HR UPDATE – Report by Chief Executive

Recommendation

This report provides an overview of the charity's Human Resources performance.

It is recommended that Directors note the:

   i.   HR performance information in **Appendix A**;
  ii.   staff survey report in **Appendix B;**
 iii.   policy reviews; and
 iv.   work with the Council on its HR and Payroll project.

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1.   Strategy Contribution

1.1   High Life Highland's (HLH) purpose is Making Life Better. The HLH Strategy 2025-2030 contains five strategic objectives which support the delivery of this purpose, and this report supports the following highlighted objectives:

    1. Delivery of affordable, accessible and inclusive services across the region.
    2. Maximise and grow income to reinvest across services.
    3. Ensure a consistent high value of delivery across HLH services.
    4. Commit to the net zero and sustainability agenda.
    5. Efficient and effective service delivery through our people and processes.

2.   Background

2.1   Improving staff satisfaction levels has been identified by the HLH Board as key to delivering the HLH Strategy 2025-2030. This is measured through the staff survey and other performance information which is collected throughout the year, such as absence and attendance rates and turnover.

3.   HR Performance Information

3.1   HR performance information can be seen in **Appendix A**. This section of the report highlights key points.

3.2.   Staffing establishment

3.2.1   The graph in **Appendix A** primarily reflects the creation of new posts for the Inverness Castle Experience showing a significant upturn in the establishment. The staffing establishment change between quarter four 2024/25 and quarter one 2025/26 was as follows:

    • Quarter 4 establishment = 746.68 FTE
    • Quarter 1 establishment = 820.47 FTE

3.2.2   This is a change of 73.79 FTE. Within that the following changes were made:

- Inverness Castle Experience – Create 70 FTE posts
- Corporate – Create 3 FTE - Training & Development Officer, Software Developer & Principal Accountant
- Leisure – Create 0.15 FTE - various minor amendments to existing establishment
- Community Venues & Engagement – Create 0.5 FTE – Facility manager (temporary)
- Libraries – Delete 0.86 FTE
- Museums – Create 1 FTE – Assistant Operations Manager NCVC

3.2.3   Recruitment controls remain effective with the changes to the establishment considered by an officer group and permanent changes approved by the executive team at its weekly business meeting.

3.3   Staff Turnover

3.3.1   Staff turnover remained steady over quarter one and no unusual trends or cause for concern were identified. The number of resignations as a percentage of posts (number in brackets denotes the number of individual resignations) during the quarter was:

- April   = 0.9% (9)
- May   = 0.8% (8)
- June   = 1.1% (11)

3.4   Absence

3.4.1   The overall absence rate for quarter one remained relatively constant with only a small upturn over the quarter of 0.11% and is below both:

- the mean absence rate for HLH; and
- the Office for National Statistics benchmark.

3.4.2   The focussed work by HR and service managers in 2024/25 continues into the new financial year ensuring that absences are monitored and addressed in a timely and supportive manner.

3.4.3   In addition to providing support through OH referrals, Counselling and access to a 24/7 online support system (Togetherall), the Senior HR Adviser has set up and hosts a monthly online Women's Wellbeing Café to support colleagues experiencing perimenopause and menopause. This has recently been rolled out to also welcome Highland Council colleagues. See **Appendix C** for an update report and more details.

4.   Case Work

4.1   Monitoring and reporting of case work (use of formal processes and ACAS claims) provides the Board and management team with an indicator of workforce relations as well as ensuring that the Board is aware of any matters which might have legal, financial or reputational implications.

4.2   **Internal resolution (grievance) -** There were no internal resolutions during quarter one.

4.3   **Disciplinary -** There were no disciplinary investigations during quarter one.

4.4   **Conciliation and Tribunal Claims -** There were no conciliation claims during quarter one.

5.   **Industrial Relations**

5.1   HLH recognises the following Trades Unions which it meets quarterly as a Joint Consultation Forum (JCF) for communication and consultation:

- EIS
- GMB
- UNISON
- Unite the Union

5.2   The JCF last met on 19 June 2025, and relationships continue to remain positive.

6.   **Employee Survey 2025**

6.1   During March and April 2025, HLH undertook an employee survey asking for colleague views on the organisation and their job. The most recent survey results can be seen in **Appendix B**.

6.2   334 HLH colleagues completed the survey and this represents 20% of the total number of staff (contracted and casual) invited by email to participate. This is a moderate sample size of the HLH workforce (a margin of error of +/- 4.8% has been applied with this sample size).

6.3   Responses were received from all HLH services and the sample size from each service represents a proportionate balance of the number of colleagues within each and the gender split of the organisation.

6.4   A mix of qualitative and quantitative responses has provided HLH with information to help understand what is most important to colleagues.

6.5   The quantitative data provides very similar response rates to those in 2024 with no significant fluctuations in most of the questions asked. However, when asked to rate HLH as an employer almost 61.68% of employees rated the organisation as above average or one of the best, an increase of 6.38% on 2024.

6.6   30% of survey respondents provided free text comments, expressing both positive and negative responses.

6.7   Six common themes emerged from the qualitative data, these are:

- Management support
- Job satisfaction
- Pay and benefits
- Work environment
- Workload and expectations

    o Training and development

6.8 Employees expressed enjoyment in their roles, highlighting the supportive and appreciative nature of their line managers and colleagues with several staff commenting on their commitment to contributing towards the Charity's success. They talked about valuing the autonomy and trust granted to them by supervisors and the flexibility and support for balancing work with personal life challenges. New employees commented on feeling welcomed and supported, finding the Charity to be fair and approachable. The Charity's commitment to staff health and wellbeing and in particular, mental health support was recognised and welcomed by employees.

6.9 Staff also commented on improvements that could be made to the payroll processes, with particular regard to manual recording of additional hours, overtime etc. For some staff it is felt that lower graded posts are undervalued and improved benefits may help with retention of staff. They felt that the disparities between some jobs and pay grading should be addressed.

6.10 In addition, employees commented on training and development opportunities across the Charity which could be improved and expressing a desire for structured career progression that goes beyond current offerings, which in turn would help to motivate staff and improve service delivery.

6.11 Some employees felt that communication and transparency from senior management could be improved, particularly regarding decisions that impact staff directly and that there is a need for improved leadership development to ensure effective handling of workplace morale and performance related issues.

6.12 Others suggested that improvements to staff facilities and equipment would help to improve morale and create a more inclusive and friendly day to day work environment. Fostering and more inclusive work environment for casual and relief staff was also highlighted as a way to enhance workforce engagement.

6.13 In summary, the key strengths of the Charity that have been highlighted include job satisfaction, supportive management, a positive workplace culture, flexibility and strong team dynamics with employees valuing their roles and feeling valued and motivated to contribute to the organisation's success. Feedback also suggests that there are opportunities for improvement in administrative efficiency, financial and career related benefits, management communication, resource allocation, training and the working environment. Prioritising these areas would help to enhance employee engagement and satisfaction and ultimately drive organisational success.

6.14 Some of the key areas commented on in this survey are currently being addressed as follows:

- HR & Payroll System review. Further details of the review can be found below at paragraph 7 but will ultimately help to address some of the manual people processes currently being undertaken. The systems are determined by The Highland Council.
- The appointment of a full time Training & Development Officer who will join the HR team in October 2025. The key priority for the postholder will be to carry out a management training analysis.

- A full organisational restructure is underway which will prioritise a review and evaluation of all posts under HL03 (lowest paid posts) and establish a secure management structure.

6.15 HR continues to monitor the implications of all comments made but can confirm that there are no ongoing issues that have not been addressed and this is reflected in the current low level of HR casework.

6.16 Whilst 20% of the total number of staff is a moderate sample size for survey completion it is important that HLH identifies and removes any barriers to participation to ensure that the Charity has a reliable insight across the organisation. Some of the factors which may influence survey completion and therefore encourage participation across all employee groups in future surveys include:

- Access to technology – office-based staff are more likely to participate in the survey because they have regular access to computers. In contrast, many HLH staff do not have access to company devices and may find it harder to access and complete the surveys. Although HLH surveys are mobile-friendly and are sent to personal email addresses (when available), providing QR codes or shared devices in accessible locations could provide a boost in response rates among these groups.

- Team proximity and communication – where staff work closely together, physically or virtually, survey participation tends to be higher. These teams benefit from stronger internal communication, making it easier to spread the word and build momentum. HLH does not monitor response location, but it may be that remote or widely dispersed teams feel isolated or less engaged with central initiatives therefore it is important that multiple communication channels and personalised outreach is used to drive involvement.

- Organisation size – smaller organisations tend to achieve higher employee survey response rates because they often have fewer communication layers. Larger organisations can struggle to co-ordinate messaging consistently across services or geographies, leading to a more diluted engagement. Tailored messaging by service or area and strong leadership endorsement are critical to encouraging participation.

- Work autonomy and time allocation – where employee have control over their daily schedules, such as office workers, they will typically have more flexibility to take part in surveys. Those working in shift patterns or service roles may find it difficult to step away from their tasks to complete a survey and may not wish to complete surveys in their own time.

- Allowing staff to respond during the workday shows that their input is valued and prioritised. Asking them to do it in personal time may result in lower engagement and resentment. HLH will review whether it is possible to build time in the working day for staff to complete the survey, whether it is during team meetings, at shift changes or via special drop-in sessions.

7.   New HR and Payroll System

7.1   As part of the contractual arrangements with The Highland Council (THC) for service delivery, HLH has a service level agreement (SLA) for the provision of payroll services. This is for a full payroll service including pensions (HLH is an admitted body into the Local Government Pension Scheme). The SLA arrangement is in place because it is cost effective, avoiding duplication of costs which would otherwise be incurred if THC had to pay HLH as part of the Services Fee to provide its own payroll function (staff and system).

7.2   THC's current system is called Resourcelink and is provided by a company called Zellis. It has been in use by THC for many years as a payroll (rather than HR) system. The system having been set up as a payroll system brings challenges in process efficiency and ease of access to HR management information.   The current system contract is in place until March 2027.

7.3   The vision for a new HR and Payroll system is one of streamlining processes from recruitment through to people leaving the organisation, handling information only once and elimination of work and errors associated with processes such as for manual timesheets with a reduction in back-office resource needed through a self-service approach. Establishing the system as an HR/management system will also provide additional support in undertaking operational tasks such as absence management and additional hours payroll and in the provision of management information. While this is a Council project, HLH will benefit from it.

7.4   THC has sought external advice from a specialist company, Civiteq, to scope its requirements through analysing current processes, development of process maps, activity analysis and made recommendations for a new system based on this. THC has now initiated a procurement process. The deadline date for the new system going live is April 2027.

7.5   HLH has sought to mitigate some of the limitations of the current system by developing its own people database and through manual processes such as for recording absences. The new system should avoid the need for the separate database to be maintained.

7.6   THC does not have a requirement for a rota management system and a request has been made for the tender to include rota management or integration with a rota management system for HLH.

7.7   THC has engaged HLH well in the project. The Head of HR and Head of Governance and Scrutiny have been involved in process mapping, including the development of new processes. Libraries and Leisure staff have reviewed current processes with Civiteq and THC project staff. The Director of Corporate Performance is a member of THC's HR and Payroll Programme Board

8.   Policy Review

8.1   The following HR policies have been considered in line with the review schedule and where necessary, updated to include HLH's purpose, Making Life Better, and minor changes to job titles but otherwise no substantial changes were required:

- Trade Unions

- Volunteering
- Payment of Professional Fees
- Acting Up
- Job Evaluation
- Recruitment and Engagement of Ex Offenders Policy
- Security of Disclosure Information

8.2   The following HR policies were also considered in line with the review schedule and updated to reflect the changes to the Disclosure Scotland Act effective from April 2025. These changes were previously detailed in the HR report to the HLH Board in March 2025.

- Protection and Safeguarding Policy
- Protecting Vulnerable Groups Policy

9.   Implications

9.1   Resource Implications – there are some resource implications arising from this report relating to the addition to the establishment of a full time Training and Development Officer. This has been built into to HR staffing budget for 2025/26 onwards.

9.2   Legal Implications – there are no new legal implications arising from this report.

9.3   Equality Implications – there are no new equality implications arising from this report.

9.4   Risk Implications – there are no new risk implications arising from this report.

Recommendation

It is recommended that Directors note the:

  i.   HR performance information in **Appendix A**;
 ii.   staff survey report in **Appendix B;**
iii.   policy reviews; and
iv.   work with the Council on its HR and Payroll project.

Designation: Chief Executive

Date: 20 August 2025

Authors: Morven MacLeod, Head of Human Resources
              Douglas Wilby, Director of Corporate Performance

Women's Wellbeing Café

High Life Highland champions the health and wellbeing of its staff, so with this in mind, a new monthly virtual online café was set up in February 2025 by the Senior HR Adviser called the "Women's Wellbeing Café".

The aim of the virtual café was to give female colleagues a safe, supportive and confidential space to meet once a month to chat and share experiences of the perimenopause and menopause, as for some, there may be a lack of awareness that they are approaching or going through the menopause. It was hoped that this safe space would give staff the opportunity to open up and have conversations with their female colleagues who are going through similar experiences in order to share their stories, advice, and tips for managing symptoms.

The café opened its virtual doors in February and has been running for 6 months to date. There have been some amazing success stories from ladies attending the café who have gained invaluable knowledge from their colleagues that have improved and changed their lives. Feedback from regular attenders is that these sessions have become an important part of their schedule.

The café will continue to be run by the Senior HR Adviser on a monthly basis and it is hoped that in the future guest speakers will be invited to attend. While the cafe is predominantly aimed at our female colleagues of any age, we realise there are lots of men in the organisation who would like to know how to support wives, sisters, girlfriends, mothers, and friends – so from time to time, these sessions will be open to all members of staff.

We want to make sure all women can get the help and support they need. This starts with normalising conversations about the menopause and hopefully the Women's Wellbeing Café will continue to "*make life better*" for our staff.

High Life Highland Board – Human Resources Report

Appendix A - HLH Board Human Resources Report

Improving Staff Satisfaction Levels

High staff satisfaction levels have been identified by the HLH Board as key to delivering it strategy 2025-2030. This is measured through the staff survey and other performance information which is collected throughout the year such as absence and attendance rates, and turnover. This appendix shows information relating to the human resources report.
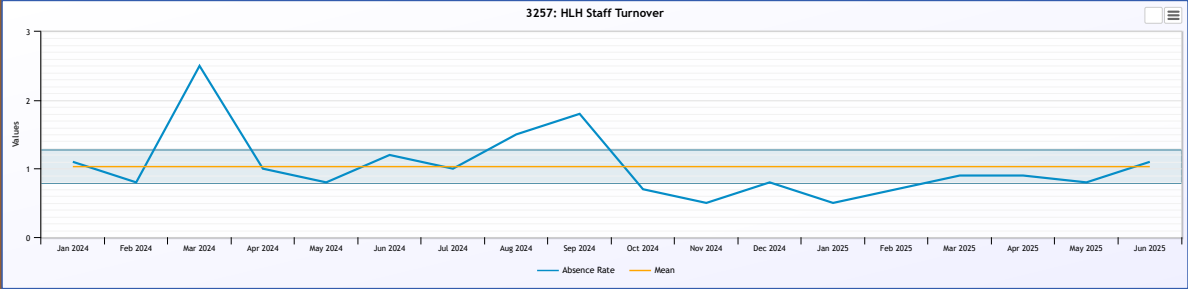
Establishment

To operate efficiently and effectively we need to ensure that we have the correct staff levels to deliver our services and we monitor overall staff levels though our establishment list. This graph tracks the number of full-time equivalent posts that we have. At the end of 2024/25 we had 746.68 FTE posts. At the end of Q1 2025/26 we had 820.47 FTE. That is a change of **+73.79** and a percentage change of **+9.88%**.

Establishment FTE - Series 7765
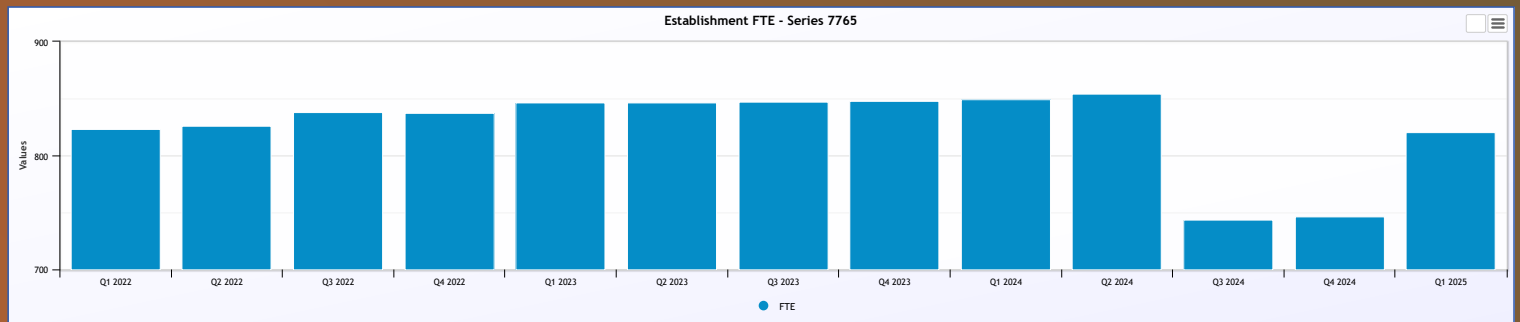
4.1 Staff Turnover

This graph shows the turnover figures as a percentage of the posts in the organisation along with, mean and standard deviation from the mean lines. This is used to flag when there might be issues which the organisation might need to address.

3257: HLH Staff Turnover

Legend: —— Absence Rate   —— Mean

Staff Absence Rates

As a benchmark, we use the office for National Statistics (ONS) absence rate for Caring Leisure and Other Service Occupations which is 4.3% with the aim being to maintain the mean absence rate at or below that level. The current mean figure for HLH is 4.31% with the current absence rate being 3.8%. The RAG rating is based on the ONS figure and assesses performance during the most recent quarter.
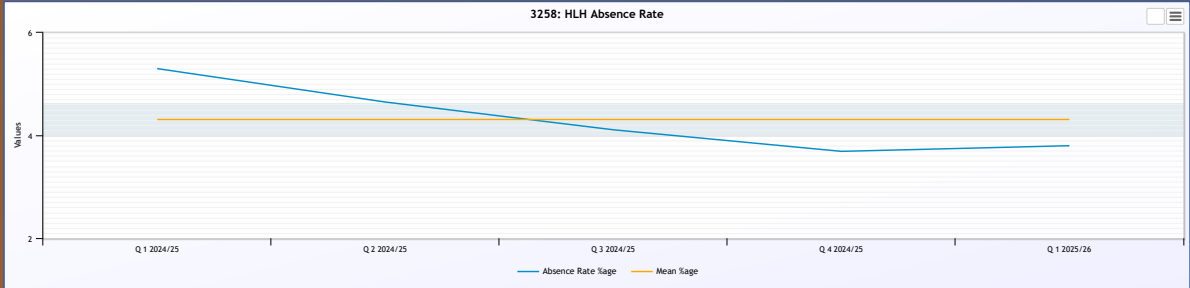
3258: HLH Absence Rate

Values

Q 1 2024/25 | Q 2 2024/25 | Q 3 2024/25 | Q 4 2024/25 | Q 1 2025/26

— Absence Rate %age — Mean %age

Long Term Absences

7777: HLH Long-Term Absences

Values

Jan 2025 | Feb 2025 | Mar 2025 | Apr 2025 | May 2025 | Jun 2025 | Jul 2025

— Absences — Mean

Short Term Absences

7776: HLH Short-Term Absences
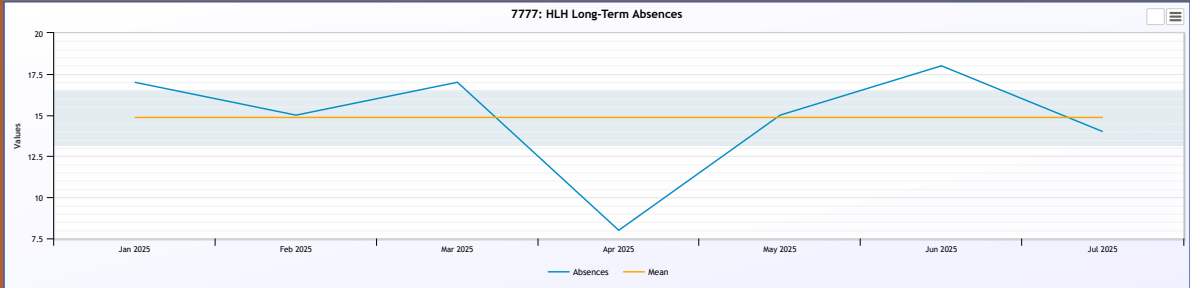
RAG Rating

green - within or below standard deviation, red - above standard deviation
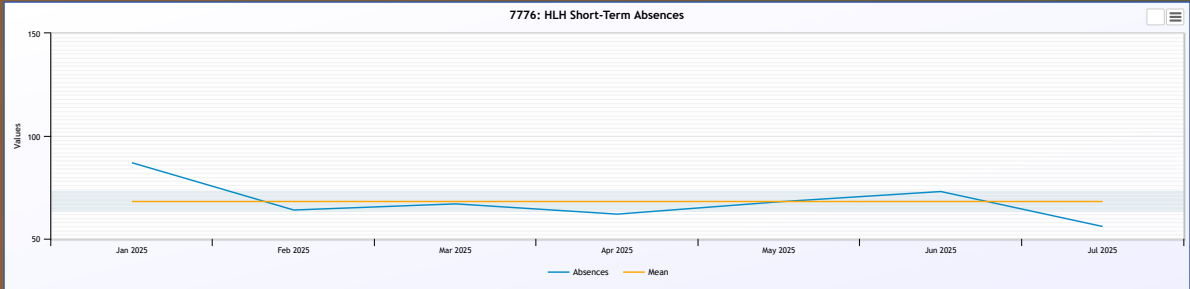
Case Work

Monitoring and reporting of case work (use of formal processes and ACAS claims) provides an indicator of workforce relations as well as ensuring that there is a systematic way of ensuring that there is awareness of staffing matters which might have a legal, financial or reputational implications. The following two graphs show the number of cases where disciplinary and internal resolution (grievance) procedures have been used.

Disciplinary Procedures

7755: HLH Disciplinary Procedures

Procedures — Mean

Grievances

7756: HLH Grievances

Procedures — Mean
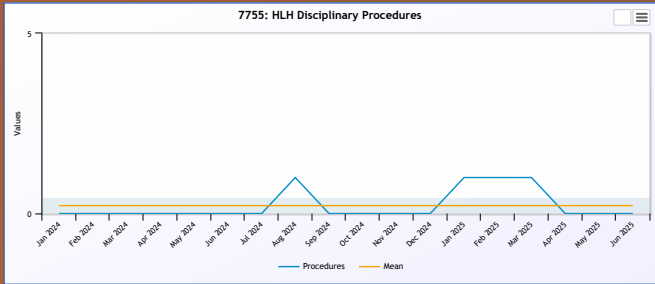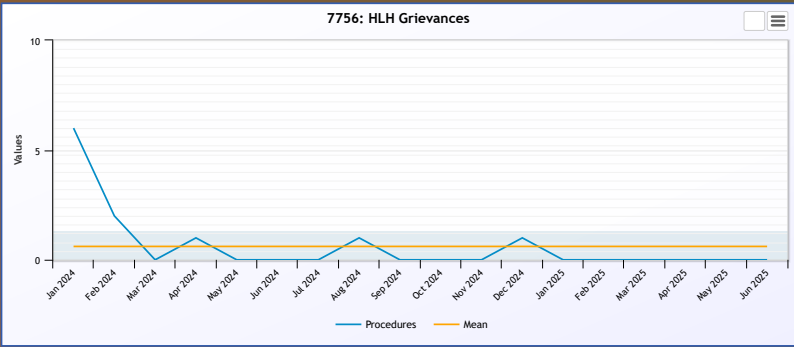
Purpose

High Life Highland's (HLH) purpose is **making life better**.

High Life Highland Strategy 2025-2030

The Strategy 2025-30 has identified HLH's purpose, vision, values, and high-level outcome as follows:

> High Life Highland's purpose is **making life better**, so that we can reach our vision of affordable access to health and wellbeing, learning and culture for everyone in the Highlands by having values: integrity; community; accountability; respect; and example, contributing to our high level outcome - making a positive impact across the Highlands by improving physical, mental and social health and wellbeing.

Strategy Outcomes

The strategy has identified outcomes by defining what success will look like. Improving staff satisfaction levels is one of the organisation's eight high-level outcomes. The annual staff survey is one of the ways the charity uses to measure staff satisfaction levels.

Survey

The survey is carried out annually.

Responses

The staff survey responses are confidential and with some services being relatively small, staff are asked to say which broad service area they work in. In 2025 there 1670 staff who were asked to complete the survey and 334 responses were received. This is a response rate of 20%. The response rate last year was 20.37%. This is a moderate sample size of the workforce, a margin of error of +/- 4.8% should be applied to that sample size.

The responses are detailed in the following graphs:
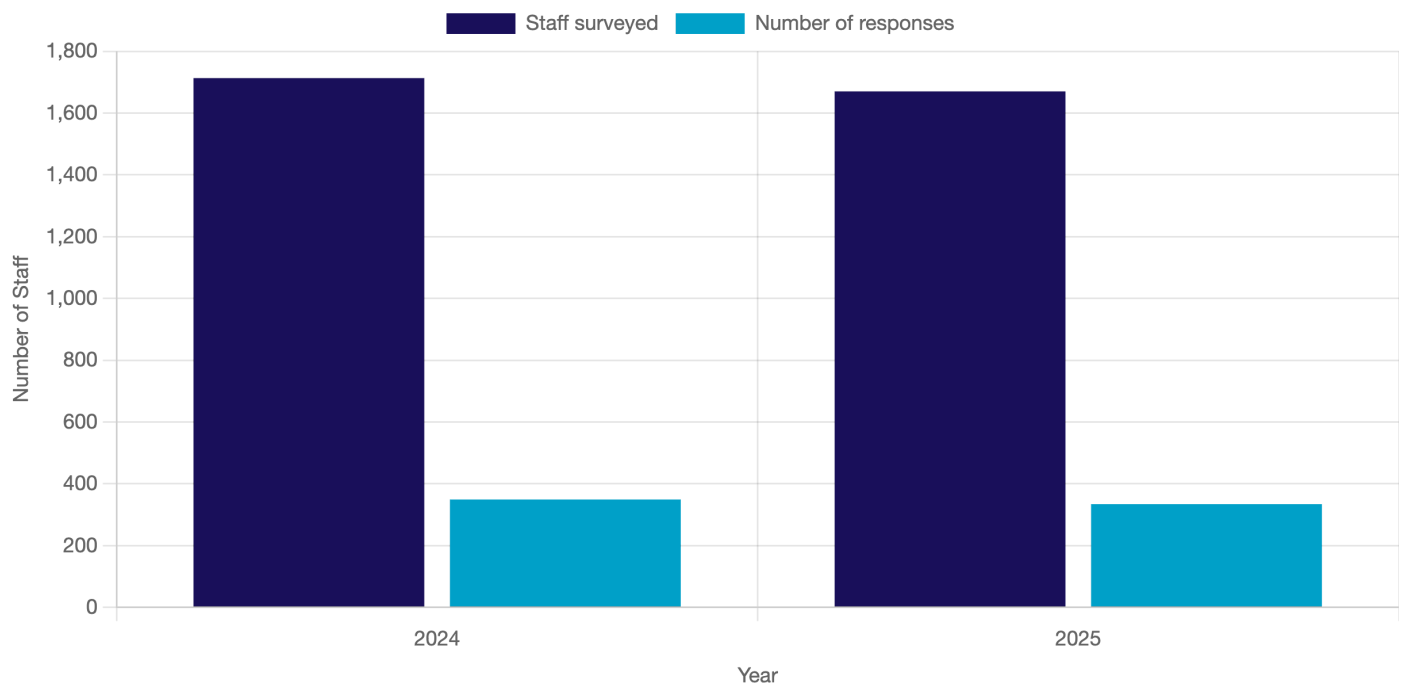
Graph 1: Total number of responses over time

The graphs below show responses by broad service area:
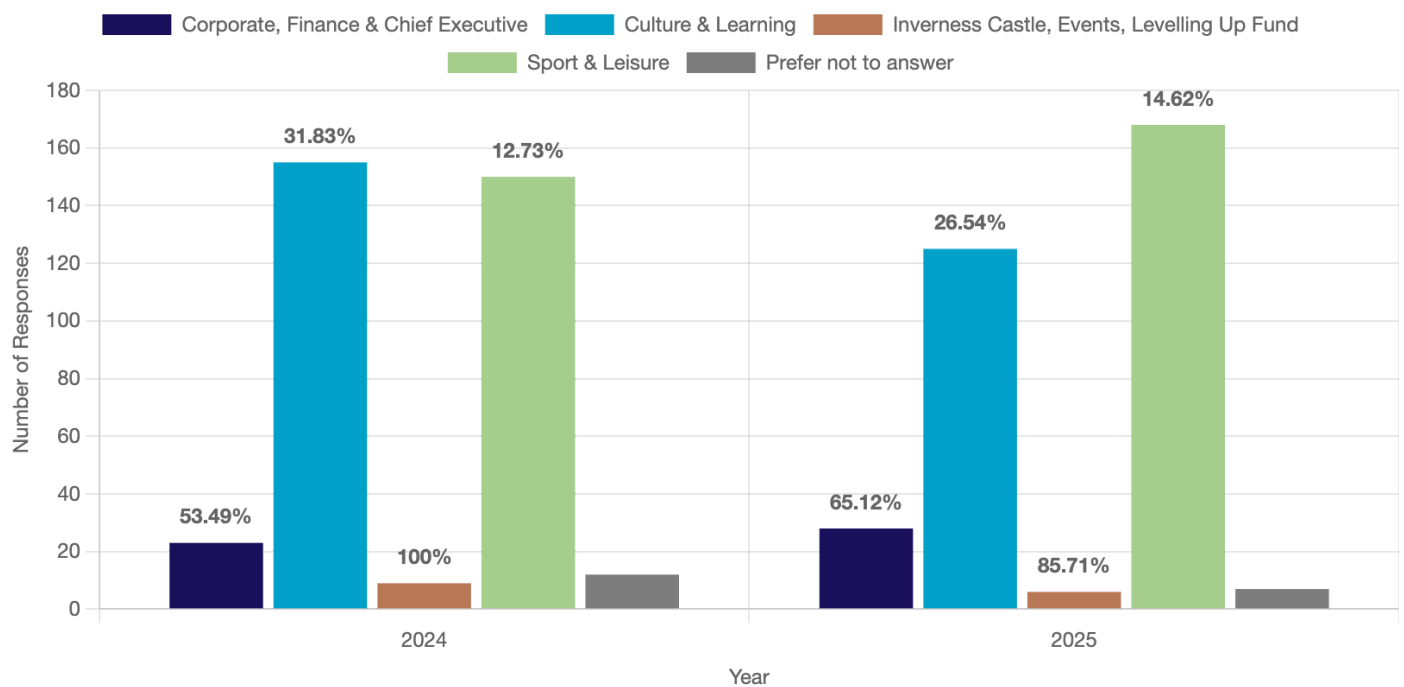
Graph 2: Breakdown of responses by service area
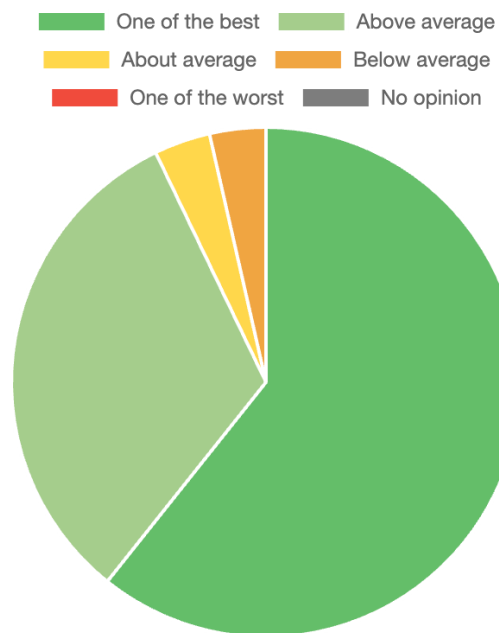
Rating as an Employer

Staff were asked to rate HLH as an employer from the following options: no opinion; one of the worst; below average; about average; above average; and one of the best. This graph shows the year on year responses as a percentage of people who completed the survey.

61.68% of employees rated the organisation as above average or one of the best which is an increase of 6.38% compared with 2024 when 55.3% of respondents rated the organisation as above average or one of the best.
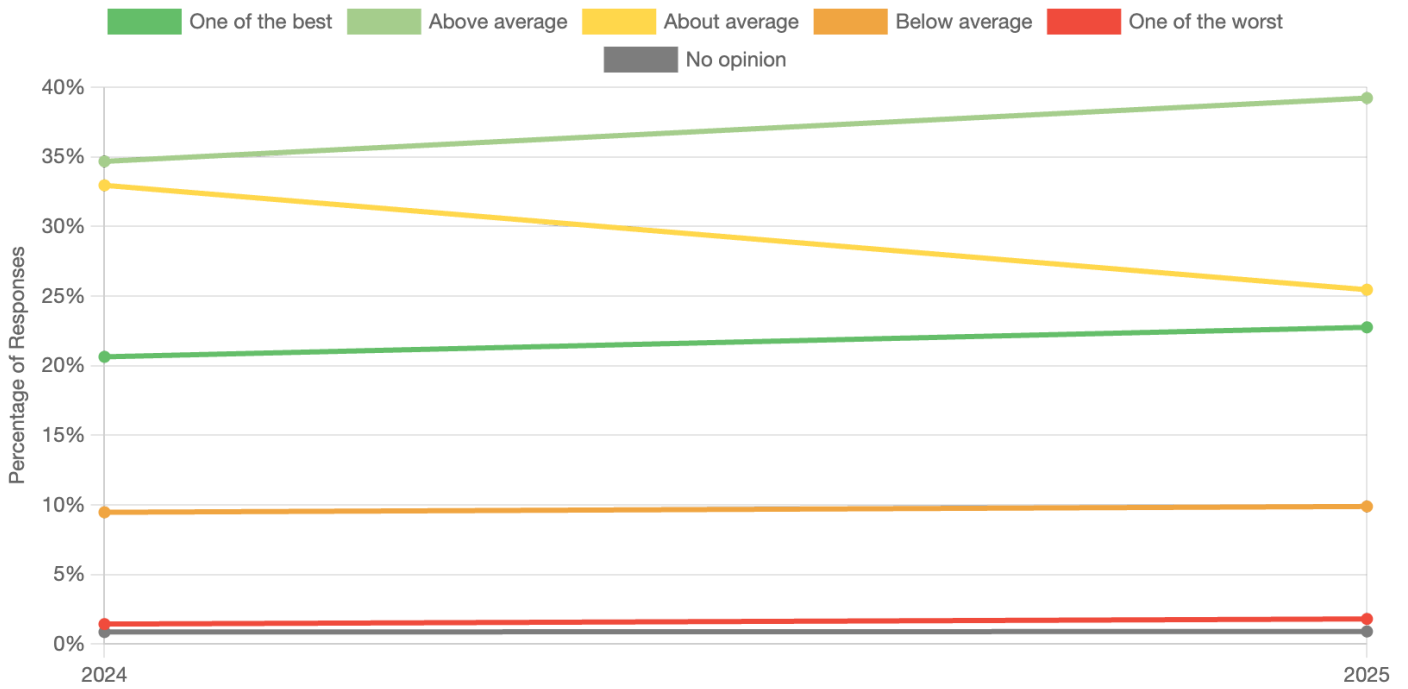
Graph 3: Ratings as an employer over time

Responses to this question for each of the broad service areas listed above are shown in these pie charts below
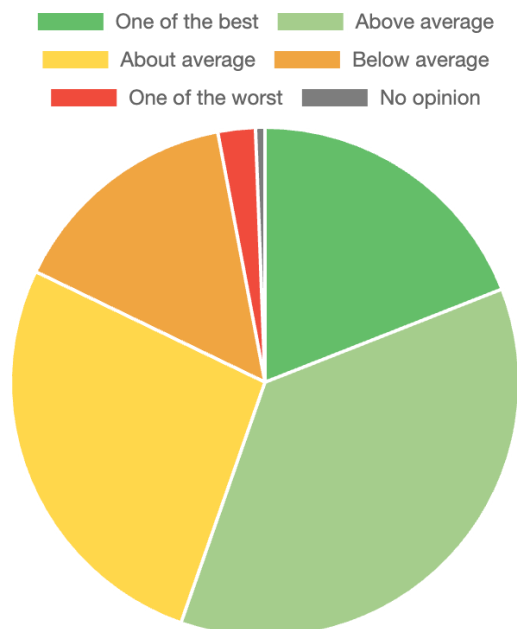

Graph 3.1: Ratings as an employer for Corporate, Finance & Chief Executive
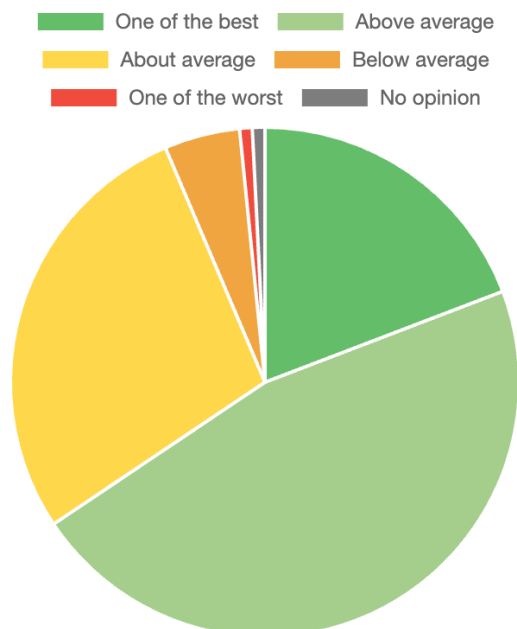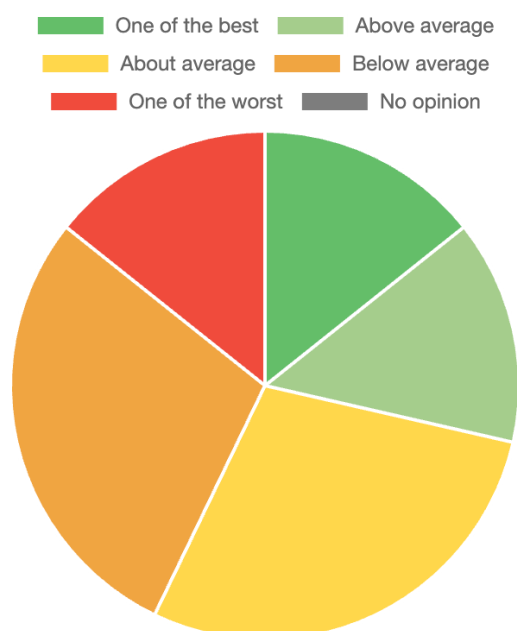
Graph 3.2: Ratings as an employer for Culture & Learning
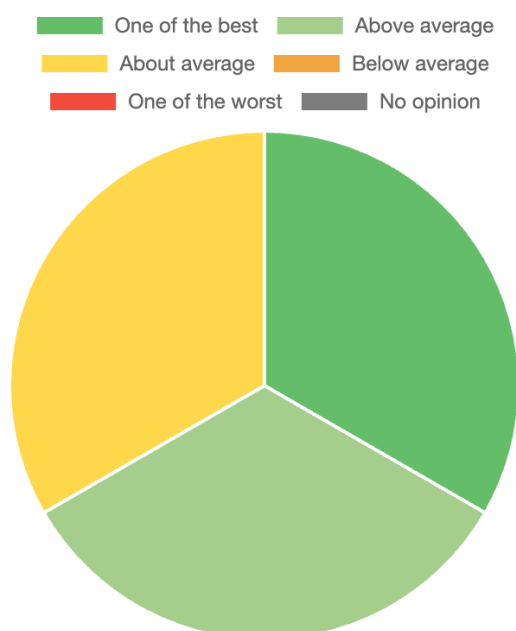
Graph 3.3: Ratings as an employer for Inverness Castle, Events, Levelling Up Fund

Graph 3.4: Ratings as an employer for Sport & Leisure

Graph 3.5: Ratings as an employer for Prefer not to answer

Job Factors - Satisfaction and Importance

Staff were provided with a list of job factors and asked to rate their satisfaction levels for each using the following scale: very satisfied; fairly satisfied; neither satisfied nor dissatisfied; fairly dissatisfied; very dissatisfied; no opinion; and prefer not to answer. Staff were then asked to indicate, in order, the six job factors which were most important to them.

Job Factor Satisfaction Ratings

This table shows job satisfaction ratings, reflecting the percentage of staff who said they were either very or fairly satisfied with each of the factors compared to last year, and also the importance ratings in 2025 and 2024.

Job Factors	Rating 2025	Rating 2024	Rating change	Importance 2025	Importance 2024
Interesting work	86.5%	86%	=	1	1
Enjoyment in the work I do	85.3%	82.2%	=	2	2
Working hours	80.5%	82.8%	=	9	8
Supportive colleagues	80.2%	81.4%	=	8	13
Personal safety at work	80.2%	81.1%	=	19	16
Feeling you have accomplished something worthwhile at work	79.6%	79.4%	=	6	7
Working as part of a team	77.2%	74.5%	=	16	11
Working environment (e.g., health & safety, security)	74.9%	71.3%	↑	10	4
Opportunity to show initiative	74.3%	67.3%	↑	15	19
Receiving guidance and support at work	72.5%	65.9%	↑	18	17
Making the best use of your skills and ability	69.8%	66.2%	↑	17	10
Receiving praise for good work	68.6%	65%	↑	21	21
Receiving sufficient training to do your job well	67.7%	63%	↑	13	15
Good employment benefits (e.g., leave, pensions, wider wallet)	65.9%	67.6%	=	7	5
Morale in your workplace	65.6%	57.6%	↑	12	14
Working for a successful organisation	65.6%	58.7%	↑	14	18
Job security	62.9%	54.4%	↑	4	6
Pay	60.8%	63.9%	↓	3	3
Feedback on your performance	57.5%	57%	=	20	20
Sufficient resources (e.g., finance, equipment, staff to do your job)	46.4%	39.5%	↑	11	12
Career development	40.7%	42.7%	=	5	9

Table 1: Job factor satisfaction ratings

Does HLH provide sufficient support for your own health and wellbeing?
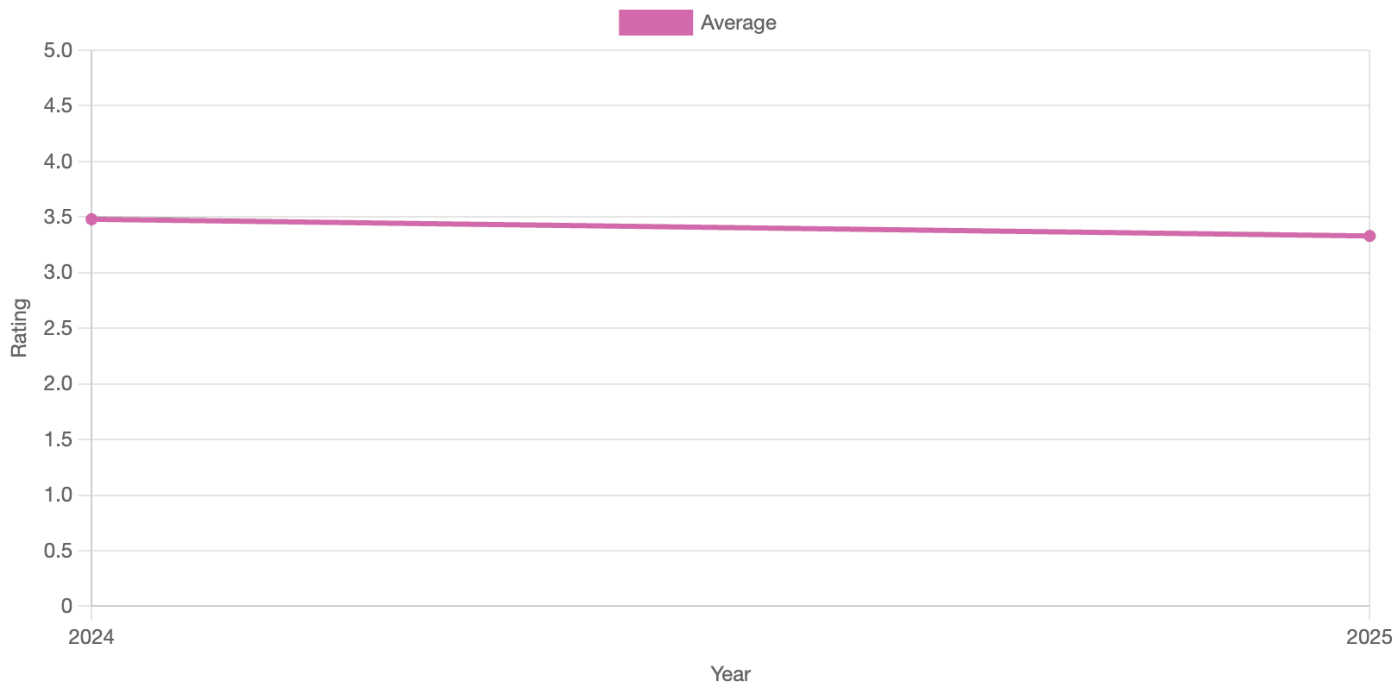
Graph 4: Health and Wellbeing

Service areas where ratings improved were: Inverness Castle, Events, Levelling Up Fund
Service areas where ratings stayed the same were: Corporate, Finance & Chief Executive; Culture & Learning
Service areas where ratings reduced were: Sport & Leisure; Prefer not to answer

[Opinion](#)
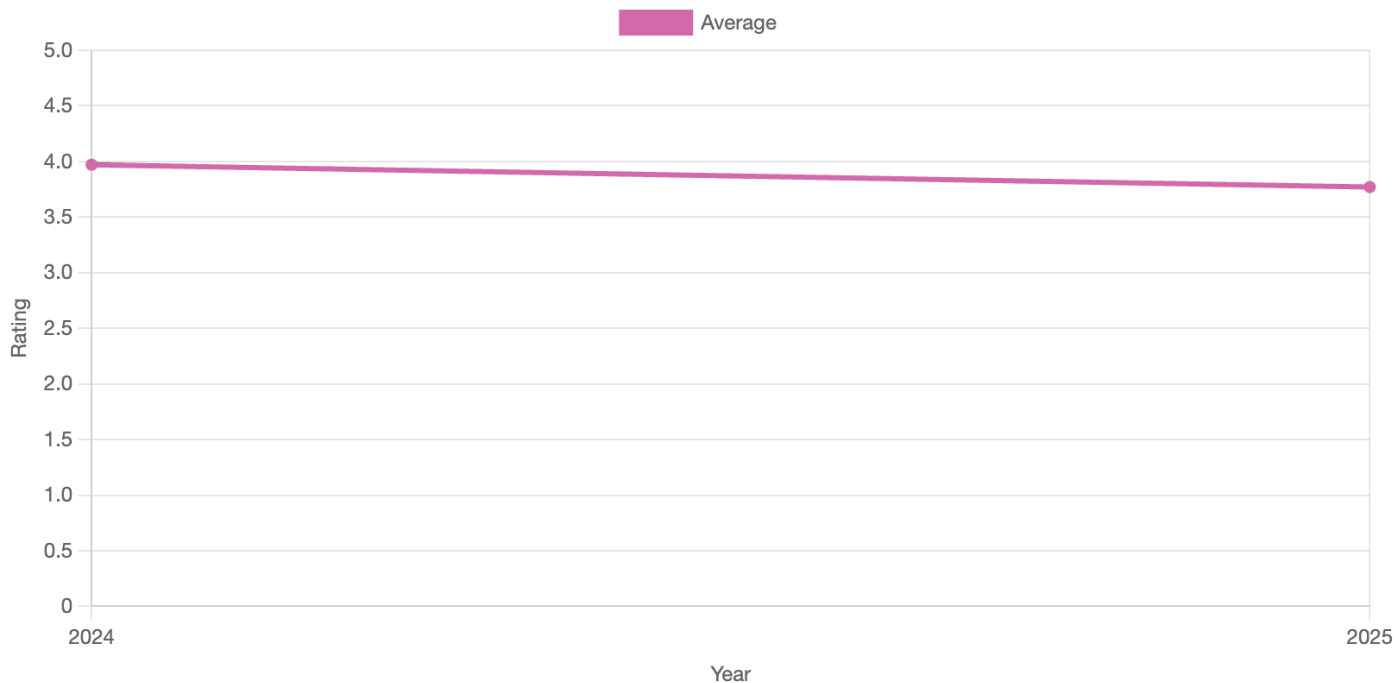
Do you think your opinion matters at work?
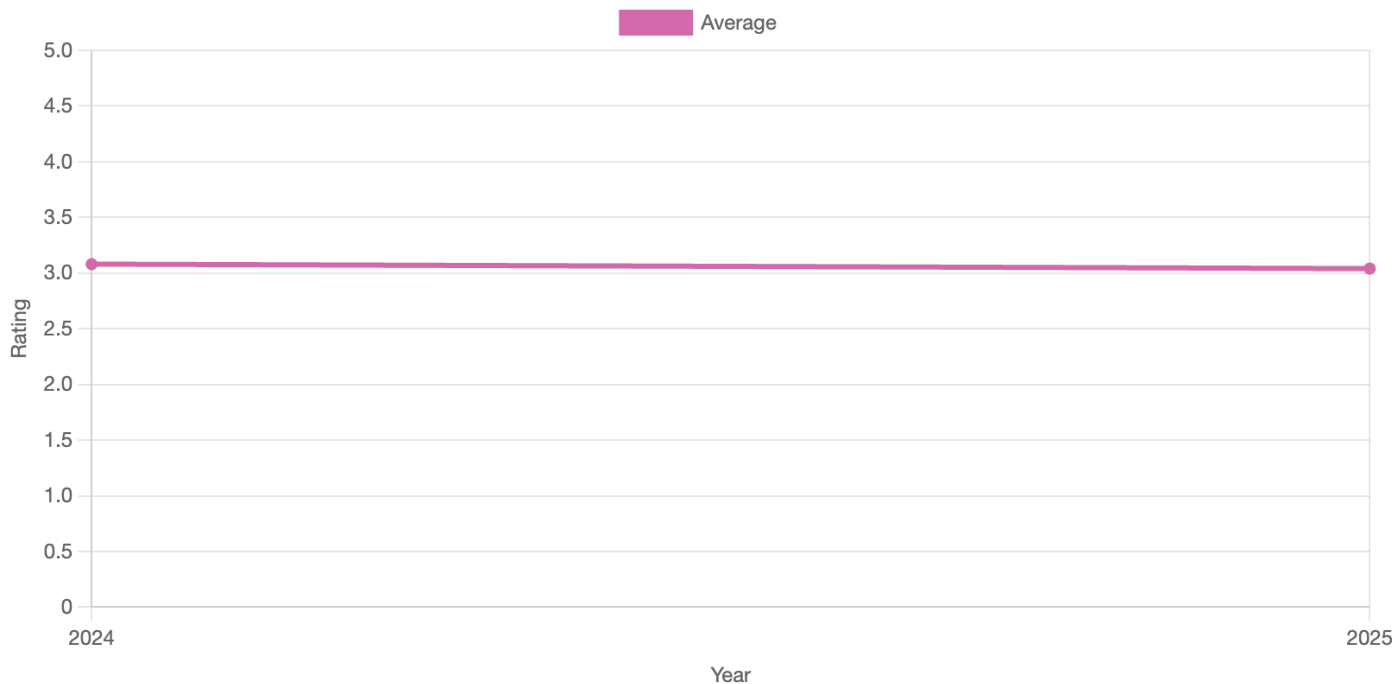
Graph 5: Opinion

Service areas where ratings improved were: Corporate, Finance & Chief Executive; Inverness Castle, Events, Levelling Up Fund

Service areas where ratings stayed the same were: Culture & Learning

Service areas where ratings reduced were: Sport & Leisure; Prefer not to answer

Work / Life Balance

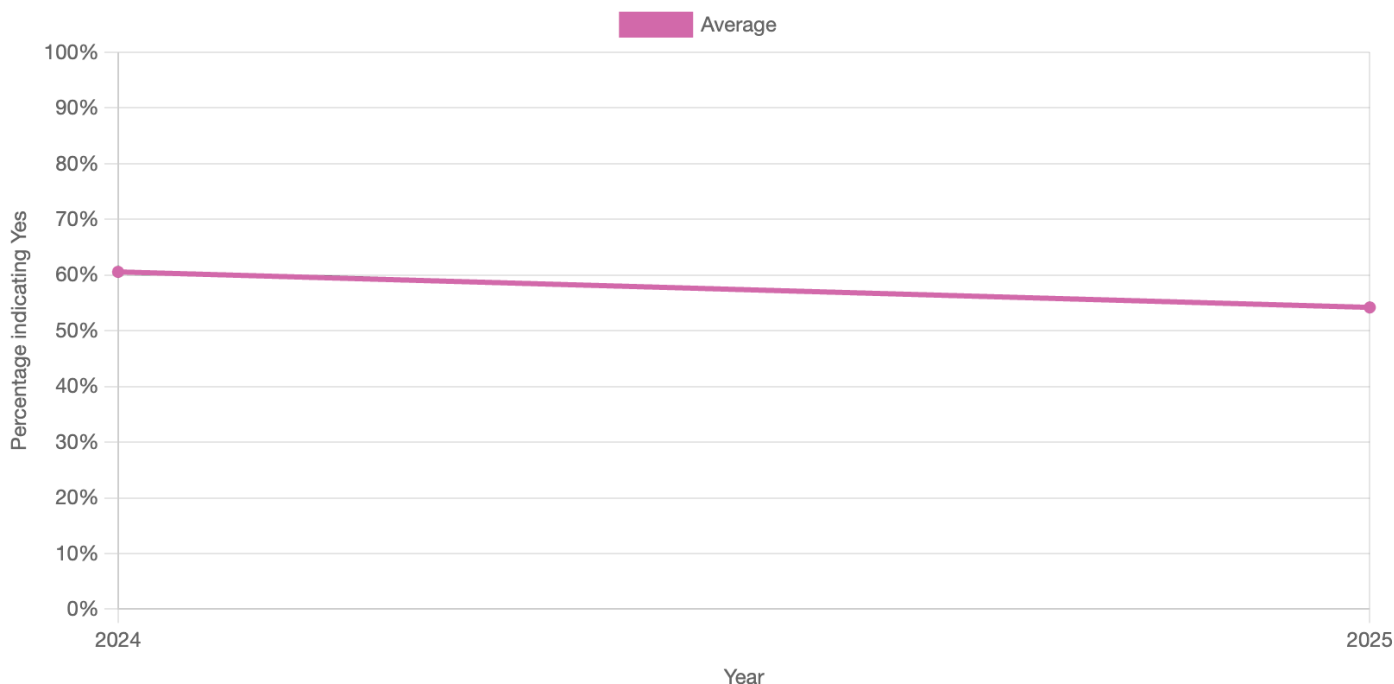Does your job give you the flexibility to achieve a work/life balance?

Graph 6: Work / Life Balance

Service areas where ratings stayed the same were: Corporate, Finance & Chief Executive; Culture & Learning; Inverness Castle, Events, Levelling Up Fund

Service areas where ratings reduced were: Sport & Leisure; Prefer not to answer

Recognition

When you contribute to the successes of the organisation, do you feel recognised?
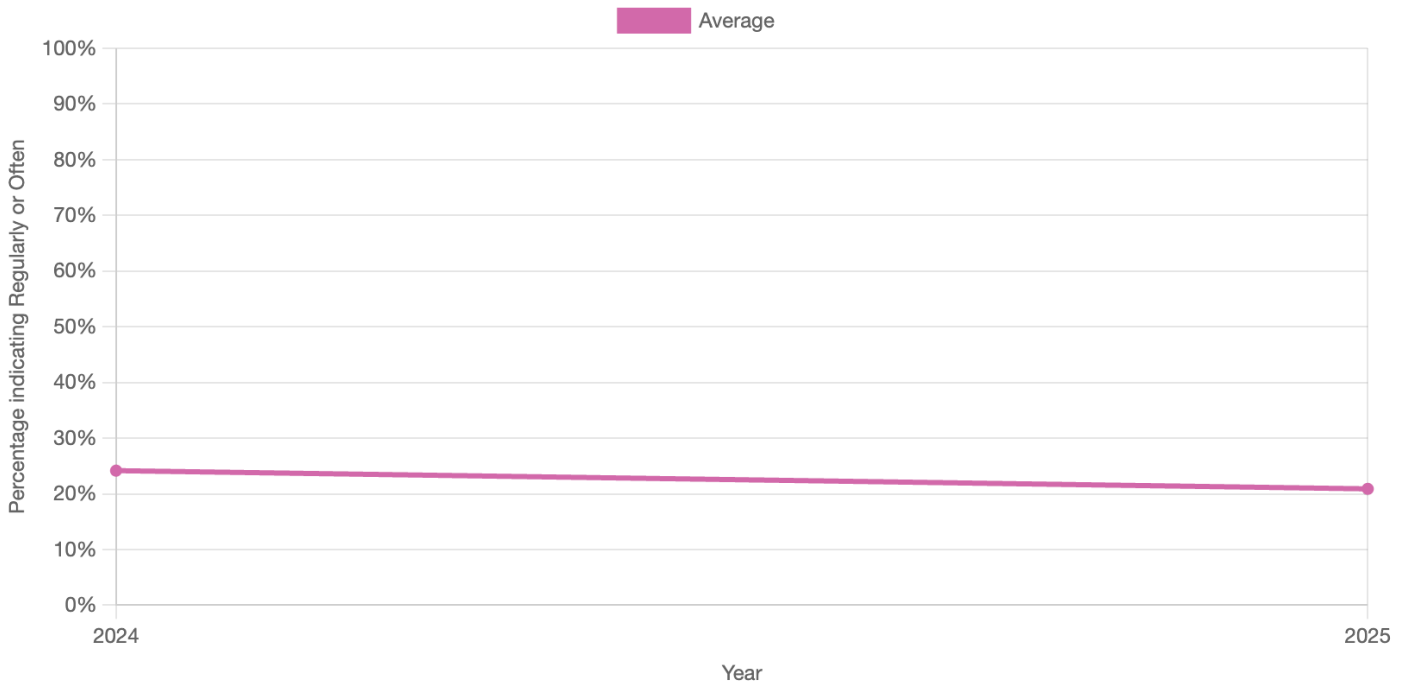
Service areas where ratings stayed the same were: Sport & Leisure
Service areas where ratings reduced were: Corporate, Finance & Chief Executive; Culture & Learning; Inverness Castle, Events, Levelling Up Fund; Prefer not to answer

[Working when ill](#)

Do you find yourself presenting for work when you should be off due to illness?

Graph 8: Working when ill

Service areas where ratings improved were: Corporate, Finance & Chief Executive; Culture & Learning; Sport & Leisure
Service areas where ratings reduced were: Inverness Castle, Events, Levelling Up Fund; Prefer not to answer

[Working when on leave](#)

Do you find yourself choosing to do work when on annual leave?
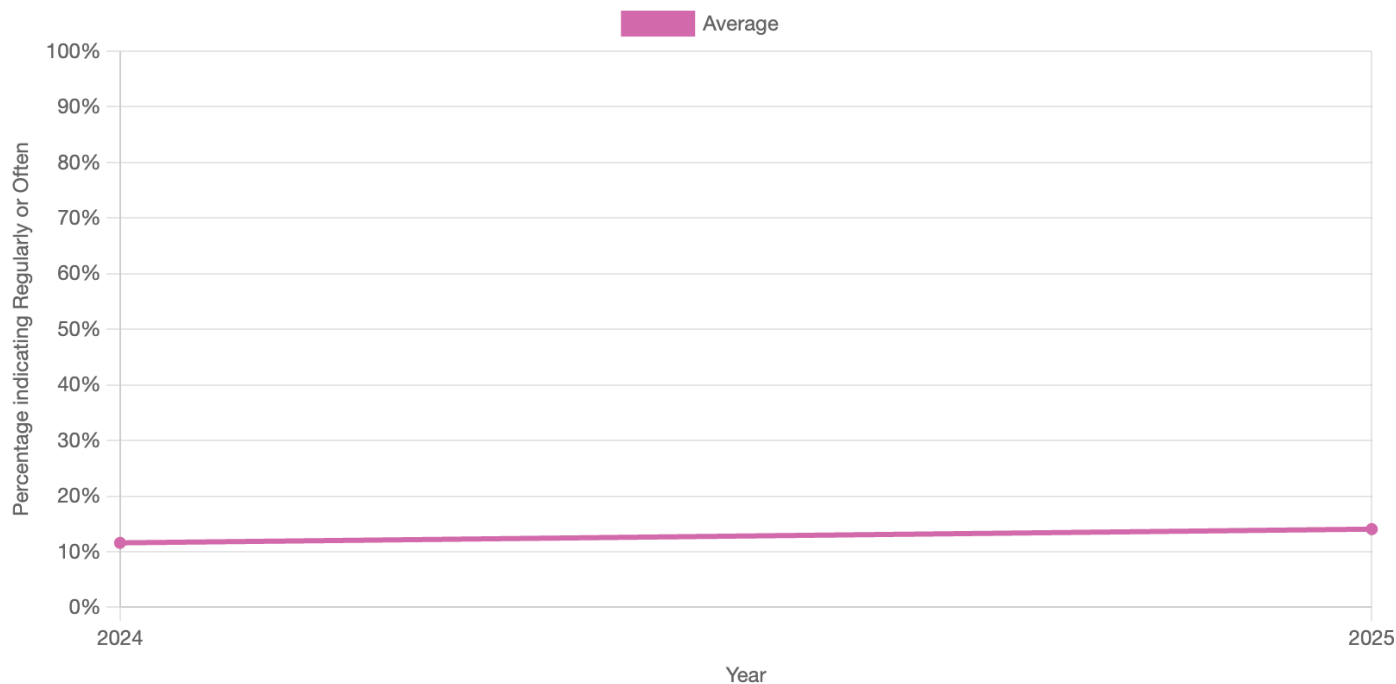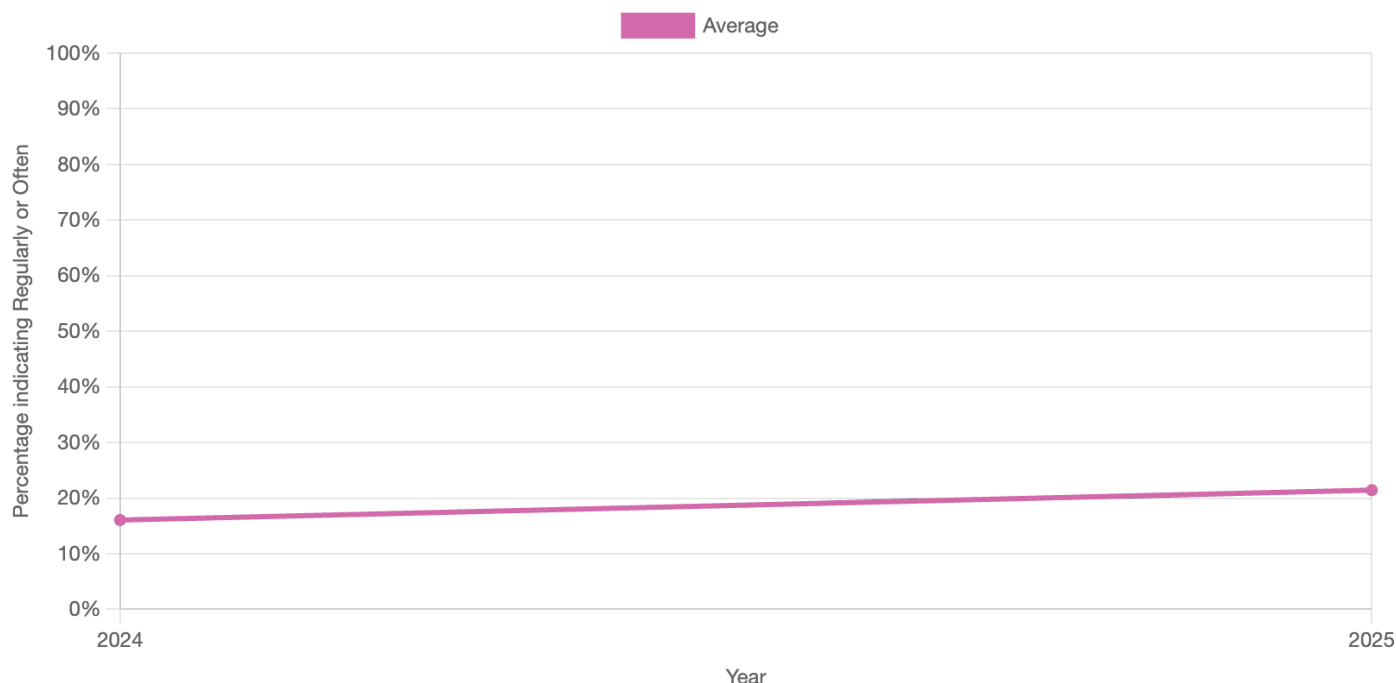
Graph 9: Working when on leave

Service areas where ratings improved were: Corporate, Finance & Chief Executive; Prefer not to answer
Service areas where ratings stayed the same were: Sport & Leisure
Service areas where ratings reduced were: Culture & Learning; Inverness Castle, Events, Levelling Up Fund

[Working at weekends](#)

Do you find yourself choosing to do work on your usual days off? (e.g. weekends)

Graph 10: Working at weekends

Service areas where ratings improved were: Corporate, Finance & Chief Executive; Inverness Castle, Events, Levelling Up Fund
Service areas where ratings reduced were: Culture & Learning; Sport & Leisure; Prefer not to answer

[Personal Recognition](#)

Do you feel your immediate line manager cares for you as a person?
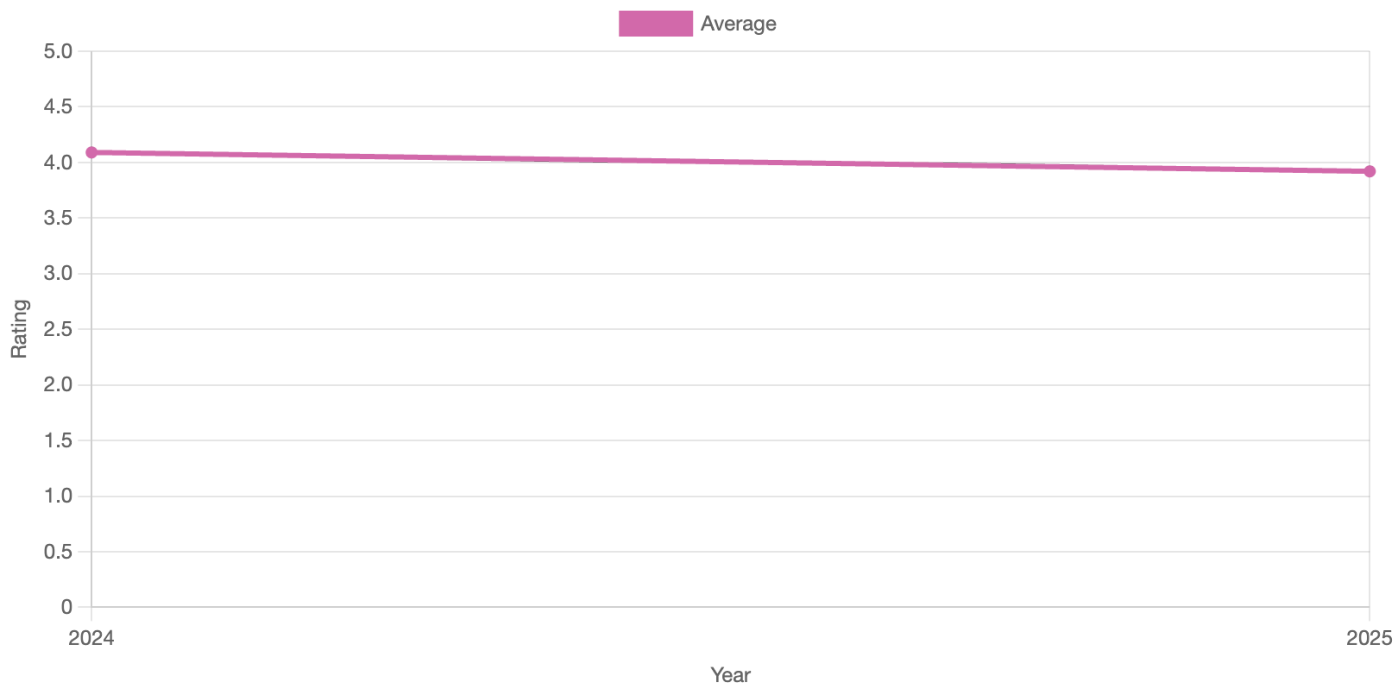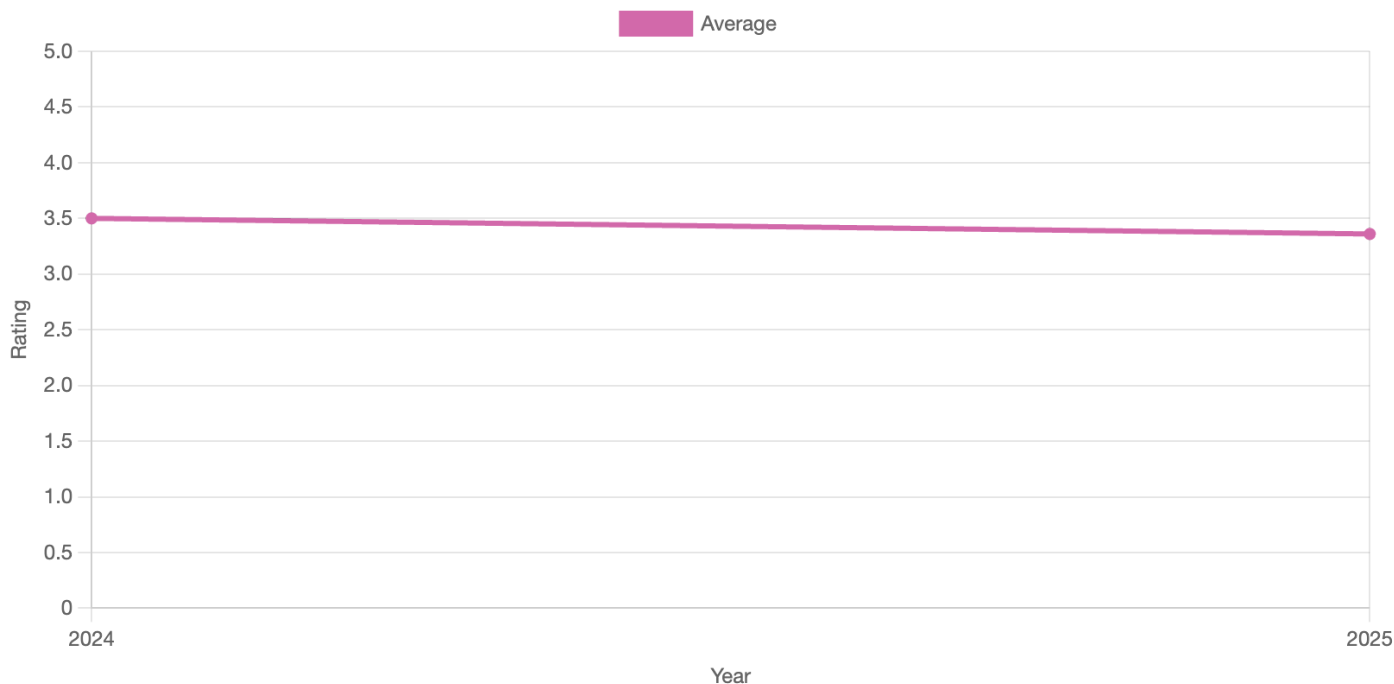

Graph 11: Personal Recognition

Service areas where ratings improved were: Corporate, Finance & Chief Executive; Inverness Castle, Events, Levelling Up Fund
Service areas where ratings stayed the same were: Culture & Learning
Service areas where ratings reduced were: Sport & Leisure; Prefer not to answer

Career Development

Do you feel your immediate line manager cares about your career development?
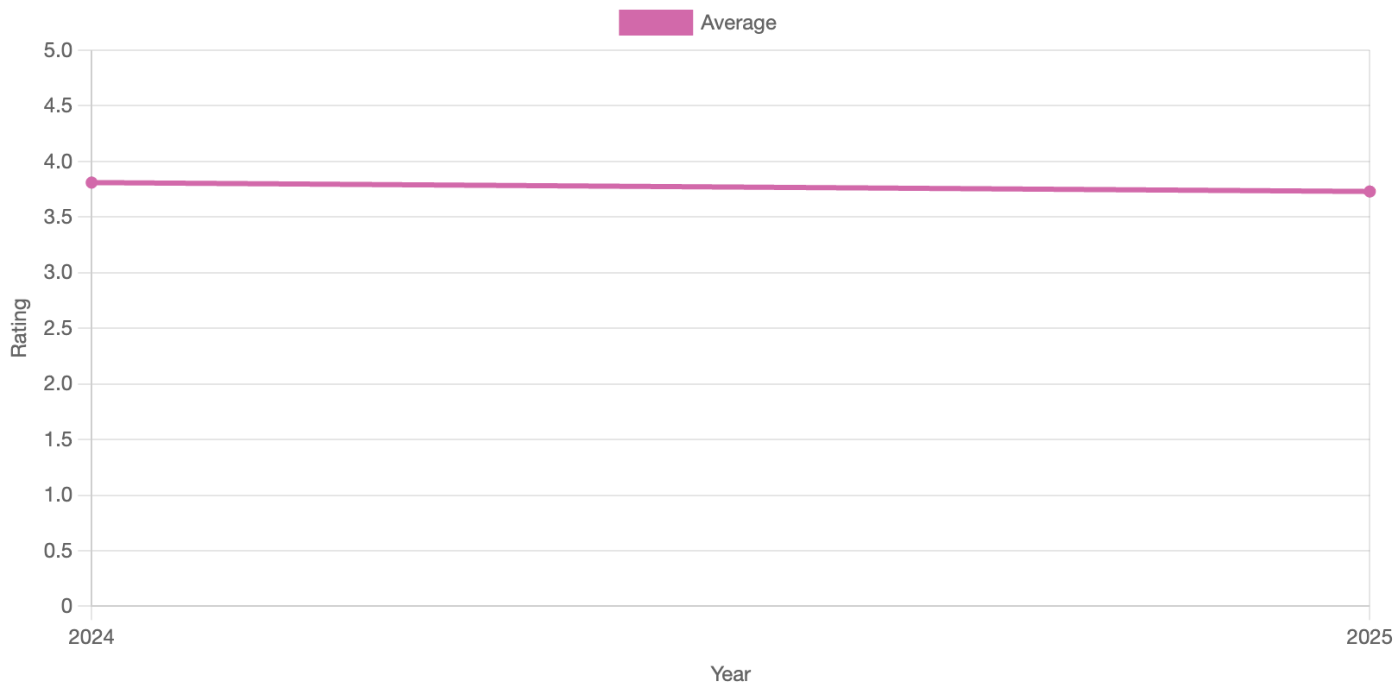

Graph 12: Career Development

Service areas where ratings improved were: Corporate, Finance & Chief Executive; Inverness Castle, Events, Levelling Up Fund
Service areas where ratings stayed the same were: Culture & Learning

Service areas where ratings reduced were: Sport & Leisure; Prefer not to answer

General Satisfaction

How do you usually feel about coming to work?

Graph 13: General Satisfaction

Service areas where ratings improved were: Corporate, Finance & Chief Executive; Inverness Castle, Events, Levelling Up Fund
Service areas where ratings stayed the same were: Culture & Learning
Service areas where ratings reduced were: Sport & Leisure; Prefer not to answer

General Satisfaction

How do you usually feel about coming to work?