalised password controls’ because we feared this would probably deter potential respondents from completing the survey and lead to a lower overall response rate. In so doing, we appreciated that there remained the possibility of the survey being (inappropriately) accessed by others than the intended respondents (i.e. current staff) if the general ‘access password’ happened to be shared more widely with other parties. Indeed, we noted from the survey responses that two (currently serving) councillors and also two former staff had gained access (presumably at the invitation of one or more members of current staff).<sup>3</sup> But these instances aside, we found no other evidence to suggest any inappropriateness among respondents, and we are therefore generally confident about the overall validity of the data generated through the survey, and the pattern of findings to be derived from it. In any case, our research design involved a significant element of ‘triangulation’ in that, as indicated, it has been ‘two-pronged’ – with the survey on the one hand and the series of interviews on the other. In this respect it was reassuring to find that, for the most part, the interview findings accorded closely with the survey results – and mostly confirmed, reinforced and expanded upon them.

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<sup>2</sup> We also had discussions with the former Leader of the Council and, separately, with the current (interim) chief executive, as well as meeting with the Chair and Vice Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee – our commissioning body.

<sup>3</sup> The responses of all four of these individuals have been omitted from the data base used for the subsequent analyses.

## Respondents to the Survey

Out of a current staff complement of 174,<sup>4</sup> some 80 individuals visited the on-line survey site during the four-week period (during which it was open) and responded to most of the questions.<sup>5</sup> This gave an overall response rate of 46%. Here, however, the probability should be acknowledged of some bias in the pattern of responses towards staff who happen to have been particularly concerned about, and perhaps might be closest to the sources of, allegations and experiences of negative behaviours in the workplace (simply because of the specific focus of the survey on 'mistreatment of staff'). That said, we did consider the response rate achieved to provide a sound basis for analysis and one from which sufficiently reliable overall conclusions could confidently be drawn. Tables 1-4 summarise some key characteristics of the set of survey respondents and, in broad terms at least, would seem reasonably representative of the organisational profile as a whole.

**Table 1: Respondents' Gender**

	Number	%
Female	30	48.4
Male	20	32.3
Prefer not say	12	19.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>62<sup>5</sup></b>	<b>100</b>

**Table 2: Respondents' Age**

	Number	%
Under 25	1	1.6
25-35	5	8.1
36-45	9	14.5
46-55	20	32.3
56-65	9	14.5
More than 65	2	3.2
Prefer not to say	16	25.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>100</b>

**Table 3: Respondents' Length of Service at Ryedale**

	Number	%
Less than 1 year	3	4.8
1-5 years	9	14.5
6-10 years	11	17.7
11 or more years	35	56.6
Prefer not to say	4	6.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>100</b>

**Table 4: Respondents' Position within the Ryedale Organisation**

	Number	%
Main grade assistant	24	39.4
Supervisory/Team leader	13	21.3
First line management	5	8.2
Senior management	3	4.9
Prefer not to say	16	26.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>100</b>

<sup>4</sup> At the start of March 2018, and as notified to us by the chief executive.

<sup>5</sup> Excluding the possibility of any additional respondents not currently on the payroll of Ryedale District Council.

<sup>6</sup> Not all 80 respondents to the survey provided answers to every question, and the total number answering each question varied between different tables and analyses presented in this report.

A total of 23 follow-up interviews were conducted – 12 by telephone, and a further 11 through face-to-face interviews in the Ryedale area<sup>7</sup>. 13 of the interviewees were female and the other 10 male. There was representation of each of the categories for age, gender, and length of service among the staff who had follow-up interviews, 17 of whom were current members of staff at Ryedale, while the other 6 were former employees.

## Staff Morale at Ryedale District Council

As with all councils in the UK, the past eight years have been particularly tough in terms of budgetary cutbacks because of national public financial austerity. There has been rationalisation in the number of staff posts, reorganisation, only very limited new recruitment and promotion opportunities, and increasingly demanding and expanding workloads for those remaining in post. Such a personally challenging state of affairs for staff would surely, in part at least, be reflected in responses to an initial question within our survey on staff morale at Ryedale. Nevertheless, it was surprising to find that two-thirds of respondents felt staff morale to be quite, or very, low, and only 11 per cent quite, or very, high. (Table 5).

**Table 5: Perceptions of the State of Staff Morale at Ryedale**

	Number	%
Very high	1	1.4
Quite high	7	9.9
Not especially high or low	15	21.1
Quite low	33	46.5
Very low	14	19.7
Prefer not to say	1	1.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>71</b>	<b>100</b>

Moreover, the survey also highlighted a dominant perception of a downward trend in morale within the organisation over the past year or so (Table 6).

**Table 6: Perceptions of the Trend in Staff Morale in the past year or so**

	Number	%
Become higher	7	9.8
Stayed about the same	19	26.8
Become lower	43	60.6
Don't know	2	2.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>71</b>	<b>100</b>

Of the relatively small proportion who were more positive about morale (perceiving it be quite or very high and becoming higher), the reasons proffered in response to an open-ended question included the following statements:

<sup>7</sup> The interviews were conducted at venues chosen by each respondent – and, in all but one case, away from the Council offices.

*"The process of applying for our own jobs was very stressful and the restructure was unnerving. [But] things have settled down."*

*"Staff within our specific team help each other and work together to complete required work."*

*"New staff members have brought a high level of positive attributes to the team."*

*"Generally, the officers of the Council are settling into new ways of working following the major restructure implemented in April 2017."*

*"Because we are empowering staff and changes are taking place, and a number of difficult staff who don't have the value and behaviours we require have chosen to leave the organisation."*

Against such positive viewpoints, however, a plethora of reasons were proffered by those perceiving morale to be low and/or falling, as explanations for the state of affairs, as follows:

*"The PROUD behaviours,<sup>8</sup> restructure and T2020 [transformation programme] were badly implemented"*

*"Poor management, we are always being expected to do more with fewer people, staff being treated differently and there is a culture of bullying."*

*"Major change to structure, new roles with many new working practices and challenges – no 'real time' to learn the new job."*

*"Chronic lack of resources and acknowledgement of this by management. Together with no communication from management."*

*"Experienced staff leaving and increasing workload"*

*"As the year has progressed more parts of services that had not been considered or thought of in the new structure were included ... adding extra work to an already overloaded team."*

*"Inadequate resources but little admission to members or the public of our reduced capabilities, uncertainty over chief exec role, absence of political leadership."*

*"Increasing work demands. Inadequate training following restructure. Lack of experience and know-how."*

*"Support has not been received from specialists. We are [working] with no clear training or guidance on what the correct procedures are, we are expected to just know."*

*"When the team moved into their new roles in April 2017, most of us were excited and happy to be in the roles. We felt that we would really have something to contribute to the transformation of the Council. Since then [morale] has fallen ... mostly because the priorities aren't clear, there appears to be no improvement plan to identify the priorities."*

*"Processes that were to be put in place by Senior Management in order to streamline working practices still haven't been put into place, so the structure is just not working as it was proposed."*

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<sup>8</sup> PROUD behaviours refers to the set of five values, recommended for the Council and its 'Transformation Programme for 2020' by the management consultancy iESE, which are based on a similar set that had previously been developed and applied within parts of the NHS. In Ryedale's case, the formally adopted behaviours are: Passion; Respect; Openness; Unity; Decisive(ness).

Senior Management are all appearing very relaxed and not stressed, they are not reflective of the rest of the organisation."

"Trying to learn the new job, while still doing most of the old job and also training other colleagues to do the parts... that I am not supposed to be doing anymore. Frustration with lack of progress with some areas of work and lack of direction/prioritisation from management and Leadership team."

"There was a genuine buzz and enthusiasm with all team members as they thought we were finally in a position to make a difference to the working of the Council through the design and application of technical solutions to improve processes and ease the pressure on colleagues.

This regrettably has not proved to be the case. There is a wealth of skill and ability within the team which is not being utilised, even though team members have put ideas and suggestions forward for improvement."

"The restructure was badly planned, rushed, and outsourced to people who had a very limited understanding of how each department operated which resulted in the production of a model that a lot of staff thought was not feasible. Because of this, a lot of experienced staff who had built up a lot of undocumented knowledge left, taking with them this knowledge and experience and at the same time breaking a lot of working relationships that had built up over a number of years. The workload has increased due to the reduced number of staff and now staff have lost motivation because they used to pride themselves on being able to do a good job within realistic timeframes. When this is not achievable a lot of passion and drive to succeed is lost, leaving staff de-motivated and resentful."

Despite these more negative perceptions, the survey nevertheless also highlighted that a majority of staff were (fairly or very) happy at the Council and regarded it to be a (fairly or very) sociable place to work (Tables 7 and 8). The mostly positive findings in this respect also concurred with the messages provided by a number of the interviewees with whom we followed-up, and many of whom referred to the 'family culture' at Ryedale (and the fact that, over the years, several staff had followed their parents or other relatives into employment there).

**Table 7: Personal happiness at work at Ryedale District Council**

	Number	%
Very happy at work	7	10.4
Mostly fairly happy	15	22.4
Neither happy nor unhappy	13	19.4
Somewhat unhappy	21	31.3
Very unhappy	9	13.4
Prefer not to say	2	3.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>67</b>	<b>100</b>

**Table 8: Perceptions of the Organisational Culture in terms of Sociability**

	Number	%
A very sociable workplace	5	7.5
A fairly sociable workplace	39	58.2
Neither sociable nor unsociable	13	19.4
A somewhat unsociable workplace	5	7.5
A very unsociable workplace	4	6.0
Prefer not to say	1	1.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>67</b>	<b>100</b>



## Allegations of Mistreatment of Staff

However, the survey also provided much confirming evidence as to the extent of awareness of issues of negative behaviour (including allegations about the incidence of bullying and other mistreatment of some staff) within the staffing organisation at Ryedale. Indeed, more than a third of respondents in the survey indicated being aware of one or more incidents of mistreatment and a further 2 in 5 being aware that allegations of that nature had been made (Tables 9 and 10). Moreover, while more than a third of respondents indicated learning about the incidents/allegations more than a year ago, almost as many suggested they had encountered/learned about them in the last six months – suggesting that the problems might not be just historical, but still persisting to the present day.

**Table 9: Awareness of Incidents or Allegations of Mistreatment of Staff**

	Number	%
Aware of incident(s) having occurred	28	38.4
Aware that allegations have been made	31	42.5
Unaware of incidents or allegations	12	16.4
Prefer not to say	2	2.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>73</b>	<b>100</b>

**Table 10: Period within which Respondents Encountered/Learned of Incidents/Allegations**

	Number	%
Within the last six months or so	15	28.9
Sometime earlier last year	9	17.3
More than a year ago	18	34.6
Not sure how long ago	10	19.2
Prefer not to say	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>100</b>

Two further questions asked a) about the frequency of witnessing of instances, and b) as to whether or not instances were felt still to be occurring (i.e. in early 2018). The pattern of responses to these questions are respectively summarised in Tables 11 and 12.

**Table 11: Frequency of Witnessing Bullying Behaviour**

	Number	%
Never	32	50.0
Now and Then	28	43.8
Monthly	2	3.0
Weekly	1	1.6
Daily	1	1.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>64</b>	<b>100</b>

In Table 11 it can be seen that, while only four respondents indicated witnessing bullying on a fairly regular basis at the Council (e.g. on a monthly, weekly or daily basis), more than 2 in 5 respondents indicated having seen it happening 'now and then'. Moreover, in Table 12 it can be seen that 3 out of 5 respondents (62.2%) considered that it had been happening not only in the past but in present times as well (46.6% suggesting incidence 'now and then', and 15.6% more frequently, e.g. most weeks).

**Table 12: Perceptions of the Current Incidence of Bullying Behaviour (in 2018)**

	Number	%
To the best of my knowledge it is not happening now	16	25.0
I think it is still happening 'now and then'	26	46.6
I think it is still happening quite frequently (e.g. most weeks)	4	6.2
I think it is institutionalised and prevalent on a near daily basis	6	9.4
I don't know	11	17.2
Prefer not to say	1	1.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>64</b>	<b>100</b>

## Perceptions of the Organisational Response

The survey also asked those who had indicated awareness of such incidents and/or allegations about their perceptions of the response of the Council to such matters (Table 13), and the key finding here was that a third felt the responses to be 'wholly inadequate', and a further 19.6% 'rather limited'.

**Table 13: Perceptions of the Response of the Organisation to Allegations/Incidents**

	Number	%
The response stronger than expected	0	0
The response was appropriate enough	4	7.8
No strong feelings either way	13	25.6
The response was rather limited	10	19.6
The response was wholly inadequate	17	33.3
Prefer not to say	7	13.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>100</b>

This issue (the perceived response of the Council) also generated a considerable number of comments, including the following:

*"I am aware of incidents and allegations from present day spreading back over a number of years. These have been investigated by the employer to varying degrees."*

*"In response to actions taken by the organisation, the staff involved generally ended up leaving the organisation either through them deciding that they no longer wanted to work for Ryedale, through voluntary redundancy schemes or through compromise agreements."*

*"As far as I'm aware, no action was taken."*

*"The incident was brushed under the carpet. Comments and concerns were ignored. Which is why we are still in this position now."*

*"I am aware of two situations with two different members of staff. One of the officers left RDC last year and I think this issue was a large element in why that person left. The last time I saw this person they were extremely distressed. Then they were gone."*

*"In one case an investigation happened (this was over a year ago) and bullying was identified by the investigation. However, ..no further action was taken. The person that was brave enough to bring the case ...then left on voluntary redundancy. I have also heard of colleagues experiencing bullying behaviour that don't want to complain having seen what happened to that member of staff. People that have been bullied have taken the opportunity to leave the organisation in the VR process. Why would you choose to stay and go through the extreme stress of an investigation when the previous case was dismissed, even though bullying behaviour was identified?"*

*"No disciplinary action for the perpetrator/instigator of the incidents ... the victims mostly do not work for the organisation any longer - In the past week I have heard of 2 more incidents."*

*"There appear to be a number of staff who go off suddenly and then, I quote, 'are no longer with the organisation' after a period of time. This is the information given by management. This is quite unsettling for staff. Rumours of compromise agreements issued to those members of staff."*

*"I am aware of more than one incident but refer in particular to an allegation raised under the grievance procedure. The grievance was investigated but took (in my opinion) an excessive length of time which would have been hard on both parties. I believe the allegation was 'upheld in part'. Several staff have left the organisation over the past few years as they were not comfortable to continue being employed by the organisation [and] did not feel able to raise concerns formally."*

In much the same vein, the survey also asked those staff who had reported witnessing or experiencing an incident of bullying about their contentedness with the actions taken by the Council. Here, only one reported satisfaction with the responding actions of which they were aware (Table 14).

**Table 14: Contentedness with the Actions Taken by the Council in Response to Bullying Incidents**

	Number	%
Very Content	1	3.7
Fairly Content	0	0
No Strong Feelings	6	22.3
Less than Happy	12	44.4
Very Unhappy	4	14.8
Can't Say (as proceedings still on-going)	4	14.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>100</b>

Finally in this context, the survey revealed a fairly wide spread of opinions about the Council's general stance in response to issues of bullying and other forms of mistreatment of staff. In this respect, as Table 15 shows, while 10.9% of respondents felt that the Council usually responded quickly and firmly, more than twice this proportion considered it likely that action would generally only be taken if and when formal complaints were made. Moreover, a slightly higher proportion again (26.6%) perceived the Council as tending to turn a 'blind eye' to such issues and so, in their view, tacitly at least, might seem to be condoning such mistreatment.

**Table 15: Perceptions of the Council's Stance in Response to Issues of Mistreatment of Staff.**

	Number	%
The Council usually responds quickly and firmly to any known incidents	7	10.9
It tends to take action only if a formal complaint is made	15	23.4
It tends to turn a blind eye and so tacitly condones such behaviour	17	26.6
Don't Know	22	34.4
Prefer not to say	3	4.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>64</b>	<b>100</b>

## Understanding the Nature of the Mistreatment

Despite the value of all the above findings in enhancing understanding of the views of staff at Ryedale in relation to allegations of bullying behaviour, it must be acknowledged that the term 'bullying' is a subjective one – what one person might regard as bullying behaviour, another might perhaps regard as 'simply being assertive'. For this reason, a key part of our design for the evidence-gathering at Ryedale involved planning to investigate not only the frequency of incidents labelled as 'bullying' but also of a series of more specifically defined behaviours – which might or might not be perceived in such terms. To this end, we reviewed various contributions to the peer-reviewed research literature on so-called 'work-place bullying' and concluded that it would be helpful to draw on an existing (rigorously tested, carefully validated and widely applied) tool for investigating what have been termed 'negative acts' - the 'NAQ-R' tool (Negative Acts Questionnaire – Revised); this having been used in a range of organisational contexts around the world, and including in a fairly recent major study of bullying in the UK NHS.<sup>9</sup>

The NAQ-R tool is based on 22 specifically different 'negative acts' that might each perhaps be regarded as a form of bullying, and for each of which respondents are asked to specify the frequency of incidence on a five-point scale – 'never', 'now & then', 'monthly', 'weekly' or 'daily'. The results from using a slightly adapted version of this tool within our survey at Ryedale are shown below in Table 16.<sup>10</sup>

This, information, we suggest, is the most insightful that we gathered on the nature of behavioural issues of concern at Ryedale. This is because here respondents were asked to quantify the frequency of their direct personal experience of the 22 specific actions and/or behaviours that were likely to be considered unwelcome to them. Between 60 and 64 respondents completed the various questions in this section of the survey and, happily, with regard to 17 of the 22 negative actions, a clear majority reported 'never' personally having experienced them at work.

<sup>9</sup> Carter M, Thompson N, Crampton P, Morrow G, Burford B, Gray C, and J Illing (2013) Workplace Bullying in the UK NHS: a questionnaire and interview study on prevalence, impact and barriers to reporting, *BMJ Open*, 3, e002628.

<sup>10</sup> Although our investigation was focused only on staff at Ryedale District Council, we purposefully referred to 'staff and councillors' in most of the questions in our version of the NAQ-R tool because we wanted to explore the possible mistreatment of staff by councillors as well as by colleague staff.

So, for example, 60 out of 64 (94%) of respondents reported never having been made to feel a victim of a practical joke at work, although the 4 others indicated that they had experienced this 'now and then'. Similarly, 57 out of 64 (89%) said they had never experienced intimidating behaviour (such as finger pointing) by another member of staff or councillor at work, although 4 others had done so 'now and then', and 3 more frequently (2 at roughly 'monthly' intervals, and 1 on a near 'weekly' basis).

Of the 22 cited negative acts, the most commonly experienced, and by a significant margin, was 'exposure to an unmanageable workload'. Just 12 out of 64 respondents indicated they had 'never' encountered this, while 9 experienced it on a near 'daily' basis, 12 on a 'weekly' basis, 13 on a 'monthly' basis, and 18 'now and then'. Perhaps, in light of the rationalisation in staffing levels that has been necessary at Ryedale in recent years, these figures are not too surprising, though, particularly from a health and well-being perspective, the figures should surely be of some concern to the organisation.

Moreover, it is to be noted in Table 16 that one of the next most frequently reported incidence of a negative act concerned the related issue of 'being set unreasonable targets or deadlines'. In this respect, 38 respondents (61%) reported experiencing such unreasonableness 'now and then', while 6 others indicated feeling victimised in this regard respectively on about a monthly (n=1), weekly (n=2) and daily (n=33) basis.

**Table 16 Frequency of Experiencing Various 'Negative Acts' by Other Staff or Councillors**

How often....	No of Responses	Never	Now & Then	Monthly	Weekly	Daily
Have you felt your opinions and views were being ignored?	64	20	35	4	1	4
Have you felt exposed to an unmanageable workload?	64	12	18	13	12	9
Have you felt another member of staff or councillor was withholding information affecting your ability to perform?	64	40	17	4	1	2
Have you been deliberately given work below your grade?	64	43	15	1	3	2
Have you been set unreasonable targets or deadlines?	62	18	38	1	2	3
Have you been humiliated or ridiculed by another member of staff or councillor in relation to your work?	62	42	17	1	1	1
Have you have had key areas of responsibility taken away and given more trivial/less pleasant tasks instead?	63	49	10	3	1	0
Have you been on the receiving end of wilfully hostile reactions from a member of staff or councillor?	64	31	24	6	1	2
Have you been shouted at or experienced spontaneous anger by another member of staff or councillor?	64	47	14	2	1	0
Have you felt that gossip or rumours were being deliberately spread about you?	64	45	16	2	0	1
Have you felt ignored, excluded or 'sent to Coventry' by other members of staff or a councillor?	64	47	13	2	0	2
Have you unnecessarily, but deliberately, been reminded of an error that you once made?	64	49	12	3	0	0
Have you felt under persistent pressure not to claim something to which you know you are entitled?	64	48	14	2	0	0
Have you had persistent and unreasonable criticism for your work and effort by another member of staff or councillor?	64	50	11	2	0	1
Has there been excessive monitoring and scrutiny of your work?	63	48	11	2	0	2

Have you been on the receiving end of offensive remarks by another member of staff or councillor?	64	53	10	0	0	1
Have you had a false allegation made against you by another member of staff or councillor?	60	45	15	0	0	0
Have you experienced intimidating behaviour (such as finger pointing) by another member of staff or councillor?	64	57	4	2	1	0
Have you been the subject of excessive teasing or sarcasm by another member of staff or councillor?	64	54	9	0	1	0
Have you received negative hints or signals from another member of staff or councillor that you should quit your job?	64	55	8	0	0	1
Have you been made to feel victim of practical jokes?	64	60	4	0	0	0
Have you been on the end of threats or physical violence?	64	0	0	0	0	0

Similar numbers reported feeling that their opinions and views were being ignored by others at work – some 35 on a ‘now and then’ basis, 4 about once each month, 1 on a weekly basis and 4 daily. While for many people this negative act might seem well short of their definition of bullying, it will perhaps be understood at least as potentially humiliating behaviour, particularly if it is frequently practised, and most certainly at odds with the notion of showing ‘respect’ for others (that being one of the Council’s five adopted ‘PROUD’ behaviours).

We think that the scores in Table 16 for feeling to have been ‘on the receiving end of wilfully hostile reactions from a member of staff or councillor’ should also be viewed as quite concerning. Here again, slightly more than half the respondents (51.6%) reported having experienced such hostile reactions from 1 or more colleagues on occasions at Ryedale – 2 on a near daily basis, 1 on a near weekly basis, 6 on about a monthly basis, and 24 ‘now and then’.

Three other of the 22 ‘negative acts’ that were reported as being experienced quite widely among Council staff at Ryedale were a) ‘[feeling that] another member of staff or councillor was withholding information affecting [their] ability to perform’, b) ‘[being] deliberately given work below [their] grade’, and c) ‘[being] humiliated or ridiculed by another member of staff or councillor in relation to [their] work’ – in each instance with at least 20 respondents reporting such experiences affecting them at least ‘now and then’.

Furthermore, the frequency of experience of at least 6 other ‘negative acts’ were only slightly lower for: feeling that ‘gossip or rumours were being deliberately spread about [them]’; being ‘shouted at or experiencing spontaneous anger by another member of staff or councillor’; feeling ‘ignored, excluded or “sent to Coventry” by other members of staff or councillor’; feeling ‘under persistent pressure not to claim something to which [they] know [they] are entitled (e.g. sick leave, holiday entitlement or travel expenses)’; ‘unnecessarily, but deliberately, been reminded of an error that [they had] once made’; and feeling ‘there had been excessive monitoring and scrutiny of [their] work’.

The series of follow-up interviews that we conducted (most with current and a few with former members of staff) also served to highlight and amplify the often pernicious nature and harmful impacts of many such negative acts. Indeed, several interviewees - all from one department of the Council, it should be said - recounted in considerable detail some particularly unpleasant and hurtful incidents that they had had to endure over the course of past years and months at Ryedale – often insidious, mostly calculated, frequently humiliating, emotionally damaging and, from their

perspective at least, quite disproportionate and unjustified. We also gained the clear sense that much of this intimidating behaviour was subtle and coercive, reducing a number to tears on multiple occasions and in 2 cases, we were told, invoking suicidal feelings of despair. One interviewee – a former employee – explained the situation as being *“a case of either been [sic] [the perpetrator’s] best friend or worst enemy, and that once [they] had taken against you, your card was marked”*.

Some other examples of the kinds of negative behaviours which we heard about (by both current and former staff), included:

- *“Summoning individual staff in front of their colleagues to ‘come to my office’.”*
- *“Challenging individual staff who queried a decision or instruction in terms of ‘how dare you question my judgement?’.”*
- *“Pressurising [certain individuals] to work longer hours/extra days than their contracts required.”*
- *“Placing individuals in positions of responsibility beyond their grade without support.”*
- *“Discussing ‘problem’ members of staff openly within earshot of colleagues”.*
- *“Using threatening language such as ‘If you don’t like the way I work, you know where the door is’.”*
- *“Senior managers failing to attend the ‘farewell’ sessions to say ‘thank you’ to long-serving members of staff who were leaving (following submission of formal complaints about mistreatment and acceptance of VR).”*
- *“Presenting a managerial style that likes to divide and conquer.”*
- *“Shooting down [or ignoring] any suggestions for improving work processes and office procedures.”*
- *“Being over-bossy, short-tempered, and not minding [their] Ps and Qs with the public as well as with us.”*
- *“We try to avoid having to contact our managers because they give us so much grief.”*
- *“They could benefit from some training on how to get the best out of their staff.”*
- *“The HR function is weak at Ryedale. It struggles to be heard. Things are pushed through because of the lack of supporting resources.”*
- *“Some managers probably don’t appreciate the impact of their manner and behaviour – which is often rude and hurtful.”*
- *“The behaviour is more insidious than name-calling and bullying. People are picked on; things are moved around in the office just to make a statement and show that they can. They look for excuses to criticise those they wish to hurt, and make big issues out of nearly nothing. They are clearly conspiring to undermine my position.”*
- *“They have moved off me now and are going for others instead.”*
- *“The organisation is not good at valuing staff.”*
- *“The atmosphere in the department was toxic.”*
- *“People go off work without any known reason and then don’t come back. Staff joke about ‘The Disappeared’.”*
- *“I felt that I was being used as cheap labour.”*
- *“My manager was very unpredictable. Some days lovely; others, really nasty and making sly comments, designed to make you feel on edge. If they wanted something they put pressure*

*on people. But no allowances were ever made, or adjustments to expectations when we were attempting tasks we didn't know about, or for which we hadn't been trained."*

- *"There have been tantrums and tirades over the most petty of matters, simply to make a point as to who is boss."*
- *"The work of some staff has been attacked in premeditated ways, with lots of false assertions made, and going behind others' backs to instruct their staff to do things differently."*
- *"It's mainly emotional abuse, designed to wear us down and drive us out."*
- *"There was so much negative behaviour – it was always what you did wrong, not what you did right."*

Two interviewees also told us how some of their victimised and emotionally drained colleagues were quickly able to recover their self-esteem and flourish again once they had been transferred to other departments and teams. However, others, we learned, struggled to rebuild their self-confidence at Ryedale, and felt they had to leave to put the experience behind them. At various points during three of our conversations with former staff, respondents struggled to contain their emotions as they recalled and related some of the unpleasant experiences that they had endured, in each case several years earlier.

A number of interviewees also shared their perceptions about shortcomings in the wider organisational management arena. Particularly, they spoke about how the reorganisation and associated processes for re-staffing the new structure had proved contentious and disappointing for a number of people and how it was widely regarded as having been unduly contrived and less than fair. Among the many comments we heard in this respect were the following:

- *"The restructure went down like a lead balloon and the structure was changed further after people had taken up their posts."*
- *"The reorganisation wasn't particularly well handled. It was quite unpleasant because we all had to apply for each other's jobs."*
- *"Many long-servers were particularly disadvantaged by the process, having not done interviews for a long time."*
- *"Workloads are [now] unequally distributed – some staff are overloaded while others don't have enough to do."*
- *"RDC is not under-resourced in staffing terms, but it's not all in the right places so there are problems."*
- *"The functions within Community Services are very close but it means there a lot of messy lines between staff."*
- *"The PROUD values are a bit of a farce – some haven't tried to work by them, yet nothing happens to them."*
- *"There's no accountability for outcomes – the Council just spends money. There's no vision or strategy either."*
- *"It's a case of absentee leadership – no one has got hold of the tiller. Bad behaviour is tolerated at Ryedale, and there is a lot of micro-management. Staff aren't being led to do better public service and there are too many moaners."*



## Summary and Conclusions

The evidence gathered in the course of this investigation, both via the anonymous on-line survey and the follow-up interviews, has generally confirmed a significantly high level of awareness among staff, at least in certain parts of the organisation, of various negative behaviours, a number of which are regarded by staff to amount to forms of bullying. Our investigations have also confirmed that instances of many of these negative behaviours have been occurring over several years and cannot simply be explained away as symptomatic of transitional difficulties associated with the recent staffing reorganisation and downsizing of the Council's team of personnel. Moreover, so serious were some of the cases of victimisation, we understand, that a number of staff have chosen to leave because the organisation was, in their view, failing to address the problem sufficiently robustly.

Certainly, the evidence we have gathered suggests that both the severity and frequency of such behavioural issues have diminished somewhat in the past 12 months. However, a number of respondents did indicate that negative behaviours continue to afflict particular individuals within their departments from time to time, and that, since some of the people who have in the past been the subject of complaints about bullying behaviour are still in post, there remains a widespread perception of the potential for further instances to occur.

For sure, the climate of financial austerity, and an unsettling context of organisational reconfiguration, down-sizing, and changing job roles, must have placed the whole organisation under much strain in recent times and, as the survey data confirmed, has been generally damaging to morale. Moreover, the review and restructuring processes that have been rolled out in order to achieve a leaner and reconfigured staffing organisation have undoubtedly proved challenging for most staff, and probably quite divisive as well, because of the inevitability of 'winners and losers' in the transition to the new structure.

None of that, however, in our view, could ever excuse or justify the nature and intensity of some of the instances of mistreatment of staff that we have heard about in the course of our investigation, and much of which, as indicated, preceded the reorganisation in any case. That such behaviours should have been able to persist for so long in a public service organisation with all the relevant policies and procedures in place (e.g. a Harassment Policy and procedures for handling complaints, grievances and disciplinary matters) reflects badly on Ryedale District Council and should be viewed by its leadership as deeply concerning. Seemingly, senior management of the organisation has either been insufficiently 'in touch' with the day-to-day experiences of some of their staff, or too weak and tardy in its response, if not tacitly condoning unacceptable behaviours.

As stated at the outset of this report, our commission has been to assist the Overview and Scrutiny Committee of the Council with independent evidence-gathering as part of its consideration of allegations of mistreatment of staff at Ryedale. It is therefore for that Committee and, in turn we would hope, for the Council as a whole, rather than for us, to make specific recommendations as to the way forward in light of the information that we have provided in this report.

That said, we feel our report would be incomplete if we didn't at least proffer our thoughts as to the kinds of responses and actions that we consider should be prioritised in the coming months to ensure that the organisation is able to move on from these challenging past few months and years

and, above all, that no member of Ryedale's staff should ever feel bullied nor have to endure any other form of unwanted negative behaviour or mistreatment at work.

To that end, we do think that at least one basis for ensuring an end to negative behaviours and a more positive future is potentially already in place at Ryedale – this being the set of 'PROUD' values to which the organisation has formally pledged itself, but which, from many of our interview conversations, clearly have yet to be properly understood, meaningfully embedded and 'owned' and consistently practised throughout the organisation. 'Respect' (for other people) and 'Openness' (in the processes of supervision and management), in particular, strike us as being two of the values that seem especially relevant to the issues that have been the subject of this report, and which need to shape the attitudes and behaviours of all at Ryedale – and, by that we mean staff and councillors alike.

In this respect, we are sure that it would be helpful in the first instance for the organisation to commit more time to developing deep understanding of, and allegiance throughout the Council and its workforce to, each one of those five values, and to heighten appreciation of what each should imply in practice in everyone's particular area of Council activity. We would suggest that this is something that is best done through a mandatory series of five 'small-group' workshop events for staff – maybe each of a full day's duration, and ideally with groups of no more than twelve to fifteen participants each time, focusing on one of the values in each session in turn (i.e. passion, respect, openness, unity and decisiveness). A particularly important further aim for such events would be to develop the personal skills required to ensure that each value is meaningfully and consistently practised each and every day and in all situations.

In addition, and in light of this investigation, we think it would be timely for all Ryedale's staff in supervisory and management positions to participate in a broader-scoped, but carefully tailored, 'effective manager programme', to include specific training in recognising and handling cases of bullying and other mistreatment, but also, and more positively, focused on developing inspiring leadership practices and the elimination of negative (bullying) behaviours.

We also believe that elected members, too, would benefit from at least one development session on the PROUD values, particularly focusing on the implications for councillorship (this, we think, would be best arranged separately from the sessions for staff because of the differences between service delivery and governance responsibilities). We make this suggestion because, during our evidence gathering, we heard many comments from staff (a few of which are reproduced below) about their perceptions of misbehaviour by some of Ryedale's councillors in Council meetings, sometimes directed at each other and sometimes towards themselves as staff.

*The bullying I have witnessed has been in the council chamber.*

*Some of the councillors relentlessly harass the officers who cannot retaliate.*

*Senior officers will continue to leave the organisation because of the lack of respect shown by members towards officers and the behaviour of members at meetings of Council*

*I think the members need to consider their own behaviour and their bullying and sexist threats & comments.*

*Councillors show no respect for staff at meetings and openly challenge staff in an aggressive and confrontational way. We should all be working together but unfortunately it doesn't happen.*

For sure, tensions and differences of viewpoint between elected members are to be expected within political settings like the Council Chamber and the committee rooms. Moreover, robust 'challenge' is certainly a vital part of the effective conduct of Council business. That said, we are also sure that adherence to high standards of courtesy and respect between councillors, and particularly in relation to staff, will always best serve the interests of the organisation and its reputation externally.

In light of the evidence from our research, we also think Ryedale would benefit from a stronger commitment of staffing resources at Ryedale House to the HR function – currently, we understand, largely in the hands of just one individual. Strengthening resources in this function would seem a particular priority given our arguments above for more emphasis on training and development in relation to values, behaviours and supervisory skills. Similarly, we consider further investment of time and commitment to improve internal communications (from the top of the staffing organisation), would help to promote a more positive, better informed and stronger shared culture throughout the organisation (this, indeed, again being something that several of our interviewees also suggested).

Finally, while this particular evidence-gathering exercise has focused on behaviours both in the present and recent past, we also think it will be important going forward to monitor progress on the issues covered in our report. Accordingly we would see merit in the Overview and Scrutiny Committee taking a lead in devising and commissioning further surveys within the organisation on a regular basis (perhaps at least annually, and probably conducted in-house), to ensure that both staff and elected members have good understanding about the trajectory of improvement in behaviours and of any needs for further action in this regard.

With these thoughts from us on the ways forward, we would simply end by wishing the whole organisation well in the coming Council year and beyond as it reflects on, and responds to, the issues raised in this report.

**John W. Raine and Eileen Dunstan**

**May 2018.**

