

## Tackling attendance management and discipline: An Acas workplace project at Lothian Buses plc

A case study describing how Acas helped Lothian Buses to improve union-management relations, solve problematic attendance management procedures, review discipline policies, and adopt a joint working approach for further policy reviews.<sup>1</sup>



Lothian Buses plc is the only publicly owned bus company in Scotland, and by far the largest in the United Kingdom.

Based in Edinburgh, they employ just under 2000 people, about 1400 of whom are drivers.

### The issues

The issues that prompted the approach to Acas went back as far as 1999. Growing concerns among the workforce about the trends in privatisation across the sector led to a climate of suspicion. Anxieties increased with the appointment of a new chief executive and new management team many of whom had worked previously in well known private sector transport companies.

Issues came to a head in 2002 during a particularly difficult wage negotiation. As part of the negotiation, the management was attempting to introduce changes to terms and conditions in order to improve operational efficiency to get in line with their major competitors. At the same time, the company was engaged in a 'bus war'<sup>2</sup> with a competitor in the market place, putting both the management and the drivers under a great deal of pressure.

A number of pay offers were rejected by the workforce and the trade unions eventually held ballots for industrial action. They "were within a hair's breadth of industrial action two or three times" (Senior Manager, Lothian). It was suggested by the full-time officer from the main union at the site (TGWU<sup>3</sup>) that it would be a good idea to bring in Acas because relations were at such a low ebb.

## How did Acas help?

Acas advisers use a variety of techniques and strategies when working with managers and representatives to get to the heart of the problems and seek solutions. At Lothian Buses, the following techniques were used:

- a steering committee comprising management and union representatives
- a series of workshops to gather views on issues to be addressed
- a focus group dealing with communications issues at Lothian Buses
- a joint working party to review procedures.

The workshops were especially important in helping identify barriers to improved employment relations. Attended by a cross section of employees from different departments, each meeting began with a keynote address from a senior manager and a union representative. This was followed by a free and open discussion among employees, facilitated by the Acas adviser. A number of major themes were identified but the critical issues needing attention were considered to be communication and the handling of the attendance management and discipline procedures.

A number of those who had attended the workshops subsequently took part in a focus group whose aim was to review communications within Lothian Buses and to formulate recommendations for improvement.

Additionally a joint working party, comprising of management and union representatives was set up to review the existing attendance management and discipline procedures. The working party deliberations took place during a series of meetings from August to December 2003.

## Aims and Expectations

The management and union benefited from these early 'brainstorming' workshops in helping to clarify their appreciation of some of the underlying tensions in the organisation. In working with Acas, the main aim of the management team was to re-establish some trust between themselves and the workforce and to try to break down "*the terrible atmosphere of suspicion*" that was developing at Lothian Buses. In addition, the management and union alike sought to revise their outdated policies in order to improve their attendance management and disciplinary procedures. The lack of clear guidance, especially on the management of sick leave and absence had resulted in inconsistent methods of dealing with employees who were on sick leave, causing some hostility among the workforce.



## Outcomes: The way forward

The focus group produced fifteen recommendations for improving communications at Lothian Buses. One suggestion was to issue all drivers with a copy of the company handbook. Another was to provide clearer guidance to drivers on dealing with passenger issues, for example how to deal with buggies and unruly or drunk passengers. It was also suggested that a process be set up to inform drivers of any changes on return from an absence.

The outcome of the joint working party was a revised discipline policy and attendance management policy. The reviewed policies and the recommendations from the focus group were incorporated in booklet form and all employees who attended the workshops were sent copies. The booklets were also posted on all the noticeboards in the garages.

## Outcomes: The impact on employment relations and the workplace climate

Both the management and union representatives said that relations and communications between them were greatly improved following the Acas work, as was the relationship between the union and the workforce. As one union rep said, previous to the Acas project;

*"There was a lot of mistrust between the troops and us, between the troops and the management, between us and management and between management and everybody. Nobody trusted anybody."*

The employment relations climate has changed dramatically since the Acas project. As a senior manager stated;

*"If you look at day to day relations now, it's hard to believe they were actually as bad as that... at the moment there's no real tangible feeling of that terrible hostility that was here two years ago."*

The new attendance management policy has resulted in less absence at Lothian and a reduction in sick pay. The cost of sick pay has dropped significantly, by about 10%, compared to the previous year. In addition, since the new attendance management procedure has been implemented and communicated, there have been no complaints from the workforce about how absence is being handled.

Regarding disciplinary issues, there have been fewer appeals since the Acas project. A year or so ago, there were two to four appeals most weeks, while currently there is about one appeal every three weeks. Moreover, following on from the joint working

party, the management and the trade union have used the same joint working technique to produce a new grievance procedure.

Also as a result of reduced conflict in the workplace, managers feel more able to devote time to handling other issues central to the running of the company. As one senior manager said

*"I wasn't getting the time to look at the areas I needed to address; to improve communication with the workforce and to move the company forward. It's freed up a lot of time."*

This was echoed by a union representative.

*"... but I think without (the Acas adviser) and Acas we would never have got to where we are today. In fact we'd probably still be having meetings."*

**For further details please contact Acas Research and Evaluation at [research@acas.org.uk](mailto:research@acas.org.uk)**

## Footnotes

1. This case study is based on interviews carried out with the Acas adviser and representatives of the management and trade union at Lothian Buses plc by Nicola Power and Gill Dix (Acas, RES) on 13 and 14 October 2004, as part of Acas' evaluation programme. We are grateful for interviewees' assistance and reflections on the Acas project.
2. An attempt to take over bus routes through aggressive pricing and scheduling.
3. Transport & General Workers Union

