

**Scottish Public Services  
Ombudsman**

**Focus Group Summary report 2007**

**Submitted to**



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## 2 Background and Objectives

Between 4<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> October 2007, ORC International conducted 4 x 2 hour focus group sessions with the Scottish Public Service Ombudsman (SPSO). As the organisation has relatively small numbers of staff it was decided that the best way to gather information regarding SPSO's organisational issues was to conduct qualitative research with all members of staff via focus group sessions being held within the SPSO offices in Edinburgh. Two focus groups were conducted with complaints investigators, one group with the outreach team and one mixed group comprising of support staff and managers.

The key objectives of the focus groups were to achieve a greater understanding of some of the key organisational issues, and to give staff the opportunity to suggest improvement actions. Key areas for discussion were generated around:

- What makes you proud to work for SPSO
- What motivates / de-motivates you at work
- Discussions surrounding the SPSO objectives and strategic direction
- Organisational strengths
- Areas for improvement

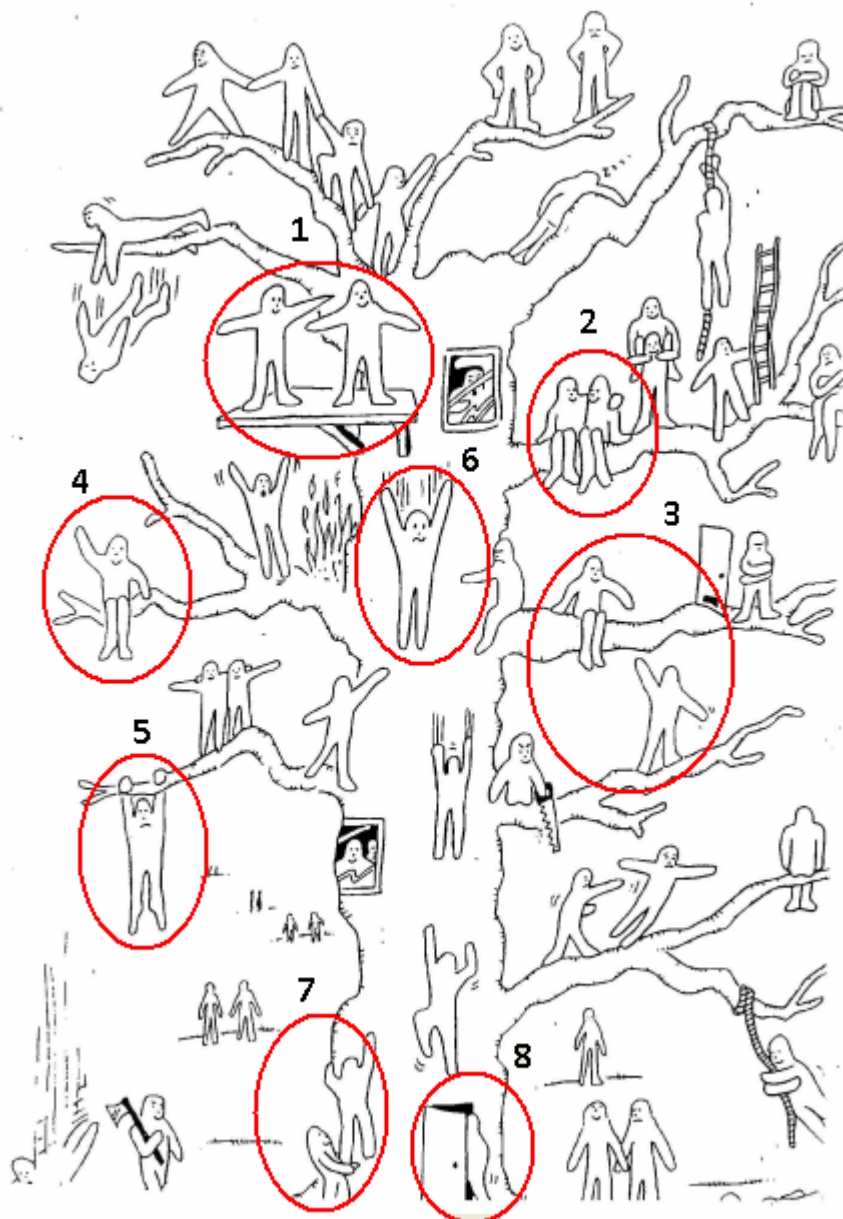
This report details the key findings from these focus groups and presents ideas for actions that are viewed as having potential to address some of the key issues.

- The sessions started with a brief introduction, including why we were conducting this type of research and the confidentiality issues around the sessions. Staff were then asked to complete a short questionnaire which asked respondents how strongly they agreed or disagreed with statements relating to their organisation. Participants then took part in a projective exercise designed to assess which character (see overleaf) most closely resembled them within the SPSO and then continued with an informal discussion of the main characters identified. A discussion guide was used to add structure to the session. This is included in the appendix for reference.

### 3 The Results

#### 3.1 Projective Exercise – Tree Diagram

A projective technique was initially used in all of the focus groups, whereby the following tree diagram was presented to each member of the focus group and they were asked to select a character from the tree diagram which best illustrated **how they felt about working for the Scottish Public Service Ombudsman**. In the majority of cases more than one character was chosen by participants as they felt that they could relate to different characters at different times.



Characters chosen by staff from all groups are circled and numbered in the diagram above. These choices are illustrated as follows:

1. Good team work and support. The fact that the characters were standing on a sturdy platform was an important fact and a common theme reflected throughout all of the focus groups.
2. Similarly staff envisaged these characters representing the overall team work within SPSO, but only within their immediate teams. Having good friends and feeling comfortable with line management, were also comments used to explain these choices.
3. These characters were viewed by staff in different ways, on one hand staff believed that this symbolised a lack of appreciation and recognition from managers, whereas it is was also a symbol for the support throughout the organisation someone being there to lend a hand.
4. On the other hand, some staff really related to character 4. These members of staff liked to remain cheerful but felt as though they were on their own with no one willing to lend a hand for support.
5. Staff explained how they enjoy working in a reactive environment but feel like they are clinging on at times as the workload is never ending.
6. Employees envisaged character 6 as someone who was falling. They enjoy making decisions but realise that these do not always turn out successfully.
7. In general staff commented that when they first started at SPSO they received a great deal of initial support and believed that this character summed this situation up the best.
8. It was a general perception that there are many new starters and that recently a lot of new people had come through the door.

## 3.2 What makes you proud to work for SPSO

### Key Issues

#### ***The aspect of the job overall – “this is a public service organisation.”***

- Generally staff were proud to work for SPSO because it was a public service organisation.
- There was a real sense that staff enjoyed “making a difference” to peoples lives with the work they undertake.
- It would appear that staff take pleasure in making a contribution to the public as they try to improve public services overall.

#### ***“SPSO is a nice place to come and work.”***

- Many positive comments were centred around the eclectic mix of interesting people who worked for the organisation.
- Most people agreed that they were proud of the people they worked with and that no one came to work with the wrong attitude.
- There was a general perception that the organisation was becoming increasingly supportive.
- Staff commented that SPSO was a “young” and “fresh” organisation, which maintained a professional set up. Working for a small organisation such as SPSO made them feel more valued as a workforce.

#### ***“The work is interesting, stimulating and challenging.”***

- The challenging nature of the job means that employees gain a wealth of experience from a relatively short space of time whilst working for SPSO.
- Most staff agreed that they received an element of respect from the public for doing their job and that they felt powerful in their roles, having the ability to make changes for the better.

### The questionnaire

The survey results supported the comments received with 83% of staff stating that they were proud to work for the SPSO. Three quarters of staff believed that their work gave them a feeling of personal accomplishment, with 71% stating that they feel valued as employees working for SPSO. Overall, staff felt proud because they believed they were

making a difference, enjoyed the challenges and interesting nature of their work and the enjoyed the eclectic mix of the people they work alongside.

### 3.3 What motivates you at work

#### Key Issues

##### “Feeling a sense of achievement”

- Similar reasons to why staff felt proud emerged when employees were asked what motivated them at work. Employees commented that they feel they are able to do the best work they can, make a difference and feel a sense of personal achievement. Additionally, organisational and personal pride were interlinked with what motivated employees, as staff felt that they did not want to let the public or fellow employees down.

##### “Happy at work and enjoying the job”

- The general perception was that the variety of work/cases employees undertook was a big motivation in their jobs. The fact that everyday a new challenge could arise and staff worked on a variety of issues was one of the main reasons why staff enjoyed their jobs.
- Staff also spoke positively about the problem solving element of their roles and the ownership they felt towards the work they do. A further motivation was that some staff were beginning to see the light at the end of the tunnel and that workloads were finally starting to be reduced, due to measures taken in the past 12 months.

##### “Leadership is an inspiration”

- It would appear that the overall leadership of the SPSO motivates its staff. Employees commented on how the leadership from the very top of the organisation inspired and motivated them at work.
- Employees also stated that their motivation increases when they receive positive or constructive feedback from their managers on the work they had produced, However, it was noted that not all managers offer feedback on employees performances frequently enough.

#### The questionnaire

- Following on from leadership the survey points out that 66% of staff answered positively when asked if they believe their manager motivates and inspires them

to be more effective in their jobs, with only 15% answering negatively. The results also confirm that the majority of staff are happy at work, and comfortable with their current workloads. Just under three quarters (73%) of staff agreed they were comfortable with the amount of work they were expected to do.

### 3.4 What de-motivates you at work

#### Key Issues

##### **“Never getting to the bottom of the workload”**

- It would appear from staff comments that their workload issues is improving, however employees still have concerns with the amount of work they are expected to complete. The general perception throughout the groups indicated that staff were less motivated to complete work when they were overloaded, and felt it was difficult to show extra interest or initiative because their workloads were too high.
- Staff pointed out that the more work they took on as extra the more this was expected of them, with no additional benefits or recognition as rewards for their hard work. Employees also stated that they felt embarrassed about the backlog of work and the large timescales when dealing with customers.
- Findings from the 2007 customer satisfaction report, supports employees views. Close to two-thirds of complainants who took part in the survey were satisfied with the clarity of information provided by staff (63%), the professionalism of staff (62%) and the helpfulness / approachability of staff (61%). However, complainants were less positive concerning the speed with which the member of staff provided a reply (59%) and the level of interest / empathy shown by the staff member in their enquiry (51%).
- From the sample of those complainants who were interviewed the majority felt they were dealt with in a professional, attentive and patient manner when initially outlining their case. But others felt that more questions should have been asked and more interest should have been shown.
- Employees agreed that high workloads have lead them to be treated unprofessionally at work. Many believe there is a misunderstanding of workloads with some teams feeling they did more work than others. This in turn has lead to departments believing they are more important than others.

### **Bureaucracy and processes**

- Staff stated that recent processes which had been introduced by SPSO have increased their workload. It was noted however that this situation is now starting to improve with the recruitment of several new staff members over the previous 12 months.
- Bureaucracy surrounding aspects of case working has also been having a perceived de-motivating effect with employees. It would appear that staff are having to wait up to two to three weeks for cases to come to review, by which time many complaints investigators have forgotten the intricacies of a case.
- Staff felt that the best type of training they received was on-the-job. They agreed that the induction training was relevant and taught them what they needed to know, however it was believed that the induction period with regards to training was a little too long, with many members of staff wanting to get on with their jobs but feeling held back.

### **Poor communication**

- Communication throughout the organisation was seen as an area which could be widely improved. Staff believed that decisions were being made without prior consultation, and if staff were being consulted by their managers, decisions had already been made.
- There was a general consensus throughout the sessions that if an issue did arise then it would be seen as an individual's problem and not an issue for the team or organisation as a whole to tackle. It was sometimes felt as though the support was not there and employees were made to cope by themselves.
- Staff also commented that poor performance was not being dealt with effectively and was another factor in them becoming de-motivated at work.

### **The questionnaire**

- Following on from the point above, when staff were asked if they believe poor performance was dealt with effectively, 51% disagreed and 49% stated that they neither agreed nor disagreed. This trend is common throughout the public sector where organisations have to go through lengthy disciplinary procedures before action can be taken. However, not one member of staff fully agreed with this statement which clearly identifies an area which needs to be improved.

### 3.5 SPSO's Objectives and Strategic Direction

#### Key Issues

- There was a general perception that staff knew where to find the company objectives but could not state what they were. Most staff agreed that the objectives were written in a board room and then left there, with no consultation being sought from employees about their content. It was worth noting however that some staff felt that their manager did communicate SPSO's objectives and that others did not.
- Staff also commented that they did not focus on the organisational objectives because they believed these objectives had no relevance to their work. They stated that if they did their jobs well then it did not matter what the objectives were.
- The majority of staff however wanted to know more about the strategic direction of the organisation and were worried that they could not see any strategic or future plan. They did indicate that a small amount of information was being communicated to staff, however employees had to go well out of their way to find this information.
- Most staff agreed that there seemed to be no linkage between their appraisals and the objectives of SPSO. Employees suggested that all staff should be shown the objectives and understand the organisation's strategic plan. Staff commented that they would like to become more involved in the consultation process when objectives were being set, and for these to be cascaded down into their own personal appraisals.

#### The questionnaire

- On the whole, when employees completed the survey at the start of the sessions they scored questions which related to the direction, success and the goals of the organisation highly.
- Two thirds of respondents answered positively when asked if they felt comfortable with the progress and direction of SPSO at the present time. 88% of staff either agreed or strongly agreed that they were committed to the organisation's goals, with 98% of staff stating that they understand how their work contributes to the success of the organisation.
- The contrasting answers given by staff show that employees understand how their work contributes to the success of SPSO and their perceived understanding of their organisation's objectives (or where to find them), but when asked to

answer this question in further detail, many staff realise how unaware they really are of the overall strategic plan for the organisation, and how effectively these plans are actually communicated.

- More in-line with comments however, was the fact that only a quarter of staff believed that the management team communicated effectively with the rest of the organisation. It is important to note that this question refers to the communication by the management team regarding all organisational issues, but goes some way to explaining why employees are not fully aware of SPSO's strategic direction and objectives.

## 4 Summary

### 4.1 Organisational Strengths

Summing up the session, staff were first asked what they believed to be SPSO's key organisational strengths.

#### Key Issues

- There was a general consensus amongst staff that large changes which had been implemented had disrupted their working patterns quite considerably. It was believed that the smaller changes which had taken place over the past 12 months were enabling the organisation to make more consistently positive progress. Although 51% of staff answered negatively when asked if they believe that the management team managed change effectively, the comments within the groups suggested that this was an issue which is now improving.
- Staff believed that SPSO's biggest strength was the people that worked within the organisation. Colleagues were viewed as interesting, supportive (within teams) and always came to work with the right attitude. The questionnaire points out that the majority of staff would tell people that SPSO is a good place to work, with 80% answering positively.
- Good terms and conditions was also a theme which appeared frequently through all of the group sessions, as one of SPSO's organisational strengths, with flexible working opportunities and a good benefits package amongst the most popular comments. 93% of staff who completed the questionnaire also answered positively when asked if the flexible working arrangements in place allowed them to balance their work and home life priorities.
- The challenging nature and variety of the work was also viewed as an organisational strength. Most staff agreed that that their work was interesting and rewarding.
- The resources to do the job, together with the training and development staff had access to were also viewed as strengths. The questionnaire answers reflected these views. 60% of staff agreed that they have the resources needed to complete their jobs effectively at work. Throughout the Training and Development section scores were positive, 70% of staff believed that the training they received was appropriate and relevant to their job, with 61% answering positively when asked if sufficient opportunities were available for staff to receive training to improve their skills in their current jobs.

- Staff commented that managers were generally approachable, but it was noted that not all managers operate in the same way with some being less open than others. On the whole however, employees did recognise the openness and willingness to listen by managers as an organisational strength. 68% of staff felt that there were opportunities for them to express their views within SPSO.
- Other organisational strengths mentioned in the groups were the office location, the reputation of SPSO and the inspirational leadership given to employees and external stakeholders by the Ombudsman.

## 4.2 Areas for Improvement

Finally, employees were asked to consider what we had discussed within the session and then to come up with areas of improvement for SPSO. Once a list was drawn up participants were asked to rank each improvement in the order they believed these issues to be most important.

### Key Issues

#### Internal Communication

- The most important area of improvement for staff was internal communications, summarised by one participant as “the right hand not knowing what the left is doing.” The internal communication issues were summed up well by a few examples which had happened in recent months –
    - Employees commented that there are two separate boards that meet regularly, but no one understands why there are two and what they achieve
    - There has also been an appointment of a director but employees have not been introduced and are unaware of who this person is
    - Employees were aware that a new database was in the process of being created. However, it would appear that staff were not consulted on how this database should function and what it would eventually be used for
  - Staff were generally in agreement that an increased openness amongst staff and the management team would improve communication throughout the organisation. Staff commented that communication fails to reach all employees and suggested more frequent all staff meetings.
  - The survey results also point out that communication is an area of concern. Only 32% of staff felt they were kept well informed about what the organisation was
-

doing, with only 39% stating they had the opportunity to contribute to how things are done at SPSO.

- Cross team working was also an issue which was interlinked with internal communications. Staff believed that teams conducting similar jobs were not communicating effectively with each other. Teams were seen as being individual, sometimes in direct competition with others instead of looking to communicate effectively, work together and looking to share best practice.

### **Knowledge Management**

- It was felt that managing information throughout the organisation was ineffective. Staff commented on this knowledge management gap and the fact that there is a position for the role within SPSO, which has yet to be filled. Employees believed that improving knowledge management processes would also have an impact on understanding the organisations strategic directions and objectives as well as improving the internal communications within the organisation. Staff often interlinked these factors as their most important suggestions to improvements.

### **External Communication**

- Improvements to external communications were also suggested. Common perceptions stated that SPSO staff were receiving no recognition of their achievements through external communications such as the press. Employees understood the nature of their jobs and the reasons why this may attract bad press. However, comments suggested that good press once in a while would go along way to help boost morale. In line with these comments, there was a general perception that staff wanted to receive more recognition both internally and externally, to make them feel more valued within the organisation and for the jobs they are doing.
- Research from the report carried out by ORC International detailing SPSO's results from their 2007 customer satisfaction survey supports what staff have suggested. Twenty-six percent of complainants had first heard of the SPSO via a referral from the organisation to which they were complaining. Leaflet's (13%), the internet (11%) and through a friend (8%) were the next most common sources.
- Of complainants who were interviewed, most had first heard of the SPSO through recommendations coming from friends, colleagues, local MPs, solicitors and the Citizens Advice Bureau, but no mention of external communications coverage.

- The research went on to state that across the 715 respondents there was no consistent view regarding the role of the SPSO and the extent to which they are able to assist complainants (i.e. powers and responsibilities of an Ombudsman office), adding to the fact that increased external communications would improve coverage and recognition of SPSO's services.

### **The Consistency of manager's approach**

- The consistency of management was also an area of concern for staff. Employees acknowledged that there were supportive managers within SPSO, who were encouraging and rewarding to work for, however this was not necessarily the case throughout the organisation and staff commented that if they had a different manager then the support might not be there.
- It was a common conception that managers and teams had been asked to compete against each other which in turn have increased the overall workload and the pressure on staff to deliver.

### **Key Performance Indicators**

- Complaints investigators were unsure why key performance indicators were being used to judge each complaint by how successful it has been when most agreed that these did not give a fair indication of how thorough or complete a complaint had been answered. They believed that they were not given enough time to deal with a case and suggested longer time periods so that cases could be addressed more probingly.
- In contrast, results from the 2007 customer satisfaction survey suggest that employees were taking too much time over complaints. When complainants were given the opportunity to tell the SPSO more about areas of service they felt work well or areas that need to be improved, the most frequent issues raised concerned the excessive amount of time taken to deal with complaints (13%).
- It would appear that complaints investigators decision making was also perceived to be under scrutiny and employees suggested that management should have more confidence in their decision making on cases.

### **The Building**

- Finally, there were slight reservations about the building. Staff spoke positively about the location, but believed that the building was not fit for purpose. As staff numbers are growing the building is becoming increasingly short of space. The structure of the building also has an effect on internal communications with

similar teams who could be helping each other out and sharing best practice, having to communicate with each other on different floors.

## 5 SPSO Employee Research – Focus group discussion guide

**2 hours**

### **Introductions [5 minutes]**

- Moderator to introduce self and ORC International, the purpose of the focus groups, confidentiality and how feedback will be reported and used
- Participants will introduce themselves – names, job role and length of service

### **Questionnaire completion [10 minutes]**

- 10 minutes will be allocated for completion of the questionnaire
- Questionnaires will then be collected before the main discussion commences

### **The Tree [20 – 30 mins]**

Imagining that the tree in the diagram below is SPSO, participants will be asked to identify which character they feel **most closely resembles them within the organisation and explain why.**



They can then indicate which character **they would like to be and why**

**Group discussion [25-30 minutes]**

- **What makes you want to work for SPSO?**
  
- **What makes you feel proud to work for SPSO?**
  
- **What motivates you to do a good job?**
  
- **What de-motivates you at work?**
  
- **What would you say are SPSO's objectives and strategic direction?**
  - Do you **feel involved in helping SPSO achieve these objectives?**
  - Do you feel driven to go 'above and beyond' to help SPSO achieve its objectives?

**Team exercise [30 minutes]**

- The group will be divided randomly into 2 teams
  - Team 1 discusses what they **would recommend to potential employees/friends/family about working for SPSO** – i.e. what the organisations principles are
  - Team 2 discusses what they think **would turn people off working here/make people want to leave**
  
- After 10-15min discussion both teams report back their lists and brief discussion to agree the main attractions/deterrents

**Summing up [15-20 minutes]**

- Thinking of everything discussed so far, and drawing on all experiences of working for SPSO, as a group a list will be made of SPSO's strengths and areas for improvement
  
- We will then try to prioritise the list of improvement areas in terms of what should and could feasibly be done to make SPSO a better place to work

## 6 Scottish Public Service Ombudsman Headline results

- **Percent Positive** - Percentage of employees who answered **Agree** or **Strongly Agree**
- **Percent Neutral** - Percentage of employees who answered **Neither Agree nor Disagree**
- **Percent Negative** - Percentage of employees who answered **Disagree** or **Strongly Disagree**

### Section A: Your Job

<i>Please tick one box only for each question</i>	Percent Positive	Percent Neutral	Percent Negative
1 My work gives me a feeling of personal accomplishment	76%	22%	2%
2 I feel valued working for the organisation	71%	27%	2%
3 I am comfortable changing the way I work if there are clear benefits in doing so	93%	5%	2%
4 Where I work we have the resources we need to complete our work effectively	60%	13%	28%
5 I am clear about what I am expected to achieve in my job	88%	10%	3%
6 I understand how my work contributes to the success of the organisation	98%	2%	0%

### Section B: Communication

<i>Please tick one box only for each question</i>	Percent Positive	Percent Neutral	Percent Negative
7 I am kept well informed about what the organisation is doing	32%	44%	24%
8 I feel there are opportunities for me to express my views here	68%	27%	5%
9 I have the opportunity to contribute to how things are done at SPSO	59%	27%	15%

### Section C: External Users

<i>Please tick one box only for each question</i>	Percent Positive	Percent Neutral	Percent Negative
10 We listen to complainants/service users rather than just telling them what they need	83%	13%	5%
11 We act on the feedback we receive from customers	63%	30%	8%
12 I regularly look for ways to serve our external complainants/service users better	82%	13%	5%
13 My team regularly looks for ways to serve our external complainants/service users better	72%	18%	10%

### Section D: Management and Leadership

<i>Please tick one box only for each question</i>	Percent Positive	Percent Neutral	Percent Negative
14 My manager motivates and inspires me to be more effective in my job	66%	20%	15%
15 The management team manage change effectively	17%	32%	51%
16 Poor performance is dealt with effectively	0%	49%	51%
17 The management team communicates effectively with the rest of the organisation	24%	29%	46%
18 The management team provide effective leadership	34%	37%	24%
19 On balance, I feel comfortable with the progress and direction of the organisation at the present time	66%	17%	17%

### Section E: Training and Development

<i>Please tick one box only for each question</i>	Percent Positive	Percent Neutral	Percent Negative
20 The training I receive is appropriate and relevant to my job	71%	13%	18%
21 There are sufficient opportunities for me to receive training to improve my skills in my current job	61%	15%	24%
22 I receive regular and constructive feedback on my performance	63%	27%	10%
23 I am given a real opportunity to improve my skills in this organisation	49%	32%	20%

### Section F: Equal Opportunities and Diversity

<i>Please tick one box only for each question</i>	Percent Positive	Percent Neutral	Percent Negative
24 I think my organisation respects individual differences (e.g. cultures, working styles, backgrounds, ideas)	76%	22%	2%
25 I would feel able to report bullying/harassment without worrying that it would have a negative impact on me	78%	10%	12%

### Section G: Work/Life Balance

<i>Please tick one box only for each question</i>	Percent Positive	Percent Neutral	Percent Negative
26 The flexible working arrangements in place allow me to balance my work and home life priorities	93%	7%	0%
27 I am comfortable with the amount of work I am expected to do	73%	7%	20%

## Section H: Perceptions of the Organisation

<i>Please tick one box only for each question</i>	Percent Positive	Percent Neutral	Percent Negative
28 I am proud to work for this organisation	83%	12%	5%
29 I would tell people that this is a good place to work	80%	12%	7%
30 I feel a strong sense of belonging to this organisation	61%	32%	7%
31 I feel committed to the organisation's goals	88%	7%	5%