



One team - GNE

WHO WE ARE

Go North East is the largest bus company in North East England, enabling over 60 million journeys a year pre-pandemic. Part of the Go-Ahead group, Go North East traces its origins to the North General Transport Company, founded in 1913 in County Durham (Go North East still uses the original 1913 depot!).

We're one of the largest private sector employers in the North East region, providing employment for almost 2000 local people. We've won many awards for our innovative approach, not only in respect of how we provide bus services and engage with the communities we serve, but also for our approach to getting the right people for our company. In 2019, we won the esteemed Princess Royal Training Award for our Bus Driver Routeway training programme, which saw Go North East team up with local Jobcentres to offer opportunities for people struggling to find employment.

OVERVIEW and OBJECTIVES

Go North East launched its One Team GNE initiative in autumn of 2020. Building on ad-hoc work and initiatives that had taken place before this, we made the decision to bring work on diversity, inclusivity and community engagement into a coherent, structured initiative. It was also timely – our colleagues had pulled together during the pandemic in a way that we'd never seen before, and so we wanted to build on this positive spirit and galvanise colleagues to want to do more around these important issues, and also reinforce that we truly are 'One Team' all working together towards the same goal.

Our One Team GNE initiative therefore aimed to pull together a group of colleagues from across the company to discuss and take action on matters linked to diversity, inclusivity and colleague engagement. Not only did we want to do more to say to all colleagues that we are a modern, diverse workplace, we also wanted to dovetail this with work on community engagement, recognising that we serve many diverse communities too and reflecting that we haven't always done as well as we can do to engage with these communities.

APPROACH

From the outset, senior management were keen that this initiative be colleague-led, rather than taking a top-down approach. This was based on the belief that colleagues working in depots and with customers often know how best to approach and engage their fellow colleagues (and customers too).

We started by putting out an open invite across the business for colleagues to get involved as 'One Team GNE Champions'. Initial meetings with these colleague Champions helped form the shape and focus of the initiative; we asked Champions to decide on which themes they wanted to focus on, what names they wanted to give to these themes, and what ideas they had for activities related to these themes. Six themes were chosen initially: Community Engagement; Gender Equality; Disability & Inclusion; LGBTQ+; Mental Health & Wellbeing; and Ethnicity.

These Champions then split into working groups for each theme, with Lead Champions appointed for each. Champions got together in their working groups to discuss the topics and share ideas for change, communications initiatives and colleague and community engagement; they were supported by three management facilitators and the Managing Director sponsored the initiative and encouraged colleagues across the business to support One Team GNE. Champions therefore came up with ideas and were then supported by the management facilitators to deliver these.

RESULTS

In their working groups, One Team GNE Champions have achieved lots of successes in the first year of the initiative. These have included:

- A programme of events for LGBTQ+ History Month in February 2021, including Champion-produced videos about personal experiences of being part of the LGBTQ+ community, and both a virtual quiz and bingo night hosted by a local drag queen
- Decorating buses for Halloween and Christmas, both tied in with competitions open to local children
- Poppy Appeal Centenary – a call was put out to the public to knit and make poppies to create an impressive display in Gateshead Interchange, in support of the Poppy Appeal and colleagues who have previously served in the forces
- Getting involved with Show Racism the Red Card day, and engaging with this organisation to provide training for Champions and Managers
- Deaf Awareness Week – information was put out to all colleagues about basic sign language, supported by a video put together by a Champion who knows sign language
- Our programme of Mental Health First Aiders – twenty colleagues from across the business have undertaken intensive training to enable them to be Mental Health First Aiders to support colleagues in crisis or in need of some support
- International Womens Day – Champions chose to support this day to raise awareness of gender inequalities in society and to showcase some of the great work that women do in our company
- Maternity pay policy – Champions raised this as something that the company could improve upon, leading to a revised policy with improvements in Maternity Pay
- Champions came up with the idea of a new policy to support colleagues transitioning gender in the workplace; this is in the final stages of its implementation
- Champions have supported various awareness days for Mental Health, including Time to Talk day when Champions produced a series of videos featuring colleagues who have experienced mental health challenges
- Everyone Matters Week – during this week of celebration of the diversity of our company, there was an informative booklet that was distributed to all colleagues, a series of talks from external speakers, interactive content relating to all the different aOne Team GNE themes, and a social event
- School visit programme – Champions partnered with NE1 Can to arrange a series of visits to secondary schools to both showcase the careers available in the bus industry, and also better engage with the communities we serve.

Overall, Champions have raised awareness among colleagues around all the themes that were chosen. They have prompted discussion and engagement around topics that aren't always easy for colleagues to talk about, and have made great progress in demonstrating to all colleagues that we are a modern company that takes equality and diversity seriously.

CONCLUSION

Though there have been successes in the fifteen months that we've running our One Team GNE initiative, the work that has been done has all taken place against the backdrop of Covid-19 and the restrictions that has placed upon workplaces. Thus, most of the planning and formulation meetings have had to take place virtually, and we have been further limited as to the kinds of activities and events we've been able to do.

Engaging colleagues in frontline roles – and asking them to take the lead – has, at times, proved challenging. We have had to try and find the balance between giving Champions time during their working hours to take part in One Team GNE whilst also asking for some commitment outside of these times, such as when we've hosted events (virtual and in-person). As we move into the next phase of the initiative, we will seek to hone this and better structure engagement from colleague Champions.

Though anecdotally there has been greater awareness among colleagues around the topics that One Team GNE is centred on, we do not know definitively know whether we have sufficiently impacted upon those colleagues who perhaps would benefit from understanding more about diversity and inclusivity; it may be that we've engaged more with colleagues already interested in, and knowledgeable about, such topics. Even though we have done lots of work with the initiative, there are still colleagues who don't understand what One Team GNE is about. This therefore poses the question of how we better communicate the aims of our initiative and reach those who may not ordinarily be interested in such workplace programmes.

Lastly, one thing that we have definitely learned is that such an initiative requires resourcing sufficiently. Though we have had some great support and enthusiasm from our Lead Champions, the workload for these needs to be carefully managed so that it can be fit around their normal roles and tasks given to them are within their capabilities.

This year we will be looking to take stock of what we have achieved so far through One Team GNE and reflect on how we can adapt and progress the programme based on what we have learnt so far. Suffice to say, there is still lots that can be done and work around inclusivity and diversity needs to be a continuous journey!