

# **The Value of Voice Through Employee Ownership: Fabric or Fabrication?**

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## Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to explore whether employee voice in an employee-owned enterprise is different to that in conventional businesses. Employee voice encompasses the different ways employees can express their ideas or concerns at work. Contemporary knowledge tends to draw empirical evidence from conventional businesses where ‘efficiency’ is a key objective of voice mechanisms. However, there is growing evidence suggesting that voice which does not correspond to this objective can go ‘unheard’. There is a gap in the literature; less is known about alternative mechanisms through which voice may be heard, such as employee-ownership.

Employee-ownership differs to conventional business. Differentiating factors include employees having a ‘right’ to a voice through its ‘embeddedness’ in the governance structure expressed through ‘sophisticated’ processes. This suggests employee voice is part of an organisation’s ‘fabric’. However, employee ‘compliance’, ‘organisational hierarchy’ and ‘management resistance’ are factors which can hamper voice in such enterprises suggesting it is a ‘fabrication’. All of these factors are explored in the thesis which adopts a subjectivist and interpretivist philosophical approach and uses a qualitative single case study of an employee-owned organisation providing social care services. The research methods were semi-structured interviews, observations and documentary evidence.

The empirical evidence suggested mixed findings. Employee-ownership did provide opportunities for voice to be heard as part of its fabric. However, the pressures on, and dominance of, senior executives counteracted and weakened voice suggesting it was a fabrication. Employee-ownership was regarded as a management tool that would achieve the objective of company efficiency. A key finding is that, even when voice did reflect this objective, it often went unheard. The conclusion is that the way employee voice is heard is not because of a mechanism, but in the way it is valued. The contribution to knowledge of this thesis is; the difference in employee voice is created because of the way in which it is valued.

**Keywords:** Employee voice, employee-owned enterprise, value of voice, unheard voice

## **Dedication**

This thesis is dedicated to all of those who lost their jobs through Thatcherism and to the subsequent generations who lost the possibility of work.

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‘...employee voice is a fragile plant that needs care and attention to allow it to flourish’.

*New Times for Employee Voice?*  
Adrian Wilkinson & Charles Fay

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# Chapter One: Introduction

## 1.1 Overview of the study

The aim of this thesis is to explore whether employee voice in an employee-owned enterprise is different compared to that of conventional businesses. Employee voice encompasses the different ways employees are able to express their ideas or concerns at work. Much of what we know about contemporary employee voice is based on empirical evidence which has been drawn from conventional businesses. A characteristic of some conventional businesses is the objective of maximising company efficiency (Budd 2004). Reflecting this objective, the processes through which employee voice is expressed are likely to be an ‘employer choice’ (Croucher et al 2010).

In conventional businesses, it is typically managers who are the architects of contemporary employee voice (Wilkinson et al 2015). The choices they make tend towards mechanisms which are regarded as ‘low-level’ (Wilkinson and Fay 2011) such as newsletters and team briefings. The purpose of such mechanisms is to contribute to the efficiency objective of the company. Voice is of value inasmuch as it achieves this purpose. However, there is growing evidence that voice which does not correspond to this objective can go ‘unheard’ (Gunawardana 2014; Wilkinson et al 2018). The risk of voice going unheard helps to reveal a gap in the literature, less is known about alternative voice mechanisms, which may enable voice to be heard. This study will explore employee voice in an unconventional business: an employee-owned enterprise.

Employee-owned enterprises differ to conventional business vis-à-vis employee voice. Factors which can enable employee voice are through employees having a ‘right’ to a voice (Pendleton 2001), the ‘embeddedness’ of voice in the governance structure (Bernstein 1976) and voice which is expressed through ‘sophisticated’ governance processes (Flanders et al 1968; Salaman and Storey 2016). These factors suggest that employee voice will be heard as it is part of an organisation’s ‘fabric’. However, there are other factors which can hamper employee voice in an employee-owned enterprise. These include ‘employee compliance’ (Cathcart 2014), ‘organisational hierarchy’ (Atzeni 2012) and ‘management resistance’ (McCarthy and Palcic 2012), which, it is argued here,

suggests employee voice may be little more than a ‘fabrication’. The differentiating and hampering factors are summarised in table 1.1 below.

<b>Fabric</b>	<b>Fabrication</b>
Right to a voice	Employee compliance
Embeddedness of voice	Organisational hierarchy
Sophisticated governance processes	Management resistance

**Table 1.1 Employee voice as fabric or fabrication**

All of these factors are explored through the methodological approach of the study. The study adopts a subjectivist and interpretivist philosophical approach and uses a qualitative single case study of an employee-owned organisation providing social care services. The methods of research were semi-structured interviews, observations and documentary evidence.

The empirical evidence suggested mixed findings. Employee-ownership in the studied case did provide opportunities for employee voice to be heard which were created through it being part of the organisation’s fabric. However, the pressures on, and dominance of, senior executives counteracted and weakened voice. Senior executives regarded employee-ownership as a management tool that would achieve the objective of company efficiency. It was used to constrain employee-owners restricting who could speak and on which subjects which was reinforced through the ‘organisational hierarchy’ and ‘management resistance’ suggesting it was little more than a fabrication.

A key finding of this study is that, even when voice did reflect the efficiency objective, it often went unheard, though, importantly, this was not an outcome of the mechanism. The conclusion is that the way employee voice is heard is not because of a mechanism, but in the way it is valued. Employee voice will not spontaneously appear through employee-ownership because of the right to a voice, its embeddedness or its sophisticated processes. Rather, it is a philosophy which relates to the value we place on the right to be heard. This leads to the contribution of this thesis; the difference in employee voice is created not because of a mechanism, but because of the way in which it is valued.

## **1.2 Background to the study**

Employee voice in the UK was traditionally expressed through trade unions (Budd 2004). Trade unions, via representatives, were the primary way employees expressed their voice at work during much of the twentieth century. Some defining characteristics of employee voice expressed in this way were that it was collective and independent of management and its primary concern was equity; fairness in the workplace was a key principle of employee voice during this period. Trade unions provided a level of protection to employees, acting to correct or mediate the employment relationship when necessary (Benson and Brown 2010). Reflecting the point that they were the key voice mechanism during this period, the membership of trade unions was at its peak in 1979 with thirteen million members (Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy 2016). However, a change in the political environment led to what Dundon et al (2017) refer to as a transformation of employee voice.

During the 1980s, employee voice in UK workplaces changed dramatically. A contributing factor to this transformation was the election in 1979 of a Conservative government. The new government created a political and economic environment which was underpinned by a 'neo-liberal' philosophy (Hall and Soskice 2001) that included privileging the market and emphasising individualism (Legge 2005). A particular characteristic of this philosophy was an emphasis on efficiency. The new environment, underpinned by a philosophy emphasising efficiency, provided the conditions for changes to employee voice and was the opposite of the collective, independent and equity-focused voice expressed through trade unions. However, whilst the new environment provided the conditions for change, a further development was to crystallise the changes to employee voice. This was through a process which, though at the time was prevalent in the US, was new to the UK: Human Resource Management (HRM).

The growth in interest in HRM was attributed to various factors. These included a growth in national interest in new management methods to stimulate productivity and industrial performance, gain competitive advantage in the world economy as well as a perception that American management methods were 'best practice' and should be imported and emulated (Kaufman 2007). Characteristics of HRM were that it was proactive and integrative and formed part of an employee commitment and participation system (Beer and Spector 1984). As it relates to employee voice, through an HRM function, it is

typically managers who are the architects of contemporary employee voice (Wilkinson et al 2015).

In conventional businesses it is usually managers who choose employee voice mechanisms and those choices are influenced by their concerns for company efficiency (Budd 2004). Whilst 40% of UK workplaces reportedly have no voice mechanisms at all (Van Wanrooy et al 2013) and as there is no legal obligation for companies to implement voice mechanisms, when managers do implement mechanisms, the choices they make tend towards those which are regarded as ‘low-level’ (Wilkinson and Fay 2011). Examples of low-level mechanisms include newsletters and team briefings. They are considered low-level as they confer limited ability for employees to have any influence; information is provided to employees who have no involvement with, or influence over, that information. Yet it is these mechanisms which are more likely to populate UK workplaces (Marchington et al 1992). The use of low-level mechanisms can have a negative bearing on employee voice.

Employee voice exists within a political and economic environment that prioritises efficiency. Efficiency is one of the main objectives of conventional businesses (Budd 2004). Reflecting this objective, the processes through which employee voice is expressed are likely to be an ‘employer choice’ (Croucher et al 2010) and are typically ‘low-level’ (Wilkinson and Fay 2011) meaning employees are afforded little opportunity to express their voice about anything beyond that prescribed by managers. This means voice is of value inasmuch as it contributes to this objective. However, there is growing evidence that voice which does not correspond to this objective can go ‘unheard’ (Gunawardana 2014; Wilkinson et al 2018). The risk of voice going unheard helps to reveal a gap in the literature, less is known about alternative voice mechanisms, which may enable voice to be heard.

### **1.3 Relevance of the thesis**

Whilst much has been learnt from the existing literature about employee voice, much of the contemporary literature is by HRM scholars who tend to draw evidence from the mechanisms used in conventional businesses. Such mechanisms are typically management-led, considered as being ‘low-level’ (Wilkinson and Fay 2011) and reflect an objective of company efficiency (Budd 2004). Given that such mechanisms are



determined by managers, they are susceptible to practices such as agenda-setting (Donaghey et al 2011<sup>a</sup>). Practices such as agenda-setting can limit the scope of topics employees are able to discuss and are therefore considered to be ‘weak voice systems’ (Dobbins and Dundon 2011). Within this environment, employees have only limited, if any, opportunities to express their voice over matters of concern to them. As such, there is a risk that some voices may go unheard.

A recent debate in some of the Employment Relations literature relates to ‘unheard’ voices. The argument is that the prevalence of managers’ concerns with efficiency, and their choices for low-level mechanisms, can lead to employee voice being unheard. In other words, voice which does not comply with that prescribed by management can go unheard (Gunawardana 2014; Wilkinson et al 2018). There are a number of negative outcomes of this such as ideas being missed, or employees leaving the organisation bringing costs to themselves and to their employer. By highlighting the issue of unheard voices, the debate has drawn attention to a limitation in the extant employee voice literature. Though we know much about employee voice in conventional businesses we know less about it through alternative mechanisms which may offer greater potential for it to be heard. An alternative mechanism is employee-ownership.

Employee-ownership is different to conventional businesses. The differences include factors such as employees having a ‘right’ to a voice through its ‘embeddedness’ in the governance structure and it being expressed through a range of ‘sophisticated’ processes. These factors suggest employee-ownership provides the potential for voices to be heard through it being part of a company’s fabric, the ‘organisational infrastructure’ (Dundon et al 2017). However, several opposing factors could inhibit employee voice through employee-ownership. These are ‘employee compliance’, ‘organisational hierarchy’ and ‘management resistance’. All of these factors mean employee-ownership provides a fruitful site for further investigation of employee voice and have helped to inform the research questions of this study.

#### **1.4 Research questions**

To address the gap in the extant literature regarding alternative employee voice mechanisms through which voice may be heard, this thesis explores employee voice in an employee-owned enterprise. The aim is to understand whether employee voice in such an

enterprise is different compared to that in conventional businesses. To achieve this aim, the following questions were used to guide the research process:

1. What contextual factors influenced the choice of mechanism in the studied case?
2. How did the mechanism differ to those in conventional businesses?
3. How did employee voice operate through the mechanism?
4. What were the consequences of the mechanism for key organisational actors?

By addressing these questions, the thesis will contribute to the contemporary debates concerning unheard voices and to our knowledge of employee voice through an alternative mechanism. To evaluate the questions, the thesis uses the theoretical lens of the ‘frames of reference’ conceived by Fox (1966; 1974).

### **1.5 Theoretical framework**

The theoretical framework of the thesis is the ‘frames of reference’ which were devised by the industrial sociologist Alan Fox. In a paper written for the Donovan Commission on trade unions and employers’ associations, Fox (1966) described the dominance of two perspectives in UK industrial relations; unitarist and pluralist. He later added a third frame, radical (Fox 1974). Fox (1966, 1974) argued that each frame provided a different interpretation of the employment relationship. Characteristic of unitarism is harmony in the employment relationship as employers and employees strive towards common goals. Pluralism interprets the relationship as both co-operative and conflictual based on the different interests and concerns of employees and employers. The radical frame regards the employment relationship as inherently flawed, skewed as it is towards the interests of employers.

Since they were conceived, the frames have been used in different ways such as to understand how they underpin management styles and preferences (Legge 2005; see also Boxall and Purcell 2011; Johnstone and Wilkinson 2017). They have also been used to identify competing interpretations of the employment relationship (Bray et al 2015; Dundon et al 2017; Heery 2016; Kaufman 2015) and to evaluate employment relations in

practice (Heery et al 2008) such as through labour-management partnerships (Johnstone and Wilkinson 2017). Importantly, a key feature of the frames is the premise that management styles, preferences or interpretations do not exist in isolation, rather, they are based on different philosophies which inform decisions, choices, actions, etc. As such, the frames provide a way of understanding and evaluating these different philosophies. As they relate to this thesis, the frames facilitate an understanding of the different philosophies which underpin management approaches to employee voice.

By applying the frames of reference to the study of employee voice, its pluralist background is revealed through the mechanism of trade unions and its subsequent ‘transformation’ (Dundon et al 2017) to the contemporary unitarist configuration through HRM. The frames also reveal some of the consequences of this unitarist configuration of employee voice which can manifest as low-level mechanisms meaning some voices go unheard. Budd and Bhave (2008) suggest we need to understand management philosophy as it is this which affects individuals’ own values and principles and therefore decisions about the design and implementation of voice mechanisms.

In turn, management philosophy will affect how voice mechanisms are experienced by employees. The frames help us to understand these different philosophies and therefore help us to see how each individual frame will generate different forms and intensities of employee voice (Kaufman 2015) through the mechanism of employee-ownership. Whilst previous studies have considered employee voice as an aspect of studying employee-ownership (e.g. Cathcart 2014; Salaman and Storey 2016), they did not use the frames of reference as the theoretical framework. In this study, the frames of reference will provide an intellectual lens through which to view employee voice in an employee-owned enterprise and help to explain and evaluate how it is different compared to a conventional business.

### **1.6 Structure of the thesis**

Including this chapter, the thesis has eight chapters. Chapter two reviews the literature on employee voice. It begins by exploring the meaning of employee voice. This highlights interest from two principal academic disciplines; Employment Relations and HRM. Importantly, these two have quite different conceptualisations of employee voice which are explored further, firstly, by drawing on Employment Relations literature to review the

meaning of employee voice from this perspective and then drawing on HRM literature to review the meaning from this perspective. This reveals that much of our contemporary understanding of employee voice is from HRM scholars who draw empirical evidence from conventional businesses where 'efficiency' is a key objective of employee voice mechanisms. Having discussed various varieties of voice mechanisms, it then introduces a recent debate from Employment Relations scholars who argue that voice which does not correspond to efficiency can go 'unheard'. This debate highlights a limited knowledge of alternative mechanisms through which voice may be heard. As an alternative, the chapter then discusses the literature on employee-ownership. This includes highlighting three differentiating factors of employee voice through employee-ownership compared to conventional businesses: the 'right' to a voice, the 'embeddedness' of voice and 'sophisticated' governance processes suggesting it is part of an organisation's fabric. However, factors are also discussed which could hamper it: 'employee compliance', 'organisational hierarchy' and 'management resistance' suggesting it may be a fabrication. These factors are evaluated through the theoretical framework of the thesis.

Chapter three discusses the theoretical framework that is used to evaluate whether employee voice is different through employee-ownership, the frames of reference. The frames help to reveal the philosophies of managers which underpin their choice of employee voice mechanisms and can shape how those mechanisms evolve in a company. The chapter begins by highlighting the main characteristics of the unitarist, pluralist and radical frames conceived by Fox (1966; 1974). It then discusses two developments to the frames. The first is a reconfiguration of the unitarist frame into hard unitarism and soft unitarism (Storey 1989). The reconfiguration helps to highlight that it is the hard and soft unitarism frames which underpin much of the contemporary HRM literature. They are reflected in the choices of some managers for low-level voice mechanisms and in what they regard as the purpose of such mechanisms, which is to contribute to company 'efficiency'. The second is a recent development to the pluralist frame; collaborative pluralism (Bray et al 2015), which offers a different way to conceive employee voice through voice as a 'right' and 'co-operative'. These three frames are used in this thesis to facilitate an understanding of the different philosophies which underpin management choices and approaches to employee voice in an employee-owned enterprise.

Chapter four outlines the rationale for, and approach to, the research methodology adopted for this study. It begins by considering the philosophical traditions which underpin different research approaches revealing how this affects research practice. To highlight these differences, it then discusses the approaches of HRM and Employment Relations scholars to the study of employee voice. It then states the approach here, which is a subjectivist ontology, interpretivist epistemology and a qualitative methodology via a single case study. This is followed by a discussion of the research design which follows the Context, Mechanism and Outcomes (CMO) configuration conceived by Pawson and Tilley (1997) which was used here to organise data collection and analysis. Next, it outlines the research process which includes selecting and accessing the case, methods of data collection and data analysis. Finally, it discusses some of the limitations of the methodology. Given that this chapter highlights the importance of understanding the environment in which employee-ownership emerged, the next chapter discusses the social care sector as it is here that the studied case operates.

Chapter five discusses the social care sector in which the studied case operates. The first section considers the context of social care and references a key policy turn, the 1990 National Health Services and Community Care Act. The Act led to the marketization of social care and an increase in the prevalence of for-profit social care organisations. The chapter then considers the choices of employee voice mechanisms in social care organisations which are typically chosen by management and are low-level. It then examines the outcomes of employee voice in social care which reveals problems such as recruitment and retention of social care employees as they tend to leave an organisation rather than express their voice through low-level mechanisms. However, rather than leave the sector, some employees move to other social care organisations creating a paradox within the sector that is discussed in the final section.

Chapter six presents the findings from the case study of Vivo-Co. The chapter begins with a company profile and then provides findings of aspects of the whole organisation such as how space is occupied and the company values. It then presents findings of the context in which Vivo-Co operates. This highlights a key objective in Vivo-Co of efficiency which was hampered by reduced local authority funding. This led to adopting a 'strategy of growth' and addressing the 'recruitment and retention problem', the latter through employee-ownership. The chapter then discusses the mechanism of employee-

ownership revealing that employee-ownership did present the potential of voice forming part of the fabric. There was a right to a voice which was embedded in the governing document and the potential was there of it being expressed through the sophisticated processes of an Annual General Meeting and a General Council. The final section discusses the outcomes of employee-ownership which reveal challenges to employee voice: 'employee compliance', 'organisational hierarchy' and 'management resistance'. It is then argued that these challenges were a result of employee-ownership being regarded as a management tool that would achieve the objective of company efficiency. This leads to the key finding that, even when employee voice did reflect an efficiency objective, it often went unheard, suggesting it was a fabrication.

Chapter seven, using the frames of reference, evaluates the findings from Vivo-Co as they relate to the employee voice literature. It evaluates the context of employee voice revealing that the assumption by senior executives that employee-ownership would incentivise employees was consistent with some of the literature. This literature is underpinned by a philosophy that regards employees as calculative and motivated by financial gain. It then evaluates how employee-ownership, as a voice mechanism, affects employee voice. The evidence here is consistent with the literature, employee-ownership can provide the means for voice to be heard through factors such as more sophisticated voice processes. It then evaluates the outcomes of employee voice through employee-ownership. The literature suggests potential challenges, such as through management concerns of compliance, evidenced here through voice which was counteracted and weakened. The next section argues that these challenges meant that some voices went unheard. This leads to the final section which discusses whether employee voice in Vivo-Co was part of the fabric or merely a fabrication. The chapter concludes that employee voice is a philosophy concerning the value placed on the right to be heard. This leads to the contribution of this thesis; the difference in employee voice is created not because of a mechanism, but because of the way in which it is valued.

Chapter eight presents the conclusions of the study and offers some suggestions for future research. It begins by summarising the key points of the study drawn from the preceding chapters. It then considers the limitations in the extant literature which provided the motivation for this study and informed the research questions and then discusses how these limitations and questions were addressed by this study. This is followed by a

discussion of the main conclusions of this study based on the findings and analysis. Within the next section, relating to the fabric and fabrication of employee voice through employee-ownership, it then sets out the key finding of this study: even when employee voice does reflect an efficiency objective, it often went unheard. Its final conclusion is that the way voice is heard is not because of a mechanism, rather, employee voice is a philosophy concerning the value we place on the right to be heard. This leads to the contribution to knowledge of this study: the difference in employee voice is created because of the way in which it is valued. The contribution to knowledge of this thesis is the value of voice.

## **Chapter Two: Literature Review**

### **2.1 Introduction**

This chapter reviews the literature on employee voice. Following chapter one, which outlined the aim of the thesis and set out the research questions, this chapter is organised around seven themes. The first explores the meaning of employee voice. This highlights the influence of two academic disciplines; Employment Relations and HRM which have quite different conceptualisations of employee voice. To investigate these differences, the second theme reviews the meaning of employee voice through the Employment Relations literature and the traditional mechanism of trade unions. The third draws on the HRM literature to review the meaning of employee voice from this perspective. This reveals that much of our contemporary understanding of employee voice is by HRM scholars who draw empirical evidence from conventional businesses where ‘efficiency’ is a key objective of employee voice mechanisms. This is reflected in ‘management choice’ which tends toward those considered to be at a ‘low-level’. To highlight this point, the fourth considers the varieties of contemporary employee voice mechanisms and the nature of voice that each yields. The fifth presents a recent debate in the Employment Relations literature which argues that voice which does not correspond to the efficiency objective can go ‘unheard’. This debate helps to highlight a limitation in the extant literature which is that much less is known about alternative voice mechanisms through which voice may be heard. To address this limitation, the remaining two themes review literature on employee-ownership. The first of these reviews the development of employee-ownership in the UK whilst the second discusses factors which differentiate employee-owned businesses from conventional businesses in relation to employee voice. Differentiating factors are having the ‘right’ to a voice through its ‘embeddedness’ in the governance structure and expressed through ‘sophisticated’ processes which suggest it is part of the organisational fabric. However, a number of factors are revealed which can present challenges to employee voice: ‘employee compliance’, ‘organisational hierarchy’ and ‘management resistance’ suggesting that it may be little more than a fabrication. All of these factors suggest employee-ownership will provide a particularly interesting site to explore whether, in such enterprises, employee voice is different compared to that of conventional businesses.



## **2.2 The meaning of employee voice**

Discussions about the meaning of ‘employee voice’ often draw on the work of the economist Alfred Hirschman (1970) as the starting point in the academic literature (Budd 2014; Dundon et al 2004; Mowbray et al 2015). His seminal work on African railways was related to customer behaviour and sought to differentiate ways of explaining company decline. Hirschman (1970) considered customer behaviour in relation to an ‘exit, voice and loyalty’ framework. Exit relates to a customer choosing to leave an organisation due to a particular dissatisfaction. Alternatively, that customer may use channels available to them, i.e. voice, to express their concerns. Because the customer has been able to air their concerns then the likelihood is they will remain with the organisation: loyalty. However, whilst this conceptualisation may provide a useful starting point in understanding what is meant by employee voice, its transferability to the relationship between employees and employers are uncertain.

The exit, voice and loyalty framework implies a linear progression between exit and loyalty with voice being the intervening factor: if voice mechanisms are put in place then the risk of someone leaving are reduced. Whilst this might apply to customer behaviour, it is argued here that the relationship between employees and employers is something quite different and more complex when compared to the relationship between a company and its customers. Indeed, when employee voice is conceived as a fundamental part of the relationship between employees and employers, which some Employment Relations scholars argue it is (e.g. Budd 2004; Dundon et al 2004), then its conceptual boundaries are broadened and go beyond that of the exit, voice and loyalty framework. Consideration of a broader conceptualisation of employee voice, highlights that it has an ‘historical pedigree’ which is often omitted in contemporary text on voice (Wilkinson et al 2014).

### ***2.2.1 Employee voice through different academic disciplines***

The necessity for employees to have a voice at work emerged during the industrial revolution because of the substantial numbers of those working in the newly created ‘manufactories’ being subjected to harsh conditions and low wages (Cole 1913). Though the term ‘employee voice’ was never used at the time, much of the intellectual thinking on it was within this historical context and was influenced by a range of different academic disciplines. This includes the sociologist Emile Durkheim, the economist Adam

Smith (Kaufman 2014), the philosopher and economist Karl Marx (Wilkinson et al 2014), the psychologist Hugo Munsterberg (Wilkinson et al 2015) and the political economist Harry Braverman (Foley and Polanyi 2006). This interest from different academic disciplines is important as it has shaped what employee voice means which varies according to each (Dundon et al 2004; Dundon et al 2017; Wilkinson et al 2018).

The importance of understanding the interest in employee voice from different academic disciplines is that this has led to two principal interpretations of its meaning. One interpretation relates to equity concerns and the second relates to efficiency concerns. For example, Braverman and Durkheim would regard having a voice at work as a way of enabling employees a moral right to humane and non-alienating work environments; an equity concern. Conversely, the primacy of the economy is apparent in the writing of Smith, Munsterberg and Hirschman; an efficiency concern. Against this academic backdrop, bodies of literature have developed around these two different meanings. A primary emphasis on equity has developed through the academic disciplines of sociology and political science and through the field of Employment Relations. In contrast, a primary emphasis on efficiency has developed through the disciplines of economics and psychology and the field of Human Resource Management. As such, Employment Relations and HRM scholars have quite different conceptualisations of employee voice, therefore an understanding of these differences is important to the discussion of employee voice.

Within the body of Employment Relations literature, employee voice is conceived in a particular way such as the idea of ‘meaningful’ voice espoused by Budd (2004). This is achieved when employees have some input into decision-making, they are able to speak freely and they have the opportunity to challenge without any reprisal. Employee voice conceived in this way is therefore focused on the objective of ‘equity’ and its expression has traditionally been channelled through trade unions. By contrast, the prevailing contemporary use of the term has tended to be influenced by HRM scholars who have a different way of conceiving employee voice. The HRM literature tends to focus on efficiency objectives and voice reflects this objective and is channelled through an array of mechanisms. These differences between Employment Relations and HRM scholars and their conceptualisation of employee voice are important as they have shaped and

influenced academic understanding of it which also influences how it is conceived and manifests within companies.

### **2.3 Employee voice and Employment Relations**

Employee voice has been a major topic of Employment Relations for many years (Barry and Wilkinson 2015). Much of the early thinking about employee voice is reflected in the classical work of Beatrice and Sydney Webb. Though never using the term ‘employee voice’, through their seminal work ‘Industrial Democracy’ (1897), the notion of employee voice manifests through links between industrial democracy and democratic theory, through trade union representation and notions of democratic processes (Dachler and Wilpert 1978). Focusing on the role of trade unions, this work concerned the mechanisms through which employees were able to ‘have a say’ at work (Marchington et al 1992), i.e. trade unions. The meaning of employee voice in this context was equity. The work of the Webbs continued to influence much of the intellectual thinking on the meaning of employee voice during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This was channelled through trade unions and espoused academically through the field of Employment Relations.

The Webbs are regarded as the founders of the Employment Relations tradition in the UK (Heery 2016; Mueller-Jentsch 2004). For Employment Relation scholars, employee voice has a focus on the various ways and means employees are able to ‘have a say’ at work (Marchington et al 1992). In other words, there is an emphasis on voice which reflects the concerns and interests of employees. This emphasis represents a fundamental premise on which Employment Relations is based: whilst there are areas of consensus in the relationship between employer and employee there are also differences, which at times may cause conflict. As such, the field of Employment Relations has a particular focus on the mechanisms through which employee voice is expressed – which historically, as noted above, was through trade unions. This Employment Relations lens was used in the pioneering work on American trade unions by Richard B. Freeman and James L. Medoff (Rees et al 2013).

Acknowledging that it made ‘good sense’ to both employees and employers to have a voice mechanism (Dundon et al 2004), Freeman and Medoff (1979; 1984) identified two opposing views on the efficacy of trade unions. The first is the monopoly view whereby

trade unions are regarded as detrimental in capitalist societies doing little more than raising the wages of their members and in so doing, increasing the degree of economic inefficiency. In the second view, trade unions provide employees with a collective voice. Freeman and Medoff (1984) regarded collective voice as more favourable than individual voice as it helped to improve employment conditions as well as the conditions facilitating employee well-being, they argued:

‘In a unionised setting, the union takes account of *all* workers and forms an average of preference that usually determines its position at the bargaining table...unionism provides an alternative mechanism for bringing about important and socially desirable changes’ (emphasis in original; p.7).

One of their research findings was that the voice aspect of trade unions was key in reducing wage inequality and lowering profits. Based on this finding, Freeman and Medoff (*ibid*) suggest that for those who think economic equality is a plus, the role of trade unions was definitely good. Conversely, for those who think economic equality was bad then so too was the role of trade unions. They concluded from their research that trade unions raised social efficiency and reduced wage inequality. For them, trade unions were the best agents of voice as they are independent of employers, a factor which in turn aids the legitimacy of voice (Dundon et al 2004). Importantly, given the prominence of this work, the conceptual development of employee voice within the field of Employment Relations during much of the twentieth century became synonymous with trade unions (Ackers 2015; Bryson et al 2006; Budd 2014).

Trade union membership was at a peak in the late 1970s in the UK. The typical member was a male, full-time manual worker in the production sector (Greene 2015). Trade unions provided a level of protection to employees by acting to correct or mediate the employment relationship when necessary (Benson and Brown 2010). Voice in this context is conceived as a form of ‘social insurance’ (Mares 2001) concerned as it is with equity. Trade unions enabled a collective voice that was independent of management and designed to act predominantly on behalf of employees in areas such as pay negotiations and terms and conditions of employment. In so doing, they provided a route for an equitable voice. Equity was the key concern that shaped an understanding of employee voice during this period (Budd 2004). However, a changed political landscape during the 1980s led to employee voice becoming associated with, and limited to, grievance in the

workplace; trade unions became associated with a voice of ‘grievance’ (Dundon et al 2004; Wilkinson et al 2018). The membership of trade unions began to decline at this time and has continuously declined since (Ackers 2015). This new political environment coupled with the new practice of HRM meant changes to the nature of employee voice.

#### **2.4 Employee voice and Human Resource Management**

Whilst trade unions were the main source of employee voice during the twentieth century, by the beginning of the twenty-first century, the main suppliers of voice in Britain were employers (Gomez et al 2009; see also Johnstone and Ackers 2015; Pohler and Luchak 2014<sup>a</sup>). Notwithstanding international trends, two key events in the UK influenced this change: the 1979 election of a Conservative government and the new practice of HRM. When these two events combined, voice was re-oriented away from equity concerns towards efficiency concerns.

A fundamental shift in the political environment during the latter part of the twentieth century had a substantial impact on employee voice. The industrial and economic turmoil of the 1970s led to strained relationships between trade unions and employers and trade unions and the state, a situation that led directly to the Thatcher era (Howell and Givan 2011). The election of a Conservative government led by Margaret Thatcher in 1979 heralded a sudden and rapid decline in the role of trade union voice (Johnstone and Ackers 2015). This new government was antagonistic towards trade unions. Trade union voice was regarded by some as the voice of grievance (Dundon et al 2004) the nature of which was ‘reactive’ (Kaufman 2007). Whereas the concern of trade unions was to provide a counter-balance between the needs of employees and those of employers, the new environment shifted attention to the needs of business. There was a ‘seismic shift’ during the 1980s in the relationship between employers and employees with power shifting in favour of management and shareholders (Mueller and Carter 2005) and away from the trade union side of the employment relationship (Procter and Rowlinson 2012) which resulted in, what Dundon et al (2017) refer to as, a transformation of employee voice.

The Conservative government laid the foundations for an economic environment which was founded on free-market, neo-liberal policies. Once in office, they increasingly intervened to diminish the role of trade unions. This created a new landscape that marked

the beginning of large-scale de-collectivisation of employment relations institutions which has resulted in a continuing trajectory towards de-centralised, individualised, company-centred employment relations institutions offering much greater flexibility and autonomy in determining pay and conditions at the company level (Howell and Givan 2011). The new environment enabled profit, productivity and performance to take precedence over any other concerns. Described as ‘casino capitalism’ (Hyman 2015), it has led to practices that have become familiar today such as asset-stripping, secondary markets and private equity. Terms such as shareholder value, commercial confidentiality and reputational damage have become common parlance both nationally and at the company level.

The new environment was fertile ground for a different type of voice at work channelled through a vehicle that was relatively new to the UK: HRM. The term ‘HRM’ first appeared in the USA in the 1960s through ‘morphing’ some of the functions traditionally the domain of Employment Relations with those of personnel management (Godard 2014; Kaufman 2007). Though the roots of HRM as we would recognise it today appeared in the UK in the late nineteenth century, Kaufman (2007) states it was not until the 1980s that real interest began.

The growth in interest in HRM was attributed to various factors, one of which was the demise of the trade unions - an historical irony given HRM developed, at least in part, from an industrial relations context. Other influencing factors included a growth in national interest in new management methods which would stimulate productivity and industrial performance, contribute to gaining a competitive advantage in the world economy as well as a perception that American management methods were ‘best practice’ and should be imported and emulated (ibid).

The idea that HRM represented best practice developed because of the characteristics which tend to be associated with its practices. These include that HRM is regarded as proactive and integrative and forms part of an employee commitment and participation system (Beer and Spector 1984). Importantly, unlike its trade union predecessor as a channel for employee voice, this new HRM function was not focused on equity concerns of employees but rather on company performance (Wilkinson and Fay 2011). Furthermore, in practice this meant an emphasis on individual and direct voice and little,

if any, room for voice being collective or independent of management as it was with trade unions. Through an HRM function, it is typically managers who are the architects of contemporary employee voice (Wilkinson et al 2015).

Where previously voice had been collective and indirect and channelled through trade unions it became individual and direct expressed through an array of mechanisms channelled through HRM departments. HRM was influenced by the management practices from overseas, such as Japan and the United States. As it developed in the contemporary UK workplace, it was managers who were the architects and implementers of employee voice (ibid). Terms like ‘involvement’ and ‘communication’ became fashionable and were associated with managerial initiatives designed to elicit employee commitment (Dobbins and Dundon 2011). Employee voice was regarded as the key ingredient for creating commitment (Wilkinson and Fay 2011). Further, HRM scholars argued that giving employees a voice made good business sense thus improving organisational performance (Timming and Johnstone 2015).

Subsequently, much of the extant literature on employee voice has developed around attempts to prove links between specific HRM-initiated voice practices and outcomes on employee performance (e.g. Perotin 2012). However, some Employment Relations scholars contend the HRM literature arguing that the new voice practices yield limited opportunity for employees to express their voice on anything beyond efficiency concerns (e.g. Budd 2004). To explore this contention, the next section considers some of these contemporary employee voice practices and then explores the nature of employee voice yielded.

## **2.5 The varieties of employee voice**

Mindful that approximately 40% of workplaces have no voice mechanisms at all (Van Wanrooy et al 2013) and that there is no legal obligation for companies to implement voice mechanisms, for those employees who do have access to voice mechanisms, there appears an abundance in the modern day workplace. Contemporary voice mechanisms are numerous and vary from formal to informal, direct to indirect, representative to non-representative and collective to individual. To illustrate this variety, some of the types and forms are shown in table 2.1 below.

<b>Voice Type</b>	<b>Examples of Voice Forms</b>
Formal	Codified, pre-arranged, concrete structures (Marchington & Suter 2013); employee surveys, suggestions boxes, and financial participation and trade unions (Gomez et al 2009).
Informal	No explicit voice mechanisms (Mowbray et al 2015); electronic communications, employee feedback, conversations at social functions and informal meetings within the workplace (Gomez et al 2009).
Direct	Individual, face-to-face (CIPD 2010; Marchington & Suter 2013), employee surveys (Gomez et al 2009).
Indirect	Collective, representative, trade unions (Johnstone and Ackers 2015; Marchington & Suter 2013).
Representative	Trade unions, workplace partnerships (Johnstone 2014; 2015); non-union employee representation (NER – i.e. one or two employees acting in a representative manner in dealing with management over workplace issues – (Butler 2005; Pohler and Luchak 2014 <sup>a</sup> ); work councils (Marchington and Suter 2013); Joint Consultative Committees and Boards of Directors (Markey et al 2013).
Non-representative	Consultative Committees (Barry and Wilkinson 2015) and team briefings (Marchington et al 1992).
Collective	Trade unions, grievance procedures and collective bargaining (Wilkinson et al 2014); collective consultation, partnership agreements and employee forums (CIPD 2010; Johnstone 2014, 2015).
Individualised	Social media, social gatherings, employee share ownership (Budd 2014).

**Table 2.1 Voice types and forms**

Though they have been separated for illustrative purposes, the types and forms shown in table 2.1 are not mutually exclusive. For example, direct voice can be expressed either formally, such as a face-to-face meeting between an employee and a manager, or informally, such as a conversation during a coffee break. Nor is it the case that only one mechanism is used, it might be that a number of different mechanisms are used by the same organisation at the same time. Nor are the mechanisms constant, they may change over time. What table 2.1 is helpful in doing is highlighting the array of mechanisms through which an employee is able to express their voice at work. What it does not do however, is tell us anything about the nature of voice that each type or form confers.

Despite the quantity of voice types and forms, we know little about its nature. Indeed, as noted earlier, these types and forms tend to reflect managerial preferences. The choices of managers tend to privilege business concerns, such as a concern for the objective of efficiency, and are individual and direct in nature but what do they imply vis-à-vis employee voice? To explore this question, the work of Marchington et al (1992) is helpful. As part of their work on employee involvement in decision-making, they developed a typology of the degrees of control, organisational levels, range of subject matter and the form of involvement different mechanisms yielded (for an earlier example



of a similar typology see Bernstein 1976). As the typology applies here, ‘involvement’ is replaced with employee voice and the first part of the typology, the degree of control employees have in the organisation, is helpful in exploring employee voice through the different mechanisms.

To illustrate the degree of control generated by different mechanisms, Marchington et al (1992) used an escalator metaphor containing five different levels, see figure 2.1 below. At the first, most basic, level of the escalator are various communication channels such as house journals and team briefings, the latter also appear at the second level. Also on this level are share ownership and profit sharing schemes. Employee voice at this level is considered ‘shallow’ by Wilkinson and Fay (2011) given employees are merely informed of decisions made by management but have no capacity to influence those decisions. The rationale of employers here is simply to provide information to employees or, in terms of share ownership and profit-sharing, for employees to share in the financial gains of the organisation though with limited, if any, scope to influence decisions.

The second level includes team briefings, differentiated from team briefings at level one as at this level they provide the opportunity for a two-way dialogue between employees and managers or supervisors. Nevertheless, they are still relatively shallow as they carry little, if any, weight in terms of employees being able to influence decisions. A recent mechanism (therefore not included in this original illustration highlighted in figure 2.1 though shown in table 2.1) used by increasing numbers of employers, an employee engagement survey, could also be included at this level. Dundon et al (2004) note that employee attitude surveys are widespread and were regarded by managers as an example of ‘good’ HRM, i.e. staff being asked for their views on a regular basis. However, Purcell and Hall (2012) question the efficacy of this mechanism arguing that it is often used in isolation rather than as a check on progress and a diagnostic tool and therefore cannot ever be an effective means for employees to express their views and be consulted.

				<b>Control</b>
			<b>Co-determination</b>	Employee Owned Organisations e.g. JLP
		<b>Consultation</b>	Works Councils	
	<b>Communication</b>	Suggestion Schemes	Employee Share Ownership Plans	Worker Co-operatives e.g. SUMA
<b>Information</b>	Team Briefings	Quality Circles	Collective Bargaining	
House Journals		Joint Consultation	Employee Directors	
Share Ownership				
Profit Sharing				
Team Briefings				

**Figure 2.1 Employee involvement escalator**

The third step suggests slightly more opportunities for the expression of employee voice with, for example, employees invited to share their ideas via suggestion schemes and quality circles. Importantly, both mechanisms are intended to provide a vehicle for employees to make suggestions for improvements to the processes and procedures of their work. As such, they are considered at a lower level as the mechanisms do not provide a vehicle for employees to discuss matters of concern to them, for example, providing an avenue for employees to air grievances. It is the two remaining levels which begin to offer more opportunities to employees to express their voice. As such, they are considered to offer greater ‘depth’ (Wilkinson and Fay 2011) and ‘strength’ (Gollan et al 2015) and the potential for more extensive participation (Wilkinson and Dundon 2010), such as in terms of influencing decisions. Further, they are differentiated from the individual and direct forms of employee voice characteristic of mechanisms found at the lower end of the escalator erring as they do towards indirect, collective and representative mechanisms.

Through the fourth level, co-determination, employees are provided with more advanced opportunities to be involved at a higher organisational level such as through works councils, employee-share ownership plans, collective bargaining and as employee directors. Underpinning the works councils, for example, is a belief that whilst companies are economic institutions they are also social institutions and therefore accountable not only to shareholders but to other stakeholders, including employees (Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman 2010).

The fifth level of the escalator, 'control', is regarded as the most advanced form of participation (Bernstein 1976). Not only is there control over decision-making at the fifth level, but also greater depth of influence (Wilkinson and Fay 2011). Such influence is yielded, in part, because of the degree of participation at this level. Marchington et al (1992) suggest the fifth level would satisfy the idealist notion of 'full' participation conceived by Pateman (1970). In other words, this level would facilitate greater participation of employees in decision-making, rather than being merely recipients of decisions-made such as at levels one, two and three. However, a further distinction is made at this level and relates to ownership.

At level five there are various enterprise models that bestow some level of ownership to employees. The logic being that ownership offers the opportunity of greater control over decision-making. Notably at the fifth level are employee-owned organisations which are differentiated from employee-share ownership plans, which appear at level four, and employee share ownership/profit sharing, which appear at level one. These are important differences regarding the type of ownership as they imply differences to employee voice.

Taking employee share ownership/profit sharing first, whilst conferring rights similar to those of external shareholders in a conventional business such as a financial stake in the company and possibly some access to financial information, rights are not conferred to employees in terms of company decision-making. An example is useful to highlight this point. The UK supermarket chain Sainsbury's operates an employee share-ownership scheme [[www.j-sainsbury.co.uk/responsibility/our-values/a-great-place-to-work/](http://www.j-sainsbury.co.uk/responsibility/our-values/a-great-place-to-work/)]. Here, employees have the opportunity to purchase shares giving them access to some financial information. They do not however, have access to other aspects of company decision-

making and therefore are placed at the lowest end of the escalator. This is in contrast to employee-share ownership plans.

In a company using an employee share-ownership plan, employees may have the opportunity to be involved in a company's strategic decision-making in addition to a financial stake through their status as both employee and owner. Markey et al (2010) distinguished between participation as an employee and participation as an owner. Regarding the former, mechanisms appear at levels one to four. In contrast, participation as an owner appears at levels four and five. Participation as an owner is achieved through organisational models that, through their governance structure, 'embed' employee voice, it becomes part of the fabric through the 'organisational infrastructure' (Dundon et al 2017). Importantly, the degree of employee voice in an employee share-ownership plan is dependent on how the organisation has been constituted. Thus, Marchington et al (1992) add the caveat that employee share-ownership plans are at this level 'in theory at least'. Furthermore, employee share-ownership plans are typically indirect forms of employee-ownership via governance processes such as employee representatives. An example is the UK retailer the John Lewis Partnership.

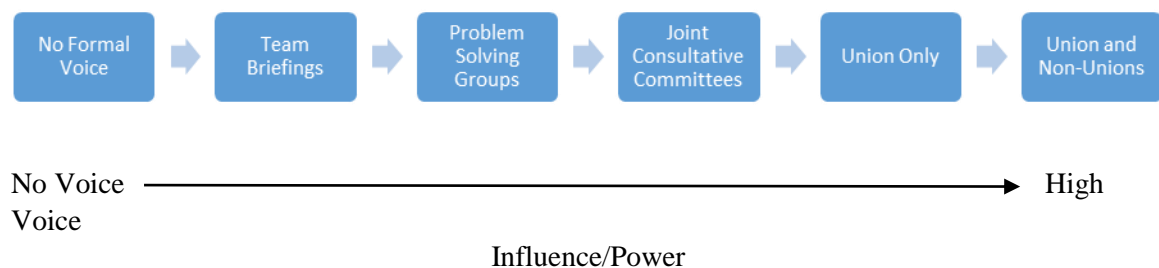
Employee share-ownership plans have attracted a cautionary note from Bernstein (1976). He suggested that the strength of participation, employee voice in this case, can be weakened where management reserve commercial confidentiality rights and where they are reluctant to forego their prerogative, particularly where a scheme has been forced on them. A further issue is management's greater expertise despite an increase in information provided to representatives given the division of labour and time. Given these challenges, employee share-ownership plans appear at level four not quite attaining the highest accolade of level five. There are, however, models of employee-ownership that confer direct ownership.

The third type of ownership includes worker co-operatives, where, as the name implies, employees directly own and run the company and are involved at every level of operational and strategic decision-making. An example in the UK is Suma, a wholesaler and distributor of wholefoods. Given the greater level of ownership, such organisations appear at level five. However, so too does the John Lewis Partnership which is specifically referred to by Marchington et al (1992) as an example of employee-

ownership at the highest level. There is no explanation given by the authors regarding why the John Lewis Partnership is placed at the highest level which highlights a grey area of this form of ownership. Furthermore, considering the escalator as a whole, there is an inference of a qualitative difference between the levels ranging from relatively low-level information-giving through to more sophisticated mechanisms of employees-as-owners.

Though Marchington and Wilkinson (2005) suggest the escalator offers the opportunity to describe the type of schemes being used, Wilkinson et al (2010) suggest the escalator ‘...implies a progression upwards rather than simply a move from zero participation to workers control’ (p.11). This idea of a progression from low mechanisms to higher impact mechanisms has been developed recently through the work of various Employment Relations scholars.

A growing area of contemporary Employment Relations research is on what are referred to as non-union employee representation (NER) schemes (e.g. Dobbins and Dundon 2014). These are defined as: ‘...employee-sponsored bodies of formally organised employee voice’ (Donaghey et al 2011<sup>b</sup> p.164). Through their work on NER schemes, Gollan et al (2015) developed the escalator metaphor (Marchington et al 1992) and conceived an ‘escalator of voice’. They use this to propose the idea of voice strength. They suggest that voice options vary in impact along a continuum from low to high; illustrated in the voice continuum in figure 2.2 below.



**Figure 2.2 Employee voice continuum**

At the highest level, voice is collective, independent, formal and has influence and is therefore likened to the strong voice yielded through trade unions. In contrast, NER voice forms fall into the central domain of the two extremes as, though they are indirect and typically involve groups of workers organised to represent other workers, they do not

make it to the highest level, i.e. ranking lower than trade unions, as they are not independent of management and convey lower levels of power and influence, i.e. a weaker form of employee voice. Employee-ownership provides an example of employee voice through NER though also highlights an anomaly between the escalator and the continuum.

As noted earlier, employee-ownership, was conceived by Marchington et al (1992) at the highest level of the escalator. However, such schemes are typically employer-initiated thus fitting the definition of an NER. Therefore, in contrast to the high positioning of employee-ownership on the escalator, they would fall within the middle domain of the continuum. In so doing, this raises an important point about the voice preferences of employers.

Gollan and Xu (2015) suggest that whilst some forms of participation are purposely designed to provide employees with a voice they are designed in such a way as to only provide a very modest role in decision-making, i.e. weak voice mechanisms. Similarly, Gollan et al (2015) query whether such schemes represent a functioning reality or a 'rhetorical façade' (p.2), the latter akin to Johnstone's (2014) analysis of labour-management partnerships as a 'vener of co-operation' or Dobbins and Dundon's (2017) analysis also of labour-management partnerships as a 'chimera'. Furthermore, there is growing evidence that in the contemporary workplace, management preference is for mechanisms that are considered 'low-level' and which reflect their own agenda (Wilkinson and Fay 2011).

Within the context of a management agenda, employee voice mechanisms are often limited to opening up lines of communication (Barry and Wilkinson 2015) and are considered as 'weak voice systems' (Dobbins and Dundon 2011 p.183; see also Johnstone and Ackers 2015). In other words, employee voice is constrained by weak mechanisms and confined to particular subjects. Additionally, mechanisms are introduced in an ad hoc manner (Dundon et al 2017; Wilkinson and Fay 2011), more as a 'flavour of the month' (Legge 2005) rather than as part of a coherent strategy. As such, employee voice can be fragile in its structure and its efficacy and is regarded by employees as having been bolted on, or lacking coherence or integration, to other policies and practices (Wilkinson and Fay 2011). With an emphasis on greater profit, productivity and performance, it is HRM

scholars who have influenced the contemporary conception of employee voice which is as something that reflects the efficiency concerns of employers (Budd 2004; Heery 2016). Employee voice is important inasmuch as it contributes to efficiency concerns and is evidenced through phrases such as employees 'going the extra mile' (Legge 2005; Piasna et al 2013). There are however several consequences for employee voice within this new landscape.

One consequence is that without trade unions providing a social insurance, the onus has shifted to employees to navigate their way through the employment relations landscape of the modern day workplace. A second is a heightened focus on the relationships between employers and employees. Without the intermediary role of trade unions, managers became pivotal in the new employer-employee relationship (Gollan et al 2015). It is managers who set the terms and conditions of employee voice in the contemporary workplace. Importantly, the views of employees are rarely sought regarding their preferences for voice mechanisms (Marchington 2007). This is a concern to those academics who regard employee voice as the ability of an employee to express their voice regardless of the subject:

‘...for voice to have legitimacy... it needs to be about more than the managerial concept of efficiency and adding value to business’ (Wilkinson and Fay 2011 p.71).

Employee voice that goes beyond the limits set by management is referred to by Budd (2004) as 'meaningful voice'. By this he means having some input into decision-making, through being able to speak freely and by having the opportunity to challenge without any reprisal. In other words, employees are able to be involved in decisions that are made, they are able to express their views over whatever subjects they choose and they can do so without fear of recrimination. However, contemporary debates by Employment Relations scholars concerning employee voice suggest the idea of employees having a meaningful voice are not on the horizon. When efficiency is the overriding goal, there are consequences for employees; voice can be silenced (Donaghey et al 2011<sup>a</sup>) or 'unheard' (Gunawardana 2014).

## **2.6 Contemporary debates: silent and unheard voices**

Building on a substantive body of literature and evidence, there have been several contributions by Employment Relations scholars to contemporary debates regarding employee voice, notably with regards to employee silence and unheard voice. For example, some of the literature regarding employee silence has been developed by the discipline of Organisational Behaviour (e.g. Morrison and Milliken 2000).

As it is understood by this discipline, employee silence is due to employee motivation; an employee consciously chooses to withhold information about possible problems or issues and therefore remains silent. However, this understanding has been challenged by Employment Relations scholars. For example, Donaghey et al (2011<sup>a</sup>) argue that silence is more likely to be the outcome of managerial, not employee, motivation. The motivation of managers is to silence employees which they do through practices such as agenda-setting i.e. ensuring issues of concern to them are included on the agenda whilst omitting those of concern to employees. A further development of this theme relates to ‘unheard’ voices, an example of which is provided through the work of Gunawardana (2014).

Through a case study of an apparel factory in an export processing zone in Sri Lanka, where voice mechanisms are notoriously absent, Gunawardana (ibid) found an array of voice mechanisms that were initiated by management. The purpose of the mechanisms was as a means of trade union avoidance and dissuading conflict. In so doing, according to management, lost productivity, absenteeism and turnover would be minimised. Despite the abundance of mechanisms, which included a workers’ council and management encouraging upward communication, the study concluded that employee voice often went unheard. Part of the reason for this is attributed to cultural norms requiring respect for elders and those in senior positions. However, a point noted by Gunawardana (ibid) though not followed through, relates to the format of workers’ council meetings.

The workers’ council meetings were operated for management to communicate to workers whilst workers had the opportunity to raise concerns at the end of the meeting. In other words, workers were only able to speak when the meeting was coming to a close and those attending would more than likely have been wanting to leave to attend to other matters. This bears similarities to the notion of ‘designing out’ some voices through processes such as agenda-setting described by Donaghey et al (2011<sup>a</sup>).



Agenda-setting involves managers purposely including on the agenda items they wish to discuss whilst ensuring they exclude items which they know employees wish to discuss. In other words whether it is the agenda or the format, it is managers who are controlling the meeting. The concept of unheard voice has more recently been developed by Wilkinson et al (2018) who conceive five types of unheard voice:

1. Organisations without any formal voice mechanisms because they are so small or the organisation is relying on precarious workers and therefore offer no mechanisms.
2. Organisations where voice mechanisms exist but no-one is listening which could be because the active voice of employees takes place against a background of institutional noise making it likely that voice is not heard albeit not purposely.
3. Organisations where there are mechanisms and employees use them and grievances are heard by management but are ignored.
4. Organisations where voice structures are in place but a climate of perpetual silence has been created through 'agenda-setting and institutional structures' (Donaghey et al 2011<sup>a</sup>) and employees do not speak up as they know 'the rules of the game' (Kalfa et al 2017; cited in Wilkinson et al 2018).
5. Organisations where employees may have differential access to voice and different propensities to use it based on factors such as gender or race (Syed 2014).

Though there are variations, the five types of voice reflect a commonality in the way they view voice; of having limited value. This manifests either by having no mechanism at all (1), or not listening to voice (2 and 3), or a more conspiratorial approach that ensures voice is closed down (4) or by not acknowledging that a diverse workforce may utilise voice in a different way than has been the norm (5). Regardless, it means employee voice is unheard which could have consequences for the organisation, such as missing

opportunities to tap into employees' ideas and other important contributions they are able to make (Dundon et al 2017). More importantly, voice is not valued. It is not regarded as important in its own right (Budd and Zagelmayer 2010). In contrast, by following the logic of the escalator and the continuum, a stronger voice is yielded through employee-ownership.

The logic of the escalator and continuum imply the potential for employees to be heard through employee-ownership. However, this highlights an omission in the academic literature regarding different organisational forms through which to study employee voice. Much mainstream contemporary HRM literature is focused on employee voice in large-scale corporations to the exclusion of alternative voices (Delbridge and Keenoy 2010; see also Atzeni 2012; Johnstone and Ackers 2015; Markey et al 2010; Strauss 2006; Wilkinson et al 2010). A similar point was noted by Kaufman (2007), 'A considerable portion of recent academic research on HRM has been focused on the top tier of companies in a small number of countries, leading to an unbalanced and overly ethnocentric and normative (prescriptive) account' (p.42). This point is reflected in a report by The Ownership Commission (2012):

'The dominant corporate ownership type in the UK is the PLC... In policy terms the PLC has crowded out other forms of ownership... This is reflected in media commentary, public discourse and crucially through government policy. Discussions of corporate governance, company legislation and business regulation revolve around the behaviours of the largest listed companies... [And] reflects that other corporate forms are less well understood and in many cases disregarded' (p.43)

As such, much of the contemporary literature is limited in its conception of employee voice through an economic lens. Following Budd and Zagelmayer (2010) employee voice is not a private matter only for those employers who believe that it is in their interests to provide voice vehicles whilst other employers decide against it. Further, employee voice is too important to simply be seen as a vehicle to assist management on management terms (Barry and Wilkinson 2015). To address this limitation in the literature, it is then timely to explore employee voice in a different way, through employee-ownership.

Importantly, opportunities for voice differ in employee-owned enterprise through voice being a 'right' which is embedded in the organisation's fabric and through the

sophisticated governance processes when compared to voice in conventional businesses. As Budd (2014) suggests:

‘...the voice literature would benefit from a deeper understanding of the relationships between corporate governance and ownership, corporate decision-making, and employee voice structures’ (p.483).

As such, employee-ownership offers fertile ground as an alternative way to study employee voice. To this end, the final section of this chapter considers the literature on employee- ownership in order to understand how and why employee voice might be different.

## **2.7 Employee voice through employee-ownership**

The term employee-ownership covers a range of organisational forms including mutuals, worker co-operatives and employee share-ownership plans (ESOPs). As noted in the earlier discussion (The varieties of employee voice), each of these different types of enterprise yield different levels of employee voice. For example, ESOPs provide more opportunities for employee voice than simply financial participation but still less than worker co-operatives. During the course of this discussion, the term employee-ownership is used generically whilst the specific form, ESOPs, is also referred to as it is this form which was adopted by the studied case of this thesis. To begin the discussion, a summary of the development of employer-ownership in the UK is described below.

### ***2.7.1 Development of employee-ownership***

Historically, there are two prominent forms of employee-ownership in the UK. The first and most common of these were worker co-operatives (Pendleton and Robinson 2015). Emerging from early 19<sup>th</sup> century Christian Socialism, having links with the labour movement and espoused by social reformers such as Robert Owen, worker co-operatives (formerly producer co-operatives) were considered the antithesis of the competitive individualism of capitalism (Mellor et al 1988). In contrast to conventional businesses, a key characteristic of worker co-operatives is that they are established to serve members not shareholders (Co-operatives UK 2014). Further, and as with their counterparts in other sectors (e.g. consumer co-operatives), many worker co-operatives adhere to ‘principles’ originally devised by the Rochdale Pioneers in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century (Whyman 2012).

Of these principles, the second enshrines member democratic control achieved through the process of decision-making endorsed by the one member one vote philosophy (Birchall 1997; Cornforth 1988; Mellor et al 1988; Ridley-Duff and Panton 2013). Profit distribution, ownership and decision-making mean worker co-operatives are regarded as advanced and distinctive forms of employee participation (Erdal 2011; Markey et al 2010). They provide a platform for engagement through democratic structures (Wilson and Hoyt 2010) and see business growth through the transformative experience of workers having a voice (Cornwell 2012). As such, worker co-operatives are regarded by some as the purest form of employee-ownership (e.g. Brione and Nicholson 2012). However, a second form of employee-ownership was established in 1929, the John Lewis Partnership.

The John Lewis Partnership bears some similarities to the worker co-operative model. Whereas the concern during this period for industrialists such as Cadbury was with the physical and social well-being of employees, John Spedan Lewis (1885-1963), the founder of John Lewis Partnership, wanted to share power and relinquish control enabling the potential for organisational democracy and mutual gain (Cathcart 2014). Underlying his philosophy, was the idea that ‘...a business should be a co-operative enterprise in which all workers share all the rewards as fairly as possible and have the satisfaction of being well-informed about the affairs of the organisation, and of being able to influence its conduct’ (Flanders et al 1968 p.31). His motivation was therefore a distaste for the extraction of profits by capitalists and a desire to re-distribute profits to all workers; thus bearing similarities to worker co-operatives. However, the form of ownership in the John Lewis Partnership is quite a different form of employee-ownership to that of a worker co-operative.

This difference lies in the form of ownership – whether it is direct or indirect (Pendleton and Robinson 2015). Ownership by employees in worker co-operatives is regarded as direct as it is more likely they will have invested financially into the business and have greater control of the decision-making processes of the company. By contrast, indirect ownership, which applies to employees (“partners”) in the John Lewis Partnership, means employees do not own the company. This in turn affects their influence of decision-making processes. These differences help to explain why employee-ownership via worker

co-operatives is conceived at the higher end of the escalator (Marchington et al 1992) whilst ESOPs are conceived at the middle of the voice continuum (Gollan et al 2015). Nevertheless, though worker co-operatives remained a prevalent form of employee-ownership during much of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, it is the ESOP form that captured interest from the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### ***2.7.2 Employee-ownership through employee-share-ownership plans***

Since the late 1980s, a plethora of new ownership forms and structures developed (Pendleton and Robinson 2015), including the contemporary ESOP. One explanation for the popularity of the new forms is the presence of a conducive political environment: one of the strongest influences on levels of employee-ownership activity (ibid). Another explanation is that they do not have the ‘ideological baggage’ associated with worker co-operatives which are often seen as a ‘deviant’ form of ownership and organisation (Pendleton 2001) and as such are simply more palatable (Oakeshott 1990). Whilst John Lewis Partnership is regarded as a direct antecedent of such modern day ESOPs, a key influence on these new forms of ownership were the ideas of an American investment expert, Louis Kelso in the 1950s (Pendleton 2001).

Kelso’s thinking was that wider ownership in an enterprise would provide a way of addressing the divisions of capitalism. If workers were given a greater share of profit they would be less likely to join a trade union or to seek wage increases, and as a result, capitalism would be strengthened. As such, the core mechanisms of ESOPs were developed and appealed to a number of Conservative politicians. Ronald Reagan commented:

‘Could there be any better answer to the stupidity of Karl Marx than millions of workers sharing in the ownership of the means of production?’ (Pendleton 2001 p.5).

Using Kelso’s ESOP as the prototype, the ESOP form used in the UK was developed by a small group of professionals. Their interest in the US model stemmed partly from what they regarded as failures of worker co-operatives. This group was a key influence on growing interest in ESOPs during the 1980s; one of its aims was to influence the policy-making process. The subsequent lobby group, that included representation from the John

Lewis Partnership, was able to make substantial progress in terms of legislative and policy changes. Two types of ESOP emerged.

The first is a Case Law ESOP. It was so named because corporation tax relief on contributions from the company to an Employee Benefits Trust (EBT) was established via case law and general taxation principles rather than by statute. The EBT is the main component of this type of ESOP where shares from the trust to employees can be issued through a variety of routes. Furthermore, it uses its EBT to borrow funds to finance equity acquisition. The main duty of the EBT trustees is to act in the best interests of the owners, i.e. the employees. The second type is a Statutory ESOP.

Statutory ESOPs were introduced in the 1989 budget under the Conservative government and aimed to reduce some of the complexity of the Case Law ESOP. The new legislation provided a legal status for ESOPs, a statutory set of principles for taxation and was stricter on the composition of trustees, e.g. a majority of trustees had to be selected by the majority of the workforce. Subsequently, the 1994 Finance Act removed the requirement that the majority of trustees had to be from, and elected by, employees. The first companies adopting the new ESOP structures arose through the buy-outs of bus companies during the 1980s.

The context of these new ESOP companies was a political and public policy environment espousing share ownership and ‘popular capitalism’ which encouraged the growth of ESOPs. In other words, an emphasis on entrepreneurialism and ownership meant the environment for this particular form of employee-ownership was fertile. Reasons for companies adopting the schemes were to promote employee involvement, assist with the recruitment and retention of staff, increased remuneration, improving productivity and preventing take-overs. Pendleton (2001) states,

‘The key point about employee involvement in this context is that it is not driven by the idealistic notion of self-expression and personal development often found in co-operatives. Instead, it is about encouraging employees to feel involved in a predetermined corporate entity’ (p.33).

As such, he argues, they were a form of remuneration rather than a mechanism for bestowing control rights, the latter being either weak or non-existent.

### ***2.7.3 Contemporary employee-ownership***

Today, employee-ownership is a form of business ownership in the UK attracting interest from academics, politicians, policy-makers and practitioners as well as from the business community (Brown et al 2019; Pendleton and Robinson 2015). Current figures of firms with significant employee-ownership (those where 25% or more of the ownership of the company is broadly held by all or most of the employees, or on their behalf by a trust) in the UK is 250-300 (ibid). This interest in employee-ownership, and specifically ESOPs, is attributed to a number of factors, including the challenging economic environment brought about by the 2008 global financial crisis (Findlay et al 2017; Heery 2016; see also Boxall and Purcell 2011). The rationale being that employee-ownership provides an alternative way of organising a business compared to that of conventional businesses. This last point is raised by Brown et al (2019) in their study of employee-ownership as a potentially more resilient business model when facing events such as the global financial crisis and cite various studies that argue employee-ownership can withstand such forces, especially regarding factors such as employee participation.

Similarly, it is argued employee-ownership can reduce inequality by passing greater control to employees (Wilkinson and Pickett 2010); can lead to better health and well-being (McQuaid et al 2012); can help to create employment, contribute to the security of employment, contribute to a more participative and dignified working life, improve employee compensation, develop leaders and teach skills of participation and self-governance (Logue and Yates 2006); and, can improve company performance and productivity, reduce absenteeism, foster greater innovation and provide a longer-term view of business decision-making (Brione and Nicholson 2012). With specific reference to the John Lewis Partnership, it has been argued, employee-ownership provides a model for reconstructing employment relations (Findlay et al 2017; Heery 2016; see also Boxall and Purcell 2011). By contrast, within the context of events such as the global financial crisis, Brown et al (2019) argue factors such as employee voice may be side-lined.

In so doing, they argue, opportunities for what Dobbins and Dundon (2017) refer to as ‘collaborative mutuality’, will be countered. More simplistically, Oakeshott (1990) suggested that for some, employee-ownership using the ESOP form were more palatable. One reason he gives for such palatability is that ESOPs enable employee-ownership to be

combined with conventional forms of company management (ibid; Pendleton and Robinson 2015). In other words the hierarchical management structure typical in conventional business could be melded with the new arrangement. It is through the characteristics of the new arrangement, specifically the governance structure of employee-ownership, that employee voice would be enabled.

## **2.8 Characteristics of employee-ownership**

Three characteristics of the governance structure of employee-owned enterprises vis-à-vis employee voice are notable: the right to a voice, the embeddedness of voice and sophisticated voice processes. Combined, these factors suggest employee-ownership will provide the mechanism for all voices to be heard; voice becomes part of the organisational fabric yielded through the mechanism of employee-ownership thus differentiating it from conventional businesses. In order to explore this idea, the following section discusses these characteristics.

### **2.8.1 *The right to a voice***

It is through the right to a voice that employee voice is first realised through employee-ownership. This is referred to by Pendleton (2001) as the ‘constitutional establishment of rights’ (p.110); voice in an employee-owned enterprise is institutionalised (Kandathil and Varman 2007). In other words, rights are established that are enshrined in the organisation’s governing document and are enacted through various processes. As a result, employees are able to use their right to a voice to influence decisions. Pendleton (2001) suggests that whilst *employee*-based participation is relatively common, in contrast, *employee-ownership*-based participation in governance decisions is novel given it is based on rights that are typically attached to capital. In this context, employee-ownership is the antithesis of shareholder-value.

It is through ownership rights bestowed to employees that a form of employee voice which is fundamentally different to that in conventional businesses is provided. Typically, in the latter, voice is given or taken away at the behest of managers. In contrast, through employee-ownership, employees are at one and the same time owners and employees of an organisation (Gospel and Pendleton 2010; Markey et al 2010). As employee-owner, they have the right to participate in the management of the company (Kaarsemaker et al 2010). This means greater potential for employees to have control and influence over



organisational decision-making (Marchington et al 1992) which provides the potential of greater ‘depth’ of voice vis-à-vis influencing decisions (Wilkinson and Fay 2011). This reflects a recent debate regarding the complementarity of different employment practices. For example, Blasi et al (2016) support the argument that group incentive practices, such as employee-ownership, work well with the complementary practice of involving employees in decision-making. Further, such complementarity of practices, Pohler and Luchak (2014<sup>a</sup>) argue, can have a positive impact on employee voice.

### ***2.8.2 Embedding employee voice***

The right to a voice facilitates the second characteristic of employee-ownership, the embeddedness of the governance processes. This is typically through the organisation’s governing document, referred to as the Articles of Association, a legal document which sets out the main parameters of the form of employee-ownership and the responsibilities of its key personnel. This document provides some sense of permanence brought about by the model and it is considered more robust compared to conventional voice mechanisms which are more easily discarded depending on a manager’s preferences and priorities. In other words, employee-ownership potentially has more permanence compared to the mechanisms often implemented by management in conventional businesses (Wilkinson and Fay 2011).

Employee voice in this context is regarded as part of what Dundon et al (2017) refer to as the ‘organisational infrastructure’. Again, this strengthens the potential for employees to influence decision-making (Marchington et al 1992; Wilkinson and Fay 2011) and means it has the potential of providing a fundamentally different form of employee voice compared to conventional business.

### ***2.8.3 Sophisticated employee voice processes***

The right to a voice and the embeddedness of voice through those rights within the governance structure of employee-ownership lead to the third feature of the model: the governance processes. The key employee-ownership governance processes as they relate to employee voice are, firstly, employees being able to attend and express their voice at Annual General Meetings and secondly, employee representatives on boards of management. An eloquent description of the highly intricate processes that give access to voice within the John Lewis Partnership is conveyed by Flanders et al (1968).

Given that the concern of the founder, John Spedan Lewis, was to ensure a counter-balance to the privileges of management, the John Lewis Partnership had, and continues to have, an array of governance processes that encourage all forms of voice at all organisational levels (Salaman and Storey 2016). This includes those noted above, Annual General Meetings and employee representatives, as well as additional processes. These processes enable structural relationships within the organisation. In other words, conversations throughout the whole organisation rather than segmented organisationally, departmentally or hierarchically. As part of his review of Varano's ethnography of the Weirton steel mill, which also had an employee share-ownership plan, Ackers (2001) was similarly impressed by the sophistication of the processes.

In this instance, the processes included majority employee-ownership, worker directors and a trade union. Additionally, there was an 'employee participation group' and a posit-employee share-ownership plan communication system. All of which support the discussion above regarding the complementarity of practices (i.e. Blasi et al 2016; Pohler and Luchak 2014<sup>a</sup>). Further, in a study of ten employee-owned enterprises, Brown et al (2019) highlighted the use of processes such as 'open forums' through which employee-owners were able to explore operational issues as well as enabling them to share innovations leading to changes within the organisations. The authors argue these factors contributed to employee voice being heard and assisted with factors such as employee retention. However, this study also highlighted a particular difference between management and employees.

Financial participation was viewed by managers as the key motivational driver and the basis of a strong perceived work ethos within employees. However, 'For employees, on the other hand, financial incentives were less immediately important, whereas feelings of responsibility and commitment to the organisation increased in importance' (ibid p. 80). This suggests a more complex picture regarding motivation within an employee-owned enterprise. There are also other challenges of employee-ownership raised by the literature which are explored in more detail below relating to employee compliance, organisational hierarchy and management resistance.

#### **2.8.4 Employee compliance**

The first issue highlighted by the literature on employee-ownership points to a worrying observation. This observation suggests that employee-ownership can be used as a means of compliance by encouraging employees to ‘go the extra mile’ (Cathcart 2009; 2014). For example, Le Grand (2003) has argued that employee-ownership in the form of mutuals can act as an incentive for employees and Kurtulus and Kruse (2017; cited in Brown et al 2019) claim that employee-ownership can stimulate employees to work harder and more effectively thus creating a more harmonious workplaces through aligning incentives. In contrast, in her study of the John Lewis Partnership, Cathcart (2009; 2014) notes how partners, i.e. employee-owners, were implored by management to put the business first, set aside their personal preferences and ‘give that little bit extra’ in recognition of their status as owners. In so doing, the line between employee-as-employee and employee-as-owner becomes blurred. This dual role of employees in an ESOP; as owner and an employee is something investigated by others.

A more complex picture is presented by Pendleton (2001). He suggests this new role as owner can bring about a precariousness through employees acquiring new interests and a new set of relationships with the firm and with management which derives from their ownership of all or part of the firm. However, in turn, these interests may differ from those they have as employees. Further, he suggests that the various forms of voice, i.e. as owner or as employee, may have different dynamics and express different sorts of objectives for each of the groups of actors in the firm and as such, it may be possible to identify conflicts in these various voice forms.

#### **2.8.5 Organisational hierarchy**

A second issue relates to organisational hierarchy. As noted above, Oakeshott (1990) regarded the ability to incorporate a conventional hierarchical management structure as a positive aspect of an employee share-ownership plan. Hierarchical structures are the traditional way of organising work in the UK and considered by some to be the most efficient. For example, Flanders et al (1968) argued:

‘A business on any scale requires a hierarchical structure of power and authority with superiors and subordinates, in which some give orders and others have to carry them out. Moreover it cannot function without some kind of law in the form of rules or regulations to govern the behaviour of its members’ (p.27).

They go on to suggest that every business embodies a system of controlling and influence vis-à-vis employees and that with increasing scale, so a more elaborate management system develops. Similarly, Williamson (1975; cited in Pendleton 2001) suggested a managerial hierarchy was necessary in an enterprise where there are complex production processes and in order to co-ordinate and control the various labour inputs and the large volume of information to be processed. However, this way of organising work has been challenged.

Organising work hierarchically, Atzeni (2012) argues, is so deeply embedded in the UK that alternatives are not considered. He notes that the nature of work within a capitalist system is regarded by many social scientists as something workers need to be encouraged to do, 'work is generally seen as a negative, alienating and unchangeable condition of life' (p.4). As an example he refers to labour economics that has described work over the last thirty years as something that 'has to be done'. Monetary rewards are emphasised as a way of encouraging workers to work; employees need to be incentivised. Similarly he suggests, workers needing motivation to work is something that underpins the HRM narrative. A different view suggests a rigidity of hierarchical systems which can stifle and suppress individual needs for self-esteem, self-confidence and growth (Pateman 1970).

An argument for flatter, non-hierarchical organisations is put forward by Rothschild (2000). She argued that they have the potential for balancing market concerns with issues of ownership and control. Such a scenario bridges the gap between those who manage and those who are managed:

'In the fully collectivist organisation, relations between members are valued in and of themselves, and all are on an equal footing' (p.196).

In other words, they are not only founded and valued on an economic level, but also on a social level. She goes on to argue:

'Most basically, democratized organisations reject justifications for top-down control: when authority is delegated, it is delegated for a specific term and it is subject to recall by the collectivity' (p.200).

A further argument is put forward by Pencavel (2001) who questioned the claim that hierarchically managed firms outperform other types of enterprise. In so doing, he suggests, outputs and consumption are privileged over employee voice.

### ***2.8.6 Management resistance***

The third issue relates to the role of managers in relation to employee-ownership and their resistance to the notion of employees as owners. Suggestive of, though not framed as, ‘resistance’, Brown et al (2019) noted in their study of employee-ownership the continued role of managers as the final decision-makers. Again this reflects a form of employee-ownership at the middle range of the voice continuum (Gollan et al 2015) as it portrays a more consultative process than one that requires all employee-owners to be fully involved. This resistance to employee-owners participating fully in decision-making processes seems, at least in part, to be attributable to the relationship between capital and labour and the role of managers within that relationship.

In a conventional enterprise, the role of managers is to act as agents of (external) shareholders (Paranaque and Willmott 2014). By contrast, the relationship in an employee-owned enterprise is more complex given labour and capital are neither exclusively separate nor joined. Pencavel (2001) states that in some ESOPs only a small proportion of assets are owned by employee-owners and therefore it is not surprising that they have little influence in determining policy by a board of directors. A second factor is that employee-owners will typically not have invested their own capital into the enterprise, i.e. the indirect form of ownership discussed earlier in this section. Combined, these two factors complicate the labour-capital relationship. However, management resistance can also be attributed to other factors.

Management resistance to employee-ownership can stem from an unwillingness to empower employees and stem from a belief that it can over-complicate decision-making processes (McCarthy and Palcic 2012). This resistance could be an inherent problem with ESOPs. Pendleton (2001) observed from his research that whereas employees are accountable to managers in the employment relationship, by contrast, managers are accountable to employees-as-owners in the employee-ownership relationship. His case studies of ESOPs revealed the overriding goal of management was to retain

‘conventional’ structures of management and, avoid what they saw as the ‘threats’ to efficiency alongside a belief that employees could not act as ‘responsible’ entrepreneurs.

‘The danger of employee-ownership, as expressed by managers in interviews, was that employees would exploit their ownership rights to claim a much greater say and involvement in routine management activity, especially on issues that directly affect them such as staff and labour deployment’ (Pendleton 2001 p.144).

Despite the concerns of managers, what happened was the opposite. Managerial concerns influenced the role and function of employee directors in these cases and thus emphasised their role as communicators and supporters of board decisions to the rest of the workforce. Pendleton (ibid) comments, ‘to all intents and purposes, most [employee share-ownership plans] are ‘conventionally’ organised and managed firms’ (p.183).

Combined, these three issues - compliance, hierarchy and resistance - present potential challenges to employee voice in an employee-owned enterprise and will have a bearing on how voice is conceived, enabled, implemented and experienced. Indeed, whilst the positive characteristics of employee-ownership suggest the potential of employee voice being heard given it is part of the fabric of employee-ownership, the three challenges discussed above have the potential to weaken employee voice, suggesting it could be no more than a fabrication. Combining all of the factors suggests that employee-ownership via an ESOP provides a fruitful site for further study of employee voice.

## **2.9 Summary**

This chapter has reviewed the literature on employee voice and was organised around six themes. The first explored the meaning of employee voice. This revealed interest from two primary bodies of literature; Employment Relations and HRM both of which have quite different conceptualisations of employee voice. To investigate these differences, the second theme investigated employee voice through the Employment Relations literature and the traditional mechanism of trade unions whilst the third investigated the HRM literature to review employee voice from this perspective. This revealed that much of our contemporary understanding of employee voice is by HRM scholars. HRM scholars tend to draw empirical evidence from conventional businesses where ‘efficiency’ is a key objective of employee voice mechanisms. This was reflected in ‘management choice’ which, despite an array of mechanisms, tended toward those considered to be at a ‘low-level’. To highlight this point, the fourth theme discussed some of the varieties of

employee voice mechanisms and the nature of voice each yields. Against this backdrop, the fifth theme presented a recent debate in the Employment Relations literature which argued that voice which does not correspond to the efficiency objective can go ‘unheard’. This debate helped to highlight a limitation in the extant literature, much less is known about alternative voice mechanisms through which voice may be heard.

To address this limitation, the remaining two themes reviewed the literature on employee-ownership. The first of these reviewed the development of employee-ownership in the UK whilst the second discussed factors which differentiate employee-owned businesses from conventional businesses in relation to employee voice. Differentiating factors were the ‘right’ to a voice through its ‘embeddedness’ in the governance structure and expressed through ‘sophisticated’ processes which suggested it was part of the organisational fabric. However, a number of factors were revealed which could present a challenge to employee voice: ‘employee compliance’, ‘organisational hierarchy’ and ‘management resistance’ which suggested that it may be little more than a fabrication. These factors suggest employee-ownership will provide a particularly interesting site to explore whether, in such enterprises, employee voice is different compared to that of conventional businesses. In order to explore these factors in greater depth, the thesis uses the theoretical lens of the ‘frames of reference’ (Fox 1966; 1974) which is discussed in the next chapter.

## **Chapter Three: Theoretical Framework**

### **3.1 Introduction**

This chapter discusses the theoretical framework. Following chapter two, which highlighted various factors which can differentiate and can also challenge employee voice in an employee-owned enterprise, the theoretical framework will help to evaluate these factors and thus, help to evaluate whether employee voice in an employee-owned enterprise is different to conventional businesses. The theoretical framework is the frames of reference. The chapter is organised around two themes.

The first theme discusses the main characteristics of the frames of reference in their original form as developed by Fox (1966; 1974). These were pluralist, unitarist and radical and were developed to provide an understanding of different management approaches to the relationship between employees and employers. It also draws on the Employment Relations and HRM literature to highlight differences between the frames. The second theme discusses two developments to the frames; firstly a reconfiguration of the unitarist frame (Storey 1989); hard and soft unitarism. This highlights similarities between the two frames, e.g. the purpose of employee voice being to contribute to the efficiency of the company, and some differences, e.g. how employees are motivated. It also highlights that these frames have a bearing on whose voices are heard. The second development to the frames is collaborative pluralism (Bray et al 2015; Budd and Bhawe 2017). This builds on some of the characteristics of early pluralism, e.g. a focus on equity concerns, whilst offering a different way to conceive employee voice based on voice as a right and as co-operative. The reason for discussing the development to the unitarist frame is because it underpins much of the contemporary HRM literature on employee voice. The reason for discussing the development to the pluralist frame is that it offers a different way of evaluating employee voice. These three frames provide the theoretical framework to evaluate whether employee voice through employee-ownership differs to that of a conventional business and help to facilitate an understanding of the different philosophies which underpin management choices and approaches to employee voice in such enterprises. From the discussion in chapter two, we know that in such enterprises voice has the potential of being part of a company's fabric. However, in an environment where unitarism prevails, whether hard or soft, might suggest that employee voice will be no more than a fabrication. The three frames will help to evaluate these issues.



### **3.2 The frames of reference and employee voice**

The frames of reference were devised by Fox (1966; 1974). He initially conceived unitarist and pluralist frames (1966) and later added a third, the radical frame (1974). The purpose of the frames was to provide a theoretical lens through which to view the relationship between employees and employers (Johnstone 2007). Importantly, each frame conveys a different view of the employment relationship because of the different beliefs and values of that relationship held within each. Furthermore, though rarely made explicit, the beliefs and values which are bound up in each frame are certainly implicit in different academic disciplines and in the work of policy makers and practitioners (Budd and Bhawe 2008). Moreover, an important feature of the frames is the premise that management styles, preferences or interpretations do not exist in isolation, rather, they are based on different philosophies which inform decisions, choices, actions, etc.

As such, the frames provide a way of understanding and evaluating these different philosophies. As they relate to this thesis, the frames facilitate an understanding of the different philosophies which underpin management approaches to employee voice. An understanding of each frame, and as such the differences between frames, is therefore important.

#### ***3.2.1 Unitarism***

The main goal in the unitarist frame is efficiency (Budd 2004). The way to achieve this is through the alignment of interests between employers and employees (Heery 2015) towards a common goal of business success. This results in the characteristically unitarist view of employment relationships as harmonious. The unitarist frame tends to be associated with the relatively recent academic field of HRM and the use of commitment practices to establish harmony between managers and employees (Beer and Spector 1984; Kaufman 2015).

Through an HRM function, managers invest in employee training, above market wages and benefits and job security and other practices in order to gain higher productivity from highly motivated, skilled and engaged workers. The aim is to make the firm more efficient so the surplus can be shared as higher profit for shareholders and wages and job security for labour: a win/win situation. The idea of employee voice in this context is to

contribute to company efficiency through harmonious relationships between employees and managers with trade unions regarded as unnecessary.

### **3.2.2 *Pluralism***

One of the main goals in the pluralist frame is to achieve equity in the relationship between employees and employers (Budd 2004). The need for equity is based on a belief, inherent in this frame, which is that there is an imbalance in the relationship between employers and employees. This imbalance tends to favour employers meaning their interests are prioritised at the expense of employees. Further, this imbalance means that the relationship is one of both conflict and co-operation. However, though conflict is unavoidable, it is not chronic and can be resolved through compromise to the benefit of all (Heery 2015).

Finding such compromise has traditionally been the role of trade unions whose role is to provide an independent voice for employees and articulate their interests. The pluralist frame tends to be associated with the (comparatively) long-standing academic tradition of Employment Relations (Heery 2016; Kaufman 2015). As noted in chapter two, the Webbs are regarded as the founders of this tradition in the UK through their work on trade unions (Heery 2016; Mueller-Jentsch 2004). This work was continued through a focus on collective bargaining by scholars such as Allan Flanders and Hugh Clegg and Fox himself, thus, the idea of employee voice through pluralism became associated with representative participation via trade unions (Barry and Wilkinson 2015; Heery 2015; Johnstone and Ackers 2015).

### **3.2.3 *Radical***

The radical frame regards the employment relationship as entirely illegitimate existing solely to satisfy the interests of the dominant party, i.e. employers. Characteristic of this frame is an inevitability of workplace conflict arising from socio-economic, political and legal inequalities (Johnstone 2014). However, unlike the pluralist frame where conflict is unavoidable though resolvable, the radical frame, which tends to be associated with a Marxist view of the employment relationship (Kaufman 2015), would see conflict as a more fundamental problem given capitalist organisations are predicated on exploitation.

Whilst there is sympathy for participation and voice within this frame, the way of achieving it is quite different. Though regarding trade unions as efficient in the short-term, in the long-term, given capitalist businesses are predominantly run for shareholders this affects the genuineness of voice, genuine voice can only be achieved when workers own and control the business (Atzeni 2012). As such, capitalism would be replaced by some form of collective ownership and workers' control of industry.

### **3.3 Developments to the frames**

Since they were first conceived, there have been several developments to the frames. Table 3.1 (p.49) provides a summary of the key developments. For example, Storey (1989) separated unitarism into two categories: hard and soft whilst Godard (2000) separated the frames into five categories: neo-classical, managerialist, orthodox pluralist, liberal reformist and radical. More recently, Cullinane and Dundon (2014) combined Fox's (1966) conceptualisation of the unitarist frame with literature concerning management styles. In so doing, three variations of unitarism are identified:

1. Traditional – this variation is characterised by Purcell and Sisson (1983; cited in Cullinane and Dundon 2014) as autocratic in relation to employer authority. Employees are regarded as being financially motivated and any opposition from them is regarded as illegitimate as it counters the employment contract. This contract also serves to legitimise the employer directing and controlling an employees' activities, particularly in relation to time, place, content and method of work and, in so doing, legitimises sanctions if an employee is disobedient. Trade unions are regarded with disdain in this variation.
2. Paternalistic – this variation retains the autocratic form of employer authority though this is mixed with benevolent inclinations such as ensuring care and responsibility for employee welfare. Employee opposition is regarded as being due to their misunderstandings and there is a hostility towards trade unions which are regarded as unnecessary.
3. Human Relations – this variation is characterised by a co-operative employment relations climate and sophisticated labour management practices which are used to legitimise employer authority. Purcell and Sisson (1983; cited Cullinane and Dundon 2014) suggest such authority is akin to 'sophisticated manipulation'. Conflict, and the need for trade unions, is regarded as unnecessary and exceptional in this variation assuming the 'right' Human Resource policies are in place.

These variations reflect some of the key characteristics of the hard and soft versions of unitarism discussed by Storey (1989). For example, that employees are thought to be

motivated by financial gain in the Traditional variation is synonymous with hard unitarism whilst the assumption that with the ‘right’ policies conflict can be averted in the Human Relations variation is synonymous with soft unitarism. As such, the variations will be considered further in the sections below. There have also recently been developments within the pluralist frame, particularly regarding the way employee voice is studied.

By building on earlier forms of pluralism, Employment Relations scholars have begun to consider different ways of studying employee voice. This is reflected in the discussion in chapter two of the contemporary Employment Relations literature regarding non-union employee representation schemes (e.g. Dobbins and Dundon 2014; Donaghey et al 2011<sup>b</sup>; Gollan et al 2015). Heery (2015) suggests a new form of pluralism is emerging that accepts there are a ‘plurality of institutions’ through which employee voice can manifest. Examples of schemes which he suggests are being treated sympathetically by Employment Relations scholars include statutory works councils, joint-consultation, employee involvement (i.e. unitarist) and financial participation. However, whilst much of the Employment Relations literature on employee voice has focused on participative democracy, less attention has been paid to other forms of participation. Regarding this as an omission, both Budd (2004) and Ackers (2002) argue in favour of broadening the scope of the debate on employee voice and a re-definition that takes it away from its traditional focus on trade unions.

Both scholars suggest that Employment Relations literature has become too focused on the ‘labour problem’ and conflict. Ackers (2011) notes: ‘Over the twentieth century, Anglo-American industrial relations writers constructed a powerful realist, pluralist conventional wisdom that participation should centre exclusively on collective bargaining with unions...’ (p.53). Similarly, Budd (2004) argues that trade unions became the dominant way of understanding employee voice but argues such a conceptualisation needs to be broadened. To progress the discussion, the scholars lay substantial emphasis on bringing moral and ethical concerns back into discussions of the employment relationship, and as such, employee voice.

Originator	Year	Frame	Organisational vision	Behaviour principle	Characteristics	Voice form
Fox	1966	Unitarism	Harmonious	Co-operation	Commonality of interests; harmony in the workplace; anti-union.	Bilateral communications, employee involvement
		Pluralism	Legitimacy of conflictual and co-operative relationships	Negotiation and compromise	Emphasis on mixed interests.	Collective representation; distributive bargaining
	1974	Radical*	Capitalist monopoly	Conflict and struggle	Employment relations are 'exploitative, coercive and de-humanising' (Heery 2015 p. 23).	Workers' control
Storey	1989	Soft unitarism	Harmonious	Competition and co-operation	Voice is conceived as harmonious and achieved through constructive and integrative behaviour	Bilateral communications, employee involvement
		Hard unitarism	Free market	Competition	Resource-focused; gaining competitive advantage; competitive market model of neo-classical labour economics: individualist view of humans motivated by rational self-interest and maximising gain'.	Open door/exit
Budd & Bhawe	2008	Egoist**	Free market			
Bray et al	2015	Collaborative pluralism	Legitimacy of co-operative relationships	Co-operation	Emphasis on common interests.	Co-determination; integrative bargaining

**Table 3.1 Summary of developments of the frames of reference**

\* Re-named critical (Budd & Bhawe 2008) \*\*Re-named individualist (Gollan et al 2015)

Following Adams (1991), Budd suggests employee voice in the workplace is a moral imperative. Influenced by the idea of creating a balance between the interests of efficiency, equity and voice (Budd 2004), Pohler and Luchak (2014<sup>b</sup>) have argued that:

‘There is a necessity to make a commitment to the fundamental democratic principle that employees should have some say in the decisions that affect their working lives, recognising that voice is not only a means to achieve a balance between efficiency and equity in the employment relationship, but also that voice is an end in itself’ (p.201).

Indeed, inherent in the traditional pluralist form, was the belief that the employment relationship embraces the equally legitimate sets of interests of employers and employees (Blyton et al 2008). It is this idea of legitimacy and conflict in relation to employee voice that is developed by Budd. Through what Heery (2016) considers to be a contemporary re-statement of the pluralist perspective, the work of Budd (2004) makes two important points; the first is conceiving employee voice as a right and the second is conceiving the potential of employee voice as co-operative rather than conflictual. Both of which are reflected in his recent work with colleagues (Bray et al 2015) on collaborative pluralism, discussed below.

The developments to the frames of reference have meant that they are considered to be one of the most enduring approaches to capturing the changing dynamics of management choice (Dundon et al 2017). Cullinane and Dundon (2014) argue that Fox (1966) regarded unitarism as an ideology which provided an ‘instrument of legitimisation’ for employers through which to evoke loyalty and commitment from employees. As such, Budd and Bhavé (2008, 2017) suggest we need to understand such management philosophy as it is this which affects individuals’ own values and principles and therefore decisions about the design and implementation of voice mechanisms. In turn this will affect how those mechanisms are experienced by employees. The frames help us to understand these different philosophies and therefore help us to see how each individual frame can generate different forms and intensities of employee voice (Kaufman 2015).

Given their relevance to the empirical findings of this study, the following sections consider the main characteristics of the hard and soft unitarist frames conceived by Storey (1989) and then considers the recent development of collaborative pluralism conceived by Bray et al (2015). These three frames, hard unitarism, soft unitarism and collaborative pluralism in turn provide the framework through which employee voice in an employee-owned enterprise is evaluated.

### ***3.3.1 Hard unitarism, HRM and employee voice***

Hard unitarism is typically grounded in the academic discipline of economics and has a focus on outcomes (Heery 2015). The rationale of hard unitarism is based on a business case which is predicated solely on economic efficiency (Wilkinson and Dundon 2010). Efficiency in this frame is regarded as an end in itself and is prioritised over anything else (Dachler and Wilpert 1978). Such efficiency is achieved, according to this frame, through alignment with the resource-based approach of some HRM practitioners.

The resource-based approach proposes that investment in certain HRM practices is likely to result in superior performance and competitive advantage (Guest 2011; for an example see Gielen et al 2010). More specifically, the way to maximise efficiency and productivity is through regarding employees as ‘resources’. Viewed from the perspective of the hard unitarist frame, employees have to be managed in a way that is both rational and also coalesces with the strategic objectives of the company (Storey 1989) and the way to do this is through viewing employees as a resource. This view of employees reflects an earlier assessment by Polanyi (1944) who argued employees are regarded as a commodity akin to any other productive resource. Similarly, Legge (2005) argued:

‘The ‘hard’ model implies that employees are a resource to be used like any other, at management’s discretion, in whatever way best achieves strategic objectives’ (p.279).

The resource-based view is in evidence in a contemporary qualitative study of management approaches by Jenkins and Delbridge (2013). They found that one organisation they studied had adopted a hard approach and had an explicit objective of gaining competitive advantage with employees regarded as a ‘resource’ to achieve this. Furthermore, a practice used within this frame to garner commitment from the resources, the employees, is incentivisation.

Incentives are used as way of aligning employer and employee interests and extracting employee performance based on a belief that employees are both rational and calculating, they seek to maximise utility and are motivated by gain (Legge 2005). This reflects the term ‘calculative relationship’ which has been used to describe the ‘normal’ employment relationship – i.e. members of the organisation are committed to it to the extent that they are prepared to do a fair day’s work for a fair day’s pay (Flanders et al 1968). A component of incentivisation are financial participation schemes that are used in this frame to secure higher performance. The main prescription within this frame has tended to be for systems of

incentivisation through financial participation such as profit-sharing, share-ownership, worker co-operatives and partnerships to provide long-term financial incentives for co-operation (Heery 2015). This has manifested recently with interest in the UK retailer the John Lewis Partnership by politicians and policy-makers (Findlay et al 2017; Heery 2016). Further, the previous UK Coalition government accepted the recommendations of the Nuttall Review of employee-ownership (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills 2012) resulting in measures to encourage growth in this area. Similarly, public sector workers were enabled to exchange their employment rights for ownership of shares through spin-offs of public sector mutuals (Le Grand and the Mutuals Taskforce 2012).

Some of these schemes were discussed in chapter two through the lens of Employment Relations scholars, i.e. Gollan et al (2015) and Marchington et al (1992) suggesting that employee voice would have greater strength in companies such as the John Lewis Partnership. However, importantly, through the lens of hard unitarism, the rationale underpinning such schemes is not fairness and equity. Rather, it is an assumption that employees are motivated solely by financial gain and employment practises are organised accordingly.

The way of organising employment practices, according to this frame, is through the traditional, hierarchically ordered organisation. Bernstein (1976) observed strict managerial styles prevalent in many workplaces that were reliant on hierarchical and authoritarian relationships to direct and co-ordinate a smooth flow of production. Based on Max Weber's (1864-1920) conceptualisation of the rationalised company, the most efficient performance of employees was achieved through increasing an organisation's degree of standardisation, impersonality, specialisation, routine, formal regulation and promotion through hierarchy. Beneath this administrative apparatus were the 'principles of scientific management' (Taylor 1911).

The key aspects of the principles of scientific management were the fragmentation, repetition and specialisation of work tasks the main goal of which was efficiency. Work tasks were not designed by employees but rather by industrial engineers, hence a separation of 'brain-work' and physical labour. An example is Ritzer's (1983) conceptualisation of 'McDonaldisation', i.e. the rationalised company that is characterised by efficiency, predictability, calculability, control and technology. The separation of brain work and physical labour led to stressing the need for a division of labour and repetitive and specialised work tasks. Direction and control was provided through a unified chain of command, close supervision and a reward structure



based on extrinsic factors. Given such stifling working practises, it is no surprise that employee voice is considered important in this frame only in terms of addressing the ‘labour problem’.

The labour problem relates to absenteeism, high staff turnover and employee unrest. The main proponents of this theory tend to be management theorists, consultants and business leaders and therefore participation is limited to work tasks and is firmly under the control of management. As such, there are no challenges to the power prerogatives of employers (Dachler and Wilpert 1978). This bears similarities to the egoist frame proposed by Budd and Bhava (2008).

They argued that management discourse is grounded in the egoist model which emphasises the primacy of market ideals. Here, the dominance of a free market is primary and institutions such as trade unions and the state are regarded as unnecessary. This point is referenced in the research findings of Cullinane and Dundon (2014) who found an overwhelming ideological commitment and persistent attachment to the Traditional variation of unitarism from respondents. They highlight that an ‘economistic interpretation between buyers and sellers of labour abounded’ whereby employees are cast as motivated solely by financial gain and which produced an ‘unproblematic authority structure’ (p.2584). Similarly, Bray et al (2015) suggest the employment relationship in this frame is predicated on ‘enforced compliance’ (p.11) which bears similarities to Cathcart’s (2014) finding of ‘employee compliance’ in the John Lewis Partnership. Following this rationale, voice is essential though only in relation to the sole quest for increased performance and competitive advantage achieved through employees regarded as resources and their compliance regarded as essential.

### ***3.3.2 Soft unitarism, HRM and employee voice***

Much of the contemporary field of HRM is underpinned by soft unitarism (Budd and Bhava 2008). HRM emerged in the UK during the 1980s and represented a ‘sea-change’ in the way the employment relationship, and therefore employee voice, was conceived (Heery 2016 p.13). Whereas the hard unitarist frame regards employees as a resource whose compliance is essential, soft unitarism regards employees as ‘assets’ (Storey 1989). Influenced by the academic discipline of psychology, particularly industrial and organisational psychology (Barry and Wilkinson 2015), the rationale of soft unitarism is based on, and justified by, there

being a unity of interests between the employer and employee striving to maintain the ‘natural’ order of harmony<sup>1</sup> in the workplace.

Soft unitarism has been influenced by the hierarchy of needs thesis (Maslow 1943) which grew from what was regarded as the negative effects of hierarchical organisations which hamper satisfaction of the higher order needs, i.e. esteem and self-actualisation. More recent influences on this frame are by Seligman (2002) who, by drawing on Maslow’s work, developed a thesis of ‘positive psychology’ evidenced in his idea of ‘the good life’. Further influences are from scholars such as Van Dyne and LePine (1998) whose more specific focus on employee voice is conceived as discretionary, pro-social and largely informal and individual behaviour (e.g. Morrison et al 2011). Employee voice through this frame and channelled through HRM tends to be predicated on the notion that ‘what is good for the firm must be good for the worker’ (Barry and Wilkinson 2015 p.263; see also Dobbins and Dundon 2011). As such, a preoccupation is identifying the conditions under which employer and employee interests are most closely aligned as it is in such circumstances that performance is maximised (Heery 2016). An array of practices, tools and techniques are therefore vital in creating the right conditions.

Soft unitarism is process-focused (Budd and Bhava 2008; Heery 2015) based on an assumption that with the right HRM policies and practices in place, the interests of employees and employers will be aligned because ‘labour and management have a unity of interests’ (Budd and Bhava 2008 p.103). By following this logic, employee voice is effective as it provides employees with the opportunity to contribute to business decision-making by drawing on their knowledge of work processes (Heery 2015). Practices include sharing information, direct consultation and task-based forms of participation, profit-sharing and more recently, employee engagement (Heery 2015; Johnstone and Ackers 2015). The aim is to make the company more efficient in order that the increased surplus can be shared as higher profit for shareholders whilst providing higher wages and job security for employees: ‘win/win’; simultaneously benefiting employers through profit maximisation and employees through fulfilment (Budd and Bhava 2008). This corresponds with the study by Jenkins and

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<sup>1</sup> An early reference to the concept of a ‘harmony of interests’ was by Leffingwell (1917; cited in Saval 2014) in relation to a growing middle class of clerks in 19<sup>th</sup> century America who, unlike their contemporaries working in factories, saw commonalities between themselves and their bosses rather than disparities. This, combined with the influence of European socialists such as Charles Fourier, Robert Owen and Karl Marx regarding the irreconcilable differences between capital and labour, prompted a change in discourse to harmony rather than discord.

Delbridge (2013) where an organisation adopting a soft management approach included using practices such as promoting 'positive' workplace conditions. Importantly, in this frame, conflict is regarded as being due to poor policies, practices and management.

Conflict in the soft unitarist frame is viewed as 'essentially pathological'; the result of management failure or challenging external influences, such as trade unions (Heery 2015 p.21). If companies are following HRM practice, then employees will be fulfilled and there would be no need for mechanisms to resolve conflict. Indeed, contemporary HR professionals often regard a need for a union as an HRM failure (Kochan 2004). Employees are able to express their (presumably positive) voice through a range of sophisticated policies, processes and practices. As with hard unitarism, the driving motivator for employee voice in this context, its purpose, is not for reasons of social justice but rather to enhance employee, and in turn organisational, performance.

Employee voice in this frame makes good business sense vis-à-vis improving organisational performance (Timming and Johnstone 2015). It therefore regarded as the key ingredient for creating organisational commitment framed in terms of its contribution to profit and shareholder value (Wilkinson and Fay 2011). This is achieved through the pursuit of shared aims and values and by investment in training, above-market wages and benefits and job security in order to gain higher productivity from highly motivated, skilled and engaged workers (Arrowsmith and Parker 2013; Johnstone 2014; Kaufman 2015). However, a preoccupation for harmonious employment relationships and an aversion to conflict within this frame could conceal a more malignant reality.

Johnstone and Ackers (2015) argue that it is important to note that initiatives such as those described above are driven by management and build a measure of employee participation around a conventional capitalist business organisation run to increase shareholder value. This means that the primacy of shareholder value is retained whilst simultaneously involving employees, though not because of social justice factors, rather, because it may impact positively on shareholder value. As an example, Johnstone (2014) relates the soft unitarist frame to his work on partnership (noted in chapter two). He suggests that attempts at partnership could mask and reinforce inequalities behind a 'veneer of co-operation' (p.318).

Similar observations are made by other Employment Relations scholars. Gollan et al (2015) use the term 'rhetorical façade' (p.2), and Dobbins and Dundon (2015) make reference to the

‘chimera’ of labour-management partnerships which were considered ‘superficial’ by Danford et al (2005). Far from an apparently benign outward impression, a particularly malignant element of this frame is its focus on performance and ‘delivering ‘bottom line’ results’, which, in a competitive world, worryingly, demand that the employee ‘goes the extra mile’ (Legge 2005 p.340). Legge (ibid) states:

‘The ‘soft’ normative model of HRM is depicted as individualistic, with committed employees working flexibly and ‘beyond contract’ in pursuit of competitive advantage’ (p.279).

As with the hard unitarist frame, the emphasis here on performance and ‘going the extra mile’ is similar to the finding noted by Cathcart (2014) in the John Lewis Partnership whereby partners were implored to go the extra mile for the sake of the business. A further similarity is found in the Human Relations variation of unitarism highlighted earlier by Cullinane and Dundon (2014) whereby labour management practices were regarded as ‘sophisticated manipulation’ (Purcell and Sisson 1983; cited in Cullinane and Dundon 2014). Such emphases however are based on a number of assumptions. For example, the idea of employees ‘going the extra mile’ presumes they are not already doing so. Further, employee voice in the context of going the extra mile reflects the compliancy espoused by the hard unitarist frame albeit framed in a softer, more positive guise, though no less manipulative. Voice viewed from this perspective reflects a management agenda that does not involve sharing of power or authority (Wilkinson and Fay 2011) and therefore is conceived as ‘voice without muscle’ (Kaufman and Taras 2010). A further issue is that HRM is associated with a positivist approach involving research practices that try to establish links between HRM and performance (Harley and Hardy 2004; Legge 2005).

An overwhelming concern with conceptualising, measuring and identifying the antecedents and consequences of positive psychological states amongst workers has been observed within the unitarist tradition and given fresh emphasis in the last two decades by the ‘positive psychology movement’ associated with soft unitarism as well as the recent wave of research on employee engagement (Heery 2016). Such ‘psychologisation’ of the employment relationship manifests in a focus on studying voice through surveys in the hope of finding links between specific HRM practices and performance (Godard 2014). Heery (2016) suggests that within this frame there has been a pronounced imbalance in research that has meant a greater focus on identifying whether employers are realising their interests rather than whether employees are achieving theirs:

The overwhelming mass of unitary research on employment relations has been on the degree, manner and conditions under which management strategies, techniques and practices elicit improved performance from workers' (p.16).

Though limited to certain disciplines, this unitarist emphasis remains the dominant paradigm within the contemporary employment relationship (e.g. Delbridge and Keenoy 2010; Hannon 2010; Heery 2016; Janssens and Steyaert 2009). As such, the contemporary employee voice landscape is underpinned by a unitarist philosophy which is based on an assumption that all members of an organisation have mutual interests (Delbridge and Keenoy 2010).

Importantly, this landscape manifests in a re-orientation of employee voice away from equity concerns towards efficiency concerns (Budd 2004). Within this landscape, HRM is under increasing pressure to 'align' itself with (financial) business objectives (Cushen and Harney 2015; see also Johnstone and Wilkinson 2013; Thompson 2011). The effect on employee voice is that it is characterised by low involvement and low representation mechanisms and predicated on low-trust relationships. Providing employees with workplace equity and voice has an 'instrumental value in increasing efficiency and competitiveness' (Budd 2004 p.70). Critical of mainstream economics that subordinates voice to efficiency, Budd (2004) argues:

'Work is not simply an economic transaction; respect for the importance of human life and dignity requires that the fair treatment of workers also be a fundamental standard of the employment relationship – as do the democratic ideals of freedom and equality' (p.1).

As such, economic performance, the 'rhetorical power of efficiency' (ibid p.5) should not be the sole standard by which employee voice is assessed. He goes on to argue for an alignment, a balance, between the business case and the social case, the latter based on values such as human dignity, mutual respect, loyalty and trust, and a richer set of objectives beyond that of efficiency. Similarly, Ackers (2002) argues: '...the employment *relationship* should be conceptualised as a social and ethical relationship, as well as an economic transaction' (emphasis in original; p.12).

### ***3.3.3 Collaborative pluralism***

The frames of reference are used by Bray et al (2015) as the starting point to develop the idea of 'collaborative pluralism'. There are two important characteristics of collaborative pluralism which differentiate it from the more traditional forms of pluralism. Firstly, it recognises and accepts that managers, employees and employee representatives are legitimate parties to co-

operative relationships with sometimes separate and sometimes shared goals. It is through this legitimacy that employee voice is expressed. Secondly, collaborative pluralism is focused on the co-operative aspects of the employment relationship rather than conflict.

a. The legitimacy of employee voice

The legitimacy of employee voice within the frame of collaborative pluralism draws on the earlier work of Budd (2004) which was concerned with how the employment relationship is viewed. If it is viewed through the lens of a hard unitarist for example, then the relationship is regarded purely as a transaction: employees regard work as a burden carried out only to earn an income therefore companies must devise mechanisms that incentivise and control to counter such things as shirking. However, an alternative view he argues is that the relationship is more than an economic one. Grounded in Kantian moral philosophy (Adams 2005), it is this latter approach which Budd takes by conceiving voice as a right, a moral imperative; voice is an end in itself.

Kantian philosophy is predicated on the belief that the basis of human dignity is autonomy and self-governance as well as on assumptions that humans are wise, intelligent, informed, responsible, interested in civic affairs, rational and co-operative. Against this philosophical backdrop, Budd (2004) argues that work is a fully human activity and employees are entitled to fair treatment (equity) as well as opportunities to have an input into decisions that affect their lives (voice). Denying people a voice at work violates the Kantian principle of having a duty to respect human life in and of itself, i.e. voice is a moral imperative. The notion of voice as a moral imperative and its legitimacy corresponds to his idea of the workplace as a place of democracy.

A broader definition of democracy is offered by Dachler and Wilpert (1978). They state that democracy has functioned as a social value in itself, and as such, 'serves as a...moral standard against which social decision-making schemes can be evaluated' (p.4). Democracy in this sense has a much broader remit than its narrowly defined counterpart in the traditional pluralist frame relating only to trade unions (e.g. Ackers 2002; Budd 2014). A key proponent of democratic theory is Pateman (1970) whose view of participatory democracy was all embracing, incorporating not only the political sphere but all aspects of social life, e.g. education, employment, family life.

For Pateman (ibid), there was a significance of employees being involved in decision-making rather than simply being recipients of decisions-made. This links to how Budd (2004) understands employee voice; it concerns employee participation in decision-making. Importantly, this way of thinking represents an alternative view of employee voice to the traditional adversarial and combative pluralist voice and, moreover, to the contemporary HRM/unitarist view of voice. What it does is put employee voice back where it originated, i.e. the traditional pluralist concern for employees, but takes it further by arguing that employees have a legitimacy to express their voice, they have the right. This is a view that is also reflected in the work of other Employment Relations scholars. For example, Donaghey et al (2011<sup>a</sup>) argue:

‘Genuine pluralism rests upon social values which recognise the right of employees to an effective voice in their own destiny, regardless of the consequences for management’ (p. 55).

Similarly, Wilkinson et al (2014) regard employee voice as something which is fundamental and should form part of a human dignity philosophy. Within the Employment Relations discipline, there has been an increasing emphasis on the importance of industrial citizenship and social democracy; thus employee voice is viewed as a right in modern democratic societies (Timming and Johnstone 2015). Following a social justice logic, employee voice is regarded as a fundamental right in order that employees are able to extend a degree of control over managerial decision-making encompassing notions of free speech and human dignity (Wilkinson and Dundon 2010). Gollan (2013) argues:

‘Voice, the right to be heard and have influence over workplace issues, and at times an acknowledgement of differing interests, may be essential conditions for more effective decision-making processes and greater social well-being and inclusiveness’ (p.501).

Whilst efficiency has become the standard by which employment relationships are assessed, Budd (2004) argues for employment that has a ‘human face’. He suggests voice should be a standard within the employment relationship akin to economic (efficiency) and equity (fairness) standards. Furthermore, he argues, employee voice should be ‘meaningful’. By this he means employees having some input into decisions that affect them in the workplace achieved through free speech and the opportunity to challenge without any reprisal. This leads to the second aspect of collaborative pluralism which conceives employee voice as co-operative rather than conflictual.

b. A co-operative voice

The second aspect of collaborative pluralism is concerned with emphasising co-operation in the employment relationship. The classic pluralist frame characterised employment relationships as both conflictual and co-operative. Within this state of conflict-co-operation, notions of fairness and justice act as a mediator (Ackers 2002). However, Ackers (ibid) and Budd (2004) argue that increasingly the pluralist frame became synonymous with the conflictual side of the relationship to the detriment of co-operation. Therefore, what differentiates collaborative pluralism from classic pluralism is the greater emphasis on co-operation. The argument is that by acknowledging that employees are legitimate parties to the employment relationship, the possibility exists for a greater emphasis on co-operative relationships, the type of relationship that employees want with their employers (Freeman and Rogers 2006).

Several studies report that the type of voice employees would like is one of co-operation with some influence at both strategic and operational levels (Bryson and Freeman 2007; Cathcart 2014; Flanders et al 1968; Freeman et al 2007; Ramsay 1977; Rathkey 1983; The Smith Institute 2016). Further, Freeman et al (2007) argue that, given workers are the main consumers of employee voice, attention should be paid to the type of voice employees want when it comes to constructing or reforming voice institutions. Yet, despite the evidence suggesting employees want a more co-operative relationship with their employers, there are some who question whether such a situation can be achieved in capitalist organisations.

Within capitalist organisations, the key architects of employee voice mechanisms tends to be managers, as discussed in chapter two. Management-led employee voice places emphasis on what is referred to as a 'business-case'. (Cathcart 2009; Johnstone and Wilkinson 2015). The purpose of employee voice within this context is to contribute to business goals and is achieved through a range of HRM innovations such as open door policies and suggestion schemes, at the lower end of the escalator in figure 2.1 (chapter two). These HRM innovations are influenced by a unitarist frame, and as such, the workplace environment is characterised as individualistic, harmonious and unified. As argued by Legge (2005):



‘The individualistic values (and anti-union bias) that pervade the rhetoric of the enterprise culture are consistent with the individualistic and unitarist values of stereotypical normative HRM models. Its emphasis on the primacy of the market and the need to create enterprising individuals and firms to compete successfully in the marketplace find echoes in the ‘hard’ model’s emphasis on external integration – of the match between strategy and environment, and of HRM policy, procedures and practices with business strategy’ (p.122).

It is within this unitarist environment that the philosophies of the most prominent organisational actors, managers, are shaped by the different academic conceptualisations of employee voice.

Following Budd (2004), Kochan et al (1984) and Kochan et al (1986), managers are the primary movers of organisational change and their strategic choices are underpinned by their own philosophies. This combination of the external environment and management philosophies creates a particular conceptualisation of employee voice as something which exists to contribute to the efficiency of the business. Simultaneously, other interpretations of employee voice which do not correspond to this conceptualisation are closed down or obscured. In so doing, some voices and subjects are heard and regarded as valuable whilst other voices and subjects are not. The key argument here is that employee voice in its current form is predicated on academic and managerial conceptualisations which influence what is of value and what is not, therefore constraining and coercing voice to correspond to this conceptualisation. In contrast, collaborative pluralism provides an alternative to the unitarist frame of reference to evaluate employee voice.

Collaborative pluralism represents an important intellectual shift away from employee voice focused on conflict (classic pluralism) or efficiency (hard and soft unitarism) by focusing on employee voice that is co-operative and yielded because of its legitimacy. This frame provides a useful addition to this thesis for the purpose of comparing and contrasting employee voice against the other two frames, hard and soft unitarism. As such, these three frames will be used in this thesis to provide a lens through which to examine employee voice through employee-ownership. Will employee voice be any different in an employee-owned enterprise given it is part of the fabric, or, against the backdrop of a pervasive unitarist environment, will it merely be a fabrication?

### **3.4 Summary**

This chapter has discussed the theoretical framework that will be used to evaluate the difference in employee voice in an employee-owned enterprise; the frames of reference. The frames were originally conceived by Fox (1966; 1974) and subsequently developed by Storey (1989) and by Bray et al (2015). To explain the relevance of the frames in relation to employee voice, the chapter was separated into two themes. The first discussed the main characteristics of each frame as conceived by Fox (1966; 1974). It also drew on the Employment Relations and HRM literature to highlight differences between the frames. The second theme focused on developments to the unitarist frame and the pluralist frame and explained the relevance of each in terms of enabling an analysis of employee voice.

It was argued that it is hard and soft unitarism, as conceived by Storey (1989), which underpin much of the contemporary HRM literature on employee voice and, as such, influence it at company level. Influenced by a unitarist environment, employee voice at company level reflects the choices made by managers. These choices are for low-level mechanisms alongside prescriptions about what voice ought to do; which is to contribute to the efficiency of the company. It was argued that this environment has a bearing on whose voices are heard. An alternative frame was then discussed, collaborative pluralism (Bray et al 2015), which proposed employee voice as a right and as co-operative. Collaborative pluralism, it was argued, offers a different way of conceptualising voice and enables comparisons to be made with the dominant unitarist frames.

These three frames, hard and soft unitarism and collaborative pluralism, provide the theoretical framework to evaluate whether employee voice in an employee-owned enterprise is different compared to that of conventional businesses. They will help to facilitate an understanding of the different philosophies which underpin management choices and approaches to employee voice in an employee-owned enterprise. As discussed in chapter two, we know that in such enterprises voice is a right, it is embedded and it is expressed through a range of sophisticated processes and as such, there is a potential of it being part of a company's fabric. However, against the backdrop of a unitarist philosophy, will it be no more than a fabrication? The frames will help to evaluate these issues using empirical evidence drawn from this study. This evidence will come from the methodological approach which is considered in the next chapter.

## **Chapter Four: Research Methodology**

### **4.1 Introduction**

This chapter discusses the research methodology. The methodology is designed to address the research questions presented in chapter one and the limitation in the employee voice literature highlighted in chapter two and reflects the theoretical framework discussed in the previous chapter. Chapter three highlighted how contemporary employee voice is underpinned by the unitarist philosophy of managers in conventional businesses which orients voice towards company efficiency and is reflected in the choice of low-level voice mechanisms. Having introduced an alternative philosophy, collaborative pluralism, it was then argued that the frames of reference will help to facilitate an understanding of the philosophy which underpin management choices and approaches to employee voice in an employee-owned enterprise. As discussed in chapter two, we know that in such enterprises voice is a right, it is embedded and it is expressed through a range of sophisticated processes and as such, there is a potential of it being part of a company's fabric. However, when the prevailing philosophy is unitarism, the question of whether voice would be no more than a fabrication was posed. The frames will help to evaluate these issues using empirical evidence drawn from this study which will come from the methodological approach discussed in this chapter. The chapter has six sections.

Section one considers the philosophical traditions which underpin different research approaches. To highlight how these differences affect research practice, section two discusses the approaches used by HRM and Employment Relations scholars to study employee voice. It then states the approach of this study which is a subjectivist ontology, interpretivist epistemology and qualitative methodology. Section four details the research design, which is a qualitative single case study that is exploratory and explanatory, and includes the Context, Mechanism and Outcomes (CMO) configuration conceived by Pawson and Tilley (1997) that is used to organise data collection and analysis. Section five outlines the research process which includes selecting and accessing the case, methods of data collection, data analysis and reflexivity in the research process. Finally, some of the limitations of the methodology are discussed.

## **4.2 Research ontology, epistemology and methodology**

Social science research is founded upon, and influenced by, various philosophical positions which are concerned with the nature of existence, ontology, and the nature of knowledge - epistemology. These philosophical positions are important as they underpin the values and beliefs of researchers (Saunders et al 2012). In turn they influence every aspect of the research process, the methodological approach, beginning with whatever it is that forms the focus of the research right through to the analysis of data, the conclusions that are drawn and the knowledge that is thus created. Importantly, these positions are based on different ontologies regarding the nature of existence and different epistemologies regarding the nature of knowledge that shape the beliefs of the researcher. In other words, they are important because they provide a base from which the foundations of a research project are built.

The following section discusses what is meant by, and the differences between, ontological and epistemological orientations followed by a discussion of how each influences the research methodology, whether quantitative or qualitative. It then states the position taken here which is a subjectivist ontology, interpretivist epistemology and qualitative methodology to carry out the research on employee voice.

### ***4.2.1 Ontology and the nature of reality***

Ontology is the philosophical study of the nature of existence, of being or of reality. It is concerned with questions about whether the social world is regarded as something which is external to social actors or, conversely, whether it is regarded as something that humans are involved in influencing (Bryman 2012). As it relates to employee voice, it refers to the ontological assumptions made by different researchers regarding the term. For example, it might involve such questions as, what is the nature of employee voice? In other words, it relates to how an entity, employee voice in this instance, is understood and the assumptions which are made about the nature of that entity (Johnstone 2007; Kempster and Parry 2011). It is about a researcher's understanding of what some 'thing' is; their understanding of a thing is ontological. Indeed ontology underpins why, as a researcher, a specific subject has been chosen and what the perceived relevance of that thing is. Furthermore, it questions the assumptions of the researcher in relation to how they see the external world operating. Ontology is how the researcher makes sense of what they are studying. It can be understood as a continuum ranging from objectivism at one extreme and subjectivism at the other with various other approaches falling between these extremes.

The objectivist researcher believes there is one single objective reality that can be studied. Further, the phenomenon which is studied is regarded as separate from themselves as researchers. That is, social entities can and should be considered as objective and having a reality that is external to humans (Bryman 2012). Based on this ontological assumption of objectivity, it is an approach which is likened to the way phenomena are studied by the natural sciences. Given that it tries to replicate the procedures of the natural sciences, objectivism strives to ensure researcher bias is minimised and is regarded by those researchers who adhere to the approach as being reliable and valid. This is in contrast to studying a phenomenon through the lens of ontological subjectivism.

Subjectivism emphasises that there is not one but many realities. Within these multiple realities, social ‘entities’ (i.e. rather than ‘phenomena’) are regarded as being made up of the perceptions and actions of humans (ibid). An understanding of an entity from a subjective approach comes through discovery and from the meanings people attach to it. To apply the lens of subjectivism to employee voice requires the researcher to be empathetic to multiple interpretations and perspectives. Employee voice, its meaning and purpose, will be interpreted differently from one person to another. An important difference between subjectivism in contrast to objectivism is that the former realises that an understanding of an entity also comes from within the context in which that particular entity occurs as opposed to the latter which studies a phenomenon in isolation of its context. This is an important difference and will be discussed in greater detail below (Context, Mechanism and Outcomes). A further difference between the two approaches concerns researcher bias.

Whereas an objectivist researcher would argue that bias must be minimised during the research process, from a subjectivist ontology there is no such thing as value-free research. Rather, the emphasis is on getting as close as possible to the entity which is being studied. Similarly, differences are noted in the terms ‘reliability’ and ‘validity’. Whilst an objectivist would argue they are fundamental to research, they are meaningless terms to the subjectivist. However, this by no means reduces the quality of the research process, rather different mechanisms are put in place. The mechanisms which are used in this research to ensure certain standards are met are discussed in a section below (Principles, Ethics and Reflexivity).

#### ***4.2.2 Epistemology and the nature of knowledge***

Epistemology relates to the theory of knowledge. It asks questions such as what do we know and how do we know what we know? As it relates to employee voice, it refers to the

epistemological assumptions made by different researchers: what do we know about employee voice and how do we know what we know? In social science research there are various philosophical positions regarding knowledge that in turn influence the research process. There are particular sets of beliefs, concepts and practices which underpin and guide the process. Again, the idea of a continuum is useful to highlight the extremes of positions. There is at one end positivism and at the other interpretivism with various other approaches falling between these extremes.

Positivism has a distinctive epistemology concerning the nature, form, acquisition and communication of knowledge about a particular social phenomenon which is being investigated (Johnstone 2007). Integral to it, is a mirroring of natural scientific approaches regarding the acquisition of knowledge about the social world and to the interpretation and understanding of social phenomena. In its most basic form, positivism searches for replicability, reliability and validity believing as it does that society must be studied in the same methodical way as, and in accordance with, scientific methods (Mearns 2011).

Positivism's epistemology identifies scientific knowledge as having 'covering laws' and regards itself as independent of the reality it is describing (Riley 2007). As such, knowledge is derived, or rather deduced, in a search for general laws and objective social facts akin to 'truths' in the natural sciences. By adopting a positivist epistemology to study employee voice, a 'nomothetic' methodological approach would be used. This approach is discussed in more detail in the section below (Methodological approaches: quantitative and qualitative).

By contrast, integral to interpretivism is a belief that there are many realities, thus rejecting the objectivist view that meaning resides in the world independent of human consciousness. It does not search for one 'truth' but rather acknowledges that there are many. Thus, the goal is to find a socially agreed understanding in order to make sense of a given entity. The way to access those realities and meanings comes through social constructions such as language, consciousness, shared meanings and instruments. It embraces a number of different approaches that include social constructionism, phenomenology, post-modernism and hermeneutics. Characteristic of this position is the need to look at the social world from the inside and adopt a subject-subject relation to the field of study (Myers 2013): both researcher and researched are integral parts of the research process. Indeed, the context in which the data is situated is paramount. The logic here is that without an understanding of the broader context it is impossible to understand the correct meaning of a single piece of data (ibid). This

epistemology which underpins interpretivism in turn informs the way employee voice is studied in this thesis, through an ‘ideographic’ methodological approach.

#### **4.2.3 Methodology: quantitative and qualitative**

Grounded in a distinctive ontology and epistemology, positivism has a methodological approach that is ‘nomothetic’, the word originating from the Greek word ‘nomos’ meaning law. This conveys an approach that is objective and systematic which seeks to provide general law-like statements (Johnstone 2007). This is regarded as the defining feature of positivism which implies that there exists in the social world regularities or law-like generalisations in material or social settings which provide a basis for explanation and prediction (Easton 2010). With a preference for quantitative research methods, a positivist approach is often taken to mean deductive, theory-testing, objective and positivist processes (Lee 1999). Kempster and Parry (2011) suggest there are a number of principles common to positivism which are followed by some researchers in order to demonstrate law-like regularities to explain reality. These principles include:

- a. The researcher being independent and value-free.
- b. Establishing causation through a process of identifying a hypothesis that is tested and either proved or disproved through statistical measurement.
- c. That such measurement is to be drawn from samples of sufficient size that inferences can be drawn.

Following these principles, positivist researchers will tend to preference research methods such as surveys and questionnaires. The principles have been applied in social sciences research influenced by an epistemology that considers it possible to make predictions about social phenomena in the same way as it is to make predictions about phenomena in the natural world. However, those rejecting a positivist philosophy argue the same principles of natural sciences cannot be applied to social sciences. For example, Mearns (2011) notes, ‘...the employment relationship does not operate in a vacuum, nor does it operate in a sterilised laboratory’ (p. 366; see also Butler 2015). An alternative philosophy is interpretivism, which seeks a more subjective approach to the entity being investigated.

In contrast to positivism, the approach of the interpretivist researcher is ideographic. This approach highlights the unique elements of an entity and focuses on subjective accounts (Johnstone 2007). It considers the social world as not static but in a constant state of change and as humans we are constantly acting to change or modify it through our interactions with others; a ‘negotiated order’ (Strauss et al 1963). As such, the research process preferences a qualitative approach that is inductive, theory-generating, subjective and non-positivist (Lee 1999). Further, its research is typically inductive compared to the deductive nature of quantitative research and is non-linear (Myers 2013). Research methods typically used are case studies, observations and interviews. And, in contrast to the emphasis in positivism on reliability and validity, it uses a variety of ways to ensure the research process is robust and meets a high standard, discussed in more detail below (Principles, Ethics and Reflexivity).

What is clear from this discussion, is that the social sciences are founded on different philosophical positions which influence methodological approaches to what is researched and how that research is undertaken. Some of the key differences between epistemologies, ontologies and methodological approaches are highlighted in table 4.1 below.

<b>Positivism</b>	<b>Interpretivism</b>
Objective	Subjective
Quantitative	Qualitative
Fact gathering	Meanings are constructed
Nomothetic: search for general laws	Ideographic: study an individual or unique person/event/thing and interpretation of results/findings
Deductive	Inductive
Test/verify hypotheses	Multiple realities
Numerical based	Text based

**Table 4.1 Differences between positivism and interpretivism**

Such differences include an emphasis on objectivity and the search for ‘facts’ as integral to the positivist research process. By contrast, qualitative research tends towards a subjective approach whereby meanings are constructed. For the former, the research process is linear (Braun and Clark 2006; Myers 2013) for the latter, it is iterative and evolving. Some caution has been expressed that the lines between the extreme ontological positions are blurring (e.g. Harley and Hardy 2004). This is exemplified in attempts to challenge the polarity of social science research such as the recent development of critical realism which tries to find a common ground between the two extremes (Edwards et al 2014). Nevertheless, what is



important to highlight is that these different ontological and epistemological approaches influence research methodology.

As these differences relate to employee voice, they have a bearing on the way it is studied. As noted in chapter two, and though not explicitly referred to as such, the study of employee voice has a long history within the discipline of Employment Relations. By contrast the relatively new field of HRM has tended to dominate the contemporary literature. The important point in a research context is that each of them have quite different approaches to the way they research employee voice. These differences are important as they affect how employee voice is studied and therefore how it is understood.

### **4.3 Research methodology and employee voice**

Given its emphasis on trying to establish links between workplace practices and employee and organisational performance as noted in chapter two, the HRM literature has been influenced by positivism (Cushen and Harney 2015; Francis 2003; Guest 2011; Johnstone 2007; Marchington and Kynighou 2012). Positivism is the dominant form of research in most business and management disciplines (Myers 2013) and is driven by empirical generalisability and strives to be independent and value-free (Kempster and Parry 2011). The adoption of natural scientific approaches to acquire knowledge about the social world is fundamental to this approach. However, the influence of positivism has created a crisis within the research community in terms of the forms of knowledge which are generated (Savage 2013). An academic discourse of HRM has been constructed which has brought into being an understanding and a set of practices that have created a ‘truth’ (Harley and Hardy 2004). This ‘truth’ manifests in an emphasis on efficiency as the only objective of a business which is influenced by hard and soft unitarist theories underpinning the HRM:

‘The theories do not merely create a picture of reality, but also help to create that reality’ (Edwards 2017 p.4).

Through the philosophical approach of positivism, HRM has sought to isolate those practices thought to improve profit, productivity and performance and therefore has created as reality the efficacy of some practices over and above others. Those studying employee voice from the soft unitarist frame, which influences much of HRM, have a tendency to try to replicate natural sciences both in terms of methodology but also in terms of ontology (Godard 2014; Heery 2016). Underpinned by this frame, HRM tends to focus on the outcomes of a particular mechanism rather than on either the mechanisms and/or the context in which particular

mechanisms were implemented. As well as this resulting in ‘intellectual poverty’, a further concern is a view of ‘human resources’ which adopts a hyper-positivist and instrumentalist perspective:

‘The risk is that human beings come to be viewed as objects to be manipulated, and especially in the case of industrial psychology, disciplined and controlled’ (Godard 2014 p.11).

This view reflects some of the literature on HRM and soft unitarism discussed in chapter three that was exemplified through such notions as ‘going the extra mile’ (Legge 2005; Piasna et al 2013). The malignant nature of such notions is not to be under-estimated; they call for employees to go beyond their contractual agreements and are based on assumptions that employees are not already fully committed to their work. Research of this nature that focuses exclusively on whether outcomes are efficient or whether practices and institutions improve productivity, ‘embodies a normative judgement that efficiency concerns are paramount’ (Budd 2004 p.186). This is true of soft and also hard unitarism:

‘The overwhelming mass of unitary research on employment relations has been on the degree, manner and conditions under which management strategies, techniques and practices elicit improved performance from workers’ (Heery 2016 p.16).

Whilst such approaches provide useful insights, it is argued here that they provide only a partial contribution to understanding employee voice. Quantitative approaches offer little about the context in which employee voice evolves, how processes and mechanisms operate, how and why employee voice occurs and offer limited explanation of linkages between voice practices. As such, there is a tendency to ‘lack sensitivity to the complexities of voice’ (Marchington 2007 p.239). An example which reflects this point was discussed in chapter two regarding the recent development of employee engagement surveys.

Quantitative approaches such as employee engagement, or satisfaction, surveys have become the key mechanism within organisations through which employees are able to express their voice. However, such surveys are regarded by some as ineffective as a means of employees expressing voice (Purcell and Hall 2012). For example, they rarely seek views from employees outside of the topics that are prescribed by management, provide little in the way of contextual influences and data is limited to giving percentages but not answers to why or how questions.

In short, the limitations of even the most sophisticated quantitative studies in developing our understanding of the importance of contextual factors and social processes, and how these can affect HR outcomes, are now increasingly recognised with some arguing that the workplace is an ‘open system’ too complex to be fully understood by ‘scientific meta-theory’ (Fleetwood and Hesketh 2010). As such, and as noted earlier, these approaches may provide only a partial contribution to understanding employee voice. A different perspective on these issues, such as the importance of context, is evident in the Employment Relations literature.

Employment Relations scholars are mindful of the role of the context in which a phenomenon evolves and develops. This is in contrast to HRM. Whereas HRM researchers rarely, if at all, give consideration to the context in which a social phenomenon occurs (Heery 2016), Employment Relations researchers do place emphasis on it (e.g. Johnstone 2014; 2015). Context as it relates to an organisation includes external factors in which an organisation operates (McBride and Stirling 2002). This can include the historical, social, economic and political environment. It also includes internal factors, for example, an organisation’s policies and procedures. Scholars in this tradition are attentive to the role played particularly by the external environment in shaping and constraining employee voice (Heery 2016). Academics working within an Employment Relations tradition are likely to be interested in the context in which employee voice has developed in order to understand how and why it is configured as it is. A further difference vis-à-vis employee voice between HRM and Employment Relations relates to research concerns about efficiency or equity.

Whereas HRM research tends to focus on employee voice in relation to its contribution to an organisational efficiency objective, research undertaken by Employment Relations researchers tends to reflect the pluralist objective of equity. Researchers in the pluralist Employment Relations tradition focus on particular mechanisms, the way those mechanisms operate in practice, the way they are used by an organisation and whether voice that is yielded as a result errs towards concerns of equity. This is evidenced in the association between an Employment Relations approach with trade unions described in chapter two. Indeed, given that the origins of employee voice evolved with trade unions, it is no surprise that this was where Employment Relations researchers traditionally focused their energy. However, with the demise of trade unions some Employment Relations researchers have turned to other institutions and other mechanisms to study employee voice. Heery (2016) suggests there are three ways pluralist Employment Relations scholars study employee voice:

- a. Scholars who are mounting a defence of trade unions, e.g. Bryson and Forth (2011).
- b. Scholars who focus on trade union revitalisation via, for example, partnership agreements, labour-management partnerships, e.g. Johnstone (2014; 2015).
- c. Scholars who focus on voice beyond trade unions to examine other representative institutions, such as employer-sponsored collective voice, worker directors, co-operatives, works councils, financial participation, etc. e.g. Bryson and Freeman (2007); Johnstone et al (2010) and Kaufman and Taras (2010).

It is with the third strand of Employment Relations research that this thesis is most closely aligned. Non-union forms of representative employee voice were discussed in chapter two with employee-ownership part of the cadre. As such, this research follows the contemporary path of Employment Relations academics through the study of employee-ownership. It uses a philosophical approach which has a subjective ontology and interpretivist epistemology. This is based on a belief that as researchers we are guided by our own ideas about the nature of existence and about what constitutes knowledge.

The ontological position of this study is that as researchers we do not operate in isolation of the myriad values and belief systems that surround us in wider society. Rather, we are influenced by those values and beliefs and, it is argued here, are an influence on them. Whilst objectivism is regarded as an appropriate and relevant ontological position from which to study phenomena in the natural world, it is argued that the same position is not appropriate to the study of the social world. In the natural world there are phenomena that can be objectively observed in the search for understanding and establishing knowledge, tidal changes providing one example. The same approach is not appropriate to the social world.

The argument here is that the social world is made up of many, sometimes competing, realities and interpretations. The role of the researcher is to untangle these realities and interpretations, try to make sense of what is happening and provide an explanation and analysis for what, in their view, is occurring. Given this ontology, it follows that the epistemological position is interpretivist prioritising an understanding of the social world through examining the interpretation of that world by its actors (Bryman 2012).

By adopting this approach, some of the key ontological and epistemological characteristics of research underpinned by positivism are anathema. This researcher assumes knowledge of reality is gained through social constructions, such as language, shared meanings, documents and other artefacts. Therefore, the research had no pre-defined variables; there were no formal propositions and no hypotheses to be tested or inferences to be drawn. This research is focused on the complexity of the environment in which decisions were taken about voice mechanisms, how employees make sense of the mechanism, employee-ownership, and how it is used by them to express their voice.

A rich and in-depth qualitative study therefore lends itself more favourably to the study of employee voice. Importantly, the research approach emphasises the context when trying to understand the nature of employee voice. Therefore, the configuration conceived by Pawson and Tilley (1997) which recommends studying context alongside mechanisms and outcomes, provides a way of organising the research approach.

#### **4.4 The research approach**

The research approach of this study was a single qualitative case study. Underpinned by a subjective interpretivist philosophy, the key purpose of the research approach was to ensure a richness and depth and was exploratory and explanatory (Saunders et al 2012) vis-à-vis employee voice. To do so, evidence was drawn from a single qualitative ‘case’ of an organisation which aimed to capture the voice of employees as it emerged in its real-life setting.

##### ***4.4.1 A single case or multiple cases?***

This study uses a single rather than multiple cases. Using a single case is potentially contentious and therefore requires justification (Saunders et al 2012). There are several reasons for choosing a single case. The first is the fundamental nature of this research and its complexity requiring examination of multiple units of analysis at different levels within the organisation which in turn would allow analysis and exploration of relationships between those units (Yin 2009). For example, the manifestation of employee voice will be considered at various organisational levels enabling the researcher to ‘close-in’ and respondents to ‘talk back’ (Flyvberg 2006 p.235; p. 236). This will ensure that a ‘thick description’ (Geertz 1973) of the case is achieved. The second reason is the case itself.

A single case study is used when it is considered ‘unique’ (Saunders et al 2012), ‘extreme or deviant’ (Flyvberg 2006) or ‘rare’ (Yin 2009). An employee-owned enterprise is an atypical business model and therefore understudied (Strauss 2006). The third is the time and resources needed for a study of this depth that could not be achieved if studying multiple cases. The fourth is the emphasis on qualitative rather than quantitative research; the idea being that it is depth not breadth that is important: ‘Using three or four cases is no better than using one case when it comes to increasing confidence in your findings’ (Myers 2013 p. 84). Indeed, though a case study can be used as part of a research strategy in either quantitative or qualitative research, the decision to adopt one or the other approach is not taken in isolation but rather, as noted earlier, is influenced by the researcher’s own assumptions and beliefs about reality and knowledge.

In a substantive critique of the case study approach, Robinson (2002) highlights how Stake (2005) and Yin (1993) use very different epistemologies in their approaches to using case studies. Given the philosophical orientation of this research, it is the approach used by Stake (2005) that has influenced the selection of the type of case study which is used here. That said, the contribution to the subject by Yin (1993) is clearly substantive and so at times and where relevant, his work will be drawn on. As a self-confessed constructivist, Stake (2005) argues knowledge is constructed by people. In this view, the plausibility of the case is paramount and is increased through the use of multiple sources of evidence coupled with a clear description of what has been done and how it has been done (Myers 2013). In contrast, Yin’s (1993) epistemology is grounded in the scientific, positivist method. Here, concerns are with the research questions or propositions and the logic of aligning data to those questions and propositions (Myers 2013). As noted in the discussion of epistemology, these differences affect the design, selection, execution and analysis of the research.

As one would expect, Stake’s (2005) ontological approach to research design, selection, execution and analysis is subjective. Rather than having a linear path, it is a process which evolves as the researcher progresses through the research. In contrast, Yin’s (1993) ontological approach is more objective and as such is organised, logical and methodical. Stake (2005) states:

‘The name “case study” is emphasised by some of us because it draws attention to the question of what specifically can be learned about the single case’ (p.443).

Applying the same epistemological question to this research, it becomes: what can we specifically learn about employee voice in an employee-owned enterprise? Further, the focus of this research is very much on developing an understanding of employee voice within this case rather than trying to generalise beyond it. Specifically, the qualitative case study strategy enables a focus, not only on the case itself but also on the context in which it operates which influences decisions about mechanisms which in turn affect the outcomes of voice as it unfolds in this particular case. Hartley (1994; cited in Kandathil and Varman 2007) suggest a case study provides a fuller contextual sense of the studied phenomena and is best suited for studying ‘social processes as they unfold in organisations’ (p.143). Stake (2005) identified three types of case study which are outlined in the table 4.2 below.

<b>Type</b>	<b>Description</b>
Intrinsic	The primary concern is for a better understanding of the particular case; it is not undertaken because it is representative nor because it illustrates a trait or problem, but because, despite its ordinariness, this case is itself of interest. The purpose is not to understand some abstract notion, nor is it theory-building, the study is undertaken because of an intrinsic interest.
Instrumental	The primary concern is to provide insight into an issue or to re-draw a generalisation, as such, the case itself is of secondary interest, it facilitates our understanding of something else. The case may or may not be typical of other cases, the choice of the case is made to advance understanding of that other interest.
Multiple	When there is even less interest in a particular case, a number of cases may be studied jointly in order to investigate a phenomenon, population or general condition, it is an instrumental study extended to several cases.

**Table 4.2 Types of case study**

Though Stake (ibid) posits either an intrinsic or instrumental case study, the approach here will be both as it seeks a better understanding of the case itself, an employee-owned enterprise, whilst also seeking to advance understanding of employee voice within the case. The third type of case study, multiple, and a rationale for not using it, has been discussed above (A single or multiple cases). Additionally, to ensure richness and depth, this study will use a single ‘embedded’ (Saunders et al 2012) and ‘extended’ (Burawoy 1998) case study design.

Embeddedness will come from studying a unit of analysis within the context of the case and related sub-units enabling how and why questions to be asked (Yin 2009). The units will be

identified by drawing on examples from the existing literature as well as through the research process itself. Extendedness will come from situating the phenomenon in its wider context and its localised environment and studying people not in terms of what they ‘ought to do’ but rather on what they ‘actually’ do (Burawoy 1998 p.5). Consideration of the wider environment is something which has been noted by several qualitative researchers as important (e.g. Myers 2013) as has placing oneself in the position of those who are being studied.

Flyvberg (2006) argues ‘...the most advanced form of understanding is achieved when researchers place themselves within the context being studied’ enabling a ‘proximity to reality’ (p.237). Gillham (2000) argues any definition of a case study should include: ‘a unit of human activity embedded in the real world; which can only be studied or understood in context; which exists in the here and now; that merges in with its context so that precise boundaries are difficult to draw’ (p.1). An embedded and extended case study is appropriate to enable proximity to the reality described by Flyvberg (2006) and as the boundaries of the phenomenon and the context in which it operates are not clearly separated (Yin 2009). For Burawoy (1998) such a reflexive model of science embraces not detachment, as with the positivist researcher, but rather engagement as the road to knowledge. A key aspect then of the qualitative case study is understanding what is going on in a particular case through observation and through being reflective (Stake 2005). The approach that has been used for this study has ensured sensitivity to the context of the organisation (Bryman and Bell 2011; Maitlis 2005), has focused on complex social processes (McBride 2005), created depth and detail (O’Mahoney and Vincent 2014), allowed how and why questions to be asked (Harrison and Easton 2004; Yin 2009) and facilitated theoretical generalisation (Tsang 2014).

#### **4.5 The research design: Context, mechanism and outcomes**

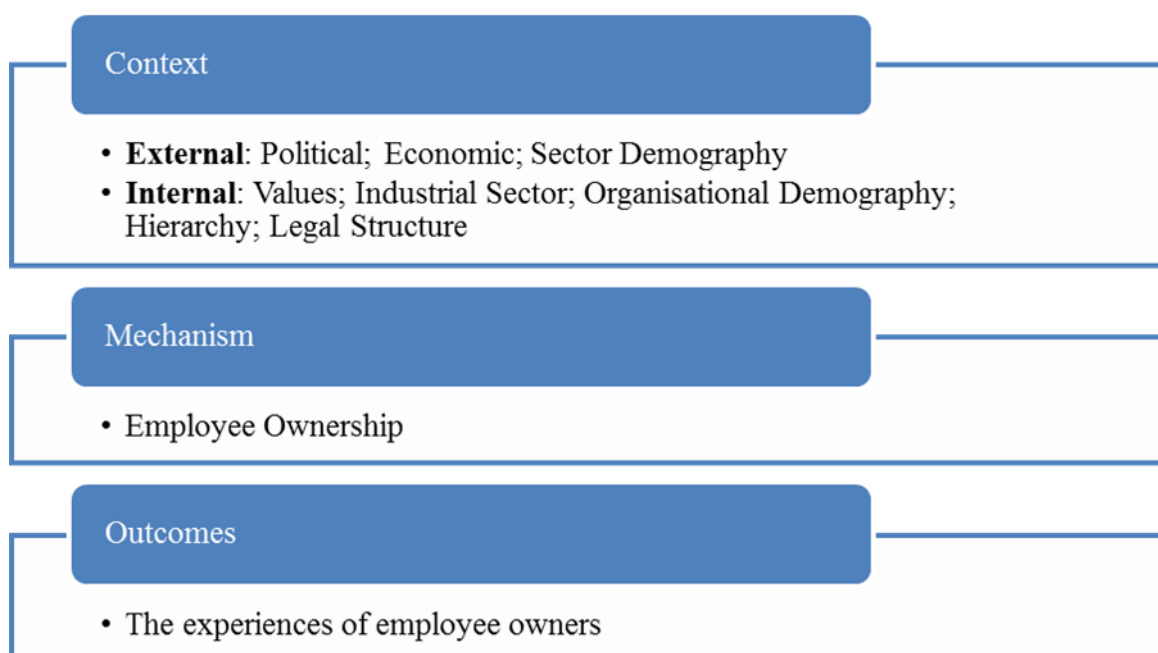
As noted several times during this chapter, context is regarded as fundamental to understanding the nature of employee voice within the case study. Reflecting the logic that without an understanding of the broader context it is impossible to understand the correct meaning of data (Myers 2013), it is anticipated a more holistic, in-depth, accurate and fair picture of the studied organisation will be achieved. Further, the context in which the studied organisation operates will have a bearing on the voice mechanism that is chosen and affect the subsequent outcomes for key organisational actors. The design of this research has followed the ‘Context, Mechanisms and Outcomes’ configuration conceived by Pawson and Tilley (1997).



‘Context’ refers to the conditions in which a mechanism is introduced which are relevant to the operation of the mechanism. As it is used for research purposes, it refers to the external environment (e.g. economic and political) and internal environment (e.g. policies and statutory obligations) in which the studied organisation operates. External context as it concerns the studied case for this research is the social care sector. ‘Mechanism’ refers to the processes through which voice manifests. An important consideration regarding a particular mechanism relates to the intention of that mechanism (Kessler 2010), i.e. what is hoped to be achieved by its architects? For this study, the mechanism is employee-ownership and an important question is how is voice exercised through it? It has been suggested that the interaction of context, company characteristics and actors’ objectives can have a powerful effect on the level and type of employee-ownership (Pendleton 2001). As such, as noted by Wilkinson et al (2014):

‘In a world in which voice mechanisms go beyond the traditional union mechanism, there is a need for more fine-grained and at times more qualitative analysis of how the different mechanisms actually function’ (p.6).

Regarding the outcomes of a mechanism, these can relate to quantifiable features such as absenteeism and staff retention. As it is used here, outcomes refer to the way in which the mechanism was experienced by organisational actors. Figure 4.1 below summarises the CMO configuration that will provide a way of organising the investigation of employee voice in this study.



**Figure 4.1 Context-Mechanism-Outcomes configuration**

As the configuration relates to context, the research will draw on the social care literature (chapter five) to explore challenges in the external environment in which the studied case operates. These external challenges influenced the decision to adopt employee-ownership as the mechanism as well as influencing how it evolved in the studied case. By outcomes, the research will focus on the consequences for employee voice in the studied case through consideration of its effect on key organisational actors.

#### **4.6 Research process**

Grounded by a subjective interpretive philosophy and using a single qualitative case study with the CMO providing a way of organising the data collection and its analysis, this section outlines the research process. The section is separated into sub-sections that cover: selecting the case, accessing the case, selecting respondents, methods of data collection, withdrawing from the research, data analysis and the principles, ethics and reflexivity of the research.

##### ***4.6.1 Selecting the case***

The studied case has been given the pseudonym ‘Vivo-Co’ in order to protect its identity. The relevance of the case which forms the focus of any research project is paramount. Cases have to be selected because ‘...they exhibit or are likely to exhibit variation in the mechanism under scrutiny or its context’ (Ackroyd and Karlsson 2014 p.31). As discussed above, Vivo-Co was chosen for its ‘suitability’ in relation to employee voice. In so doing, it is the unit of investigation that counts rather than the way the case was identified (Diefenbach 2009). Similarly, purposive sampling is recommended by Stake (2005) regarding the choice of the case and ensuring one is chosen from which the most can be learnt.

Purposive sampling can include using existing personal and corporate relationships (Myers 2013). Such an approach, Saunders et al (2012) suggest, means ‘professional colleagues’ can trust the stated intentions and assurances given about the use of data and involves a researcher ‘trading on your existing credibility’ (p.222). Vivo-Co was accessed through established networks of professional contacts. The process began through a meeting with an existing professional contact known to the researcher for approximately twenty years. However, this did not mean access was either straightforward nor a one-off negotiation. The complexity of the access process to Vivo-Co is discussed below.

#### ***4.6.2 Accessing the case***

There are myriad access issues that can affect the research process (Whittle et al 2014).

Indeed, the organisation being approached may not see an advantage in taking part in the research at all (Myers 2013). On the contrary, they may anticipate burdens such as the researcher taking up staff time or key actors not seeing any value to themselves in terms of the research results. Once access is granted, this should not be regarded as a one-off activity but rather something that needs constant re-negotiation (Delamont 2002). This was true of accessing Vivo-Co, which was a continuous process rather than something that occurred once at the beginning of the study.

Gaining access to Vivo-Co was protracted (eight months) consisting of five meetings with the Chief Executive Officer and sometimes other members of the senior executive team. Given the length of the access process, more details are provided in appendix one. It was a process that was intensive and time-consuming and incurred a number of challenges. The challenges included a period of time where the researcher was unsure whether access would be granted at all. Once access had been granted there was nevertheless a constant uncertainty during the course of the research that it would be revoked. This point is made by Delamont (2002) who acknowledges the vulnerability of the researcher in terms of knowing that the gatekeeper can at any time choose to withdraw access. In such circumstances, and indeed as it was here, constant communication between the researcher and the primary gatekeeper, the Chief Executive Officer of Vivo-Co, were necessary to alleviate her uncertainty whilst providing reassurance to him.

Despite the challenges of accessing Vivo-Co, the Chief Executive Officer was helpful and generous in giving further time. Alongside access meetings, a further six meetings as well as several electronic communications were held with him. Mainly, this was to keep him up-to-date with the research, discuss any particular areas of concern and to discuss specific technical issues regarding either social care or employee-ownership as it related to Vivo-Co. What the process did highlight was the degree of flexibility needed by the researcher in terms of both accessing an organisation as well as seeing the research as a non-linear process and made up of a number of constituent parts involving various organisational actors. Gaining access to an organisation was not a one-off event nor a linear process. Rather, access proved to be an integral part of the research process requiring constant renegotiation which involved several organisational actors.

### ***4.6.3 Selecting respondents***

Depending on the research methods being used within the bounds of the case study, there are several ways in which the researcher can select respondents within the case. As with case selection, ‘purposive sampling’ can be used to select respondents who are most likely to be able to answer the research questions (Corley and Gioia 2004). This is also known as ‘theoretical’ or ‘judgemental’ sampling the purpose of which is to illustrate the phenomenon rather than achieve representativeness. Other examples are snowballing, whereby each respondent helps the researcher to find another respondent and opportunity sampling, whereby the researcher seizes opportunities when they arise (Delamont 2002).

For this research, the strategy of selecting respondents was two-fold. Firstly, purposive sampling was used to ensure access to respondents who were directly involved with employee-ownership and therefore likely to be able to answer the research questions. This included those actors who were a member of the employee-ownership governing body, the ‘General Council’ as it was called in Vivo-Co. The General Council was a specific process yielded through employee-ownership which enabled employee voice. Furthermore, given the General Council was a relatively small group, it was feasible to consider approaching each of them to ask that they take part in an interview. Secondly, opportunity sampling occurred where the researcher was invited to attend particular events and took the opportunity to observe and ask questions of those attending these events.

### ***4.6.4 Familiarising with the case***

A degree of familiarisation with Vivo-Co was carried out before the primary and secondary research began. The purpose of this was to explore where employee voice might manifest. As there was no tool available that would allow the researcher to structure this process of familiarisation, one was developed. A ‘6-S’ configuration (see appendix two) was developed to aid understanding of how, where and with what effect employee voice was channelled into, within and outwith different parts of Vivo-Co. This was achieved by separating the organisation as follows:

1. Sovereignty – governance mechanism
2. Structure – organisational and governance configuration
3. Strategy – business planning, etc.
4. Systems – processes of employee-ownership
5. Shape – size of the organisation and the physical space it occupies
6. Spirit – how open and welcoming the organisation was

As an example of how the configuration aided familiarisation, the first component, sovereignty, related to how employee voice could manifest at the level of governance through being enshrined in Vivo-Co's governing document. This governing document provided the framework for employee-ownership: firstly, in terms of the technicalities and regulations of Vivo-Co as an employee-owned organisation; secondly in terms of its aspirations and its purpose; and thirdly in terms of setting the parameters of what the organisation and its various bodies could and could not do; its organisational powers. The 6-S configuration aided familiarisation of particular parts of the organisation and helped to provide a boundary for data collection and, importantly, helped the researcher to understand how one part related to other parts of the configuration when it came to analysing the data and understanding the nature of employee voice in Vivo-Co.

#### ***4.6.5 Methods of data collection***

Within the research process, a combination of research methods were used, thus 'deploying multiple dialogues to reach explanations of empirical phenomena' (Burawoy 1998 p.5) through 'converging several lines of enquiry' (Yin 2009 p.115). Three research methods were used to undertake the research: observations, semi-structured interviews and documentary evidence.

##### **a. Observations**

Regarded as the 'central plank of qualitative research' (Delamont 2002) and mindful of the advice from Hazen (1993), to 'hear' as well as 'see' an organisation, observations formed a major part of the research process. For this element, observations of Vivo-Co all took place in formal settings – a place of work and permission to observe was always granted by the most senior person in the organisation, the Chief Executive Officer. The activity of each observation is defined here as either 'formal and organised' (e.g. General Council meetings, team meeting and managers meeting) or 'formal and disorganised' (employees coming into and out of an office reception).

The formal and organised observations were of people within groups (Saunders et al 2012). Predominantly, this involved observation of the General Council meetings though it also included observing a team meeting of social care employees and a manager's meeting. Whilst it had been intended to carry out non-participant observation, defined as: 'A situation in which the observer observes but does not participate in what is going on in the social setting'

(Bryman 2012 p.273), on a number of occasions the researcher was invited into the space of the meeting, such as being included in introductions at the beginning of meetings and being asked for thoughts during General Council meetings about specific topics. Additionally, several electronic conversations were held with the researcher and the chair of the General Council between meetings where the researcher was asked to reflect on the General Council. As such, observations erred more towards participant than non-participant observation.

The formal and disorganised observations were of social care employees coming into and out of their office-base at one of the branches of Vivo-Co. Vivo-Co has six branches though the researcher had a more frequent presence at one of them to carry out observations of social care employees. The reason for focusing on one was that the six branches are scattered geographically across the UK meaning observations in all of them would have been time-consuming and costly; it was deemed that more substantive observations could be undertaken by focusing on one branch. As with the formal and organised observations, permission was sought from the Chief Executive Officer and the relevant branch manager to observe the social care employees. The Chief Executive Officer and the relevant branch manager were also asked by the researcher to seek permission from the social care employees to be observed. Permission was subsequently granted by the Chief Executive Officer and branch manager to access this particular branch. The Chief Executive Officer also suggested it would be courteous to inform the branch manager when observations were going to take place. The researcher's role in observing social care employees was more peripheral than was the case with the formal organised meetings.

A schedule including prescribed themes was used to record interaction during both organised and disorganised observations and in so doing, provided some structure to the observations and consistency of observations across different groups. The schedule for observations can be found in appendix three and included: who decides what is on the agenda, where meetings were held, what the attendance was, who talked and who did not, the format of the meetings, who decided the format of meetings, who actioned points afterwards and what was the nature of discussions: friendly, formal, inclusive. In other words, the schedule enabled the researcher to capture data relating to the formal aspects as well as informal aspects of each meeting.

Particular attention was paid to informal behaviour as well as the formal aspects of organisational life (Delamont 2002). For example, observing interactions before and after General Council meetings was as important as observing the actual meeting. Observing the

practices of business etiquette being invoked before, during and after meetings was also of interest. Furthermore, observations of the physical aspects of the organisation were noted including notices, to assess how welcoming the offices were.

During the research period, five General Council meetings were observed between June 2015 and June 2016. The researcher was invited to each of the General Council meetings by the Chief Executive Officer. Each meeting was rotated between the organisation's six branches and lasted a full day. There was one full-day observation of a managers meeting, six half-day observations of social care employees and one half-day observation of a team meeting of social care employees.

The observations of social care employees took place on a Monday morning, a particularly busy period as this was the time they came into the branch office to drop off their time-sheets for the hours they had worked during the previous week. The researcher sat in the reception area and observed social care employees during each three hour observation period. This also provided the opportunity for conversation with the branch receptionist. Agendas of all of the meetings, minutes of each meeting and other documentary evidence also formed part of the analysis and are discussed below (Documentary Evidence). A key concern when observing was how voice was enabled or prevented through the mechanism of employee-ownership.

#### b. Semi-structured interviews

The second research method was semi-structured interviews. In contrast to other types of interview, such as structured or unstructured, semi-structured interviews involve some pre-formatted questions though there is not necessarily a strict adherence to them (Myers 2013). It is for this reason, i.e. the flexibility of the method to both the respondent and the researcher that it was selected. Semi-structured interviews enabled the researcher to focus each of the respondents on specific issues whilst at the same time enabling them some flexibility in terms of how they responded to questions. Such flexibility however, means that semi-structured interviews can be time-consuming raising a further issue of how many to carry out.

Regarding how many people to interview, Diefenbach (2009) suggests the numbers of interviewees is shrouded in quantitative representativeness aiming at statistical validity and though data from one interview is unlikely to tell the whole story, interviews with a number of people referring to the same issues will give a broader picture of that which is being studied. That said, he suggests there is no way of determining a sufficient number. As it was,

interviewing a number of organisational actors from Vivo-Co enabled cross-checking and comparisons which in turn led to emerging patterns and deeper insights during the analysis phase. Similarly, Myers (2013) suggests it is not so much an issue of numbers as it is making sure the people interviewed represent a variety of voices. As such, interviews were with those people representing as many parts of Vivo-Co, such as the branch receptionist, though having a specific focus on those directly involved with the employee-ownership mechanism.

Detailed explanations of each of the organisational actors, such as ‘founder members’, will be provided in the next chapter when discussing the organisational configuration of Vivo-Co and chapter six when discussing the findings of the research. Suffice at this point, a summary of semi-structured interviews that were undertaken were with the following organisational actors:

- Two with the Chief Executive Officer
- Eight with five employee representatives
- Three with founder members
- Two with the Chair of the governing body, the General Council
- Four with representatives of the senior executive team.

The interview schedule used for each individual or group can be found in appendix four. The schedule was adapted depending on who was being interviewed. The interviews with the Chief Executive Officer, founder members, chair of the General Council and representatives of the senior executive team were arranged during the course of the research. Of the employee representatives, all five were asked at a General Council meeting to take part in an interview and all agreed. All were given a copy of a consent form which they all signed (appendix five).

Subsequently one of the representatives did not respond to email requests to arrange an interview date. All interviews were undertaken between the fourth and fifth meetings of the General Council. Waiting for some time before interviewing representatives meant they had time to familiarise themselves with the role. Two of the interviews were by telephone and two were face-to-face. All representatives were assured of confidentiality. Of the two face-to-face interviews, both representatives stated their preference was that the interview was not recorded. Each interview lasted between 30-40 minutes. The researcher took handwritten notes during the interview and made additional notes following each interview.



c. Documentary evidence

The third data collection method was documentary data. This has been treated here as data in its own right (Buchanan and Dawson 2007) as well as how it corresponds, complements or challenges data from other sources. Following Delamont (2002), all documentary data is socially produced and has a particular audience in mind requiring therefore that such evidence is read sceptically and examined within its social context. Regarding the efficacy of particular forms of documentary evidence, Scott (1990) suggests four criteria are used, illustrated in the table below.

<b>Criteria</b>	<b>Considerations</b>
Authenticity	Is the evidence genuine and of unquestionable origin?
Credibility	Is the evidence free from distortion and error?
Representative	Is the evidence typical of its kind? If it is not typical, is the extent of its untypicality known?
Meaning	Is the evidence clear and comprehensible?

**Table 4.3 Criteria for assessing the quality of documentary evidence**

Following these criteria, the documentary evidence forming this research was:

- Company website
- Six agendas of meetings of the governing body
- Six sets of minutes of meetings of the governing body
- One copy of the Employee Owners' Manual
- Findings of one internal employee satisfaction survey
- Minutes of one Employee Engagement Forum
- The company's Articles of Association
- The company's Trust Deed
- The company's organisational structure
- Notes of one meeting between an employee representative and a branch manager
- Newsletters
- Social care employees' team meeting agenda
- Company's core values statement
- Duties and responsibilities of employee owners
- Process of the employee suggestion scheme
- Two reports of Vivo-Co by the Care Quality Commission
- Company demographics
- One operating board meeting agenda
- Staff turnover rates
- Marketing materials (on-line and hard copy).

Mindful that this documentary data is shrouded in a particular organisational and professional language, the researcher was guided by the questions: how is this written, by whom, for

whom and what is missing? A further point to note is that substantial research was carried out in order to understand the context of the social care sector in which Vivo-Co operates which is discussed in chapter five. This included researching organisations involved with the care sector such as the Care Quality Commission and Skills for Care.

#### ***4.6.6 Withdrawing from the research***

Knowing when and how to leave the research site is an important decision. Having an ‘exit strategy’ built into the research design may help. The fieldwork for this research was guided principally by the notion of ‘theoretical saturation’; in other words the point at which few new observations or themes are observed in the data (Mason 2002), as well as being influenced by more practical issues of access and resources (Saunders et al 2012; Yin 2009). The term ‘diminishing analytical return’ is used by Fine (1983; cited in Delamont 2002); in other words, the time to leave is when there is nothing new to be learned. However, there were two inter-related reasons why reaching such a point was not so straightforward.

Firstly, following the philosophical orientation of this thesis, there is always something new to be learnt. The ‘reality’ of employee-ownership in Vivo-Co was constantly changing and re-writing itself and therefore would continue once the researcher had left the site. Secondly, given that employee-ownership was something new to Vivo-Co, the story was still unfolding more so than in other, more established employee-owned organisations. As it was, the researcher decided on a point to withdraw from the research and provided notice of this decision to key participants. Additionally, a letter was sent to the Chair of the General Council asking him to thank all of those who took part in the research and offering to present some of the key findings at a later date convenient to the organisation. To date, a reply to this offer has not been received.

#### ***4.6.7 Data analysis***

There are few formulae to analyse qualitative data; much is dependent on empirical thinking, presentation of evidence, consideration of alternative interpretations and reflection and critical evaluation of methodology and analysis (Silverman 2010, 2011; Yin 2009). The researcher is involved in a continuous process of moving back and forth between the data and theory (Ackroyd and Karlsson 2014; Harrison and Easton 2004) searching for themes and patterns; similarities and differences. It is a process that is intense and can seem disordered and messy when compared to the more organised and systematic process of analysing quantitative data. The analysis of qualitative data has no clear start or end point.

The analysis process is one that is iterative with an emphasis on the depth of analysis rather than the number of data sources. Analysis approaches can be either top-down through drawing concepts from the extant literature or bottom-up where concepts emerge from the data (Myers 2013). This research used both approaches:

- a. A top-down approach involves drawing concepts from the extant literature. The frames of reference (Bray et al 2015; Fox 1966, 1974; Storey 1989) discussed in chapter three provided a theoretical framework with a priori themes that guided the analysis process. The key frames vis-à-vis this research were hard and soft unitarism and the contemporary frame of collaborative pluralism (Bray et al 2015). The framework was used as a lens to seek characteristics akin to each frame as voice was expressed by different organisational actors. For example, a key phrase synonymous with the soft unitarist frame is 'going the extra mile'. This was a phrase invoked several times during interviews which called on social care employees to go beyond their day-to-day duties and give more to the organisation.
- b. A bottom-up approach is through in-vivo themes, i.e. themes that emerge from the data. There were a number of themes that emerged from the data and included words and phrases used by the organisational actors to express their voice regarding a particular matter. An example of this was an analogy that was used by an employee representative who described himself and the other employee representatives as 'little fish' which was in contrast to the big fish such as the Chief Executive Officer.

To provide some structure to the analysis process, the researcher drew on thematic analysis. This is 'a method for systematically identifying, organising and offering insight into patterns of meanings (themes) across a data set' (Braun and Clark 2012 p.57). It is regarded as one of the most commonly used forms of qualitative data analysis (Ripley 2011). Data analysis 'phases' devised by Braun and Clark (2006), highlighted in the table below, were used to guide the analysis process, though the authors caution that qualitative data analysis is not a linear but rather a recursive process.

Phase one	Data familiarisation
Phase two	Generate initial codes
Phase three	Search for themes
Phase four	Review themes
Phase five	Define and name themes
Phase six	Report writing

**Table 4.4 Data analysis phases**

a. Data familiarisation

The first phase of the data analysis process highlighted in table 4.4 relates to familiarisation with the data. This is achieved by reading and re-reading the data, making notes during this process and highlighting specific parts of potential interest. To do this, fieldwork notes were handwritten immediately after either observations or interview.

All notes and scripts were typed manually into a Personal Computer by the researcher according to the originating source, and where relevant, each interview participant. Where more than one interview was undertaken with a participant, the file name was given a corresponding number according to the number of the interview, one, two, and so on. Data was initially organised according to the particular research method used: observational data was collated and analysed discreetly as was interview data and documentary evidence. Once several transcripts had been generated, the process of reading the data began. Braun and Clarke (2012) advise reading the data actively, analytically and critically and thinking about what it means. This process revealed recurring themes between transcripts which led to the second stage of the process.

b. Initial coding.

Some of the initial codes which were generated reflected the respondents own language, for example 'little fishes like us' whilst others involved some interpretation by the researcher, such as a sign hung on a door which read, 'No [social care employees] beyond this point'. The process also included generating codes relating to the participant's words as being, for example, confident, servile, conflictual or compromising. In other words, the codes related to the way in which employee voice was being expressed which would then be compared to the key words and terms used in each of the frames of reference. Once all of the data had been analysed and codes identified the next stage was to develop themes from the codes.

#### c. Searching for themes

This third stage of the analysis process involved the refinement of the codes, developing themes from the codes and looking for relationships between themes. The basic process involves either collapsing or clustering codes that share some 'unifying feature' (Braun and Clark 2012 p.63). Here, the frames of reference (Bray et al 2015; Fox 1966, 1974; Storey 1989) provided the framework to allocate the developing themes. Combined scripts and texts of each research method were read and re-read in relation to this framework.

#### d. Review themes

The fourth stage involved reviewing potential themes in relation to the coded data and also the full data set. This process is one that is recursive involving the researcher going back and forth between codes and themes.

#### e. Defining and naming themes

The fifth stage involves defining and naming the themes and selecting extracts to be presented. Braun and Clark (2012) advise the themes should be both descriptive and interpretive. This process generated a number of themes, for example, governance, ownership, hierarchy, etc. Once this process had been undertaken within each research method, themes were then compared between the research methods to see if there were any similarities or differences, for example between interview data and observational data. By following this process, several themes were generated and through a process of re-analysis became sub-themes of the overall analytical themes of the frames of reference. For example, hierarchy became a sub-theme of the hard unitarist frame. An example of part of the data analysis process is provided in appendix six.

#### f. Writing a report

The resulting analysis from each of the three research methods, both individually and combined, has brought a level of triangulation to the process and forms chapter six, the findings of the research. This detailed analysis process, Stake (2005) argues, helps to identify different realities and reduce misinterpretation.

#### ***4.6.8 Principles, ethics and reflexivity***

The principles on which qualitative research is carried out differs from that of quantitative research. Principles which are concerned with 'validity' and 'reliability' in the research process are not typically associated with qualitative research given the implication in both of

an objective and independent reality (Myers 2013). They are terms more typically associated with quantitative research and lay weight to the argument that such research is more robust. Nevertheless, this does not mean that the principle of robust research cannot equally, albeit differently, be applied to qualitative research.

Following a call for greater researcher accountability (Gatrell 2009) and an acknowledgement that: ‘Qualitative researchers are guests in the private spaces of the world’ (Stake 2005 p.459), being guided by a set of research principles and ethics are considered to be an integral part of the qualitative research process. As such they should guide the way in which the researcher designs, executes, analyses and reports on the research. Though not being prescriptive, Saunders et al (2012) suggest researchers adhere to ethical principles including:

- Integrity and objectivity of the researcher
- Respect for others
- Privacy of those taking part
- Voluntary nature of participation
- Informed consent of participants
- Ensuring confidentiality of data and anonymity

Through adhering to these principles, as well as the ethical policy of the researcher’s own institution, the research process will be strengthened whilst at the same time ensuring those who take part in the research are treated with the dignity and respect they deserve. These principles have therefore been incorporated into the whole research process, from its design, through to its implementation and finally in its analysis and reporting. The principles also underpinned the ethical approach of this research.

The ethical approach of this research was guided and informed by the researcher’s academic institution but also by her own belief that research ethics should constitute an integral part of the research process. As such, they should be, and in this case are, designed into the study from the outset and inform every step of the process including the literature that has been reviewed, the philosophical and theoretical perspective taken as well as being integral to the methodological and analytical approach used. They included aspects such as integrity, sensitivity, confidentiality, anonymity, accountability and transparency and formed an integral and continuous part of the research process. Given that access was initiated to Vivo-Co via a

professional contact, the researcher was mindful of knowing some respondents and therefore of possible impacts and conflicts of interest. A further concern is the sensitive nature of the research, i.e. individuals' work experiences and commercial issues.

To address the sensitive nature of the research, respondents were assured their identity would be protected and their responses would be treated confidentially. Commercial confidentiality was a particular issue affecting access to Vivo-Co. As such, a thorough system of ethical approval was undertaken as well as consideration of the relevant literature (e.g. Diefenbach 2009; Gatrell 2009). Furthermore, a non-disclosure agreement was signed by the researcher by way of assurance to the Chief Executive Officer. Nevertheless, despite such a thorough ethical approach, being reflexive during the process was also essential.

Reflexivity in the research process is increasingly regarded as an essential component of that process (Cruz and Monteiro 2017). It requires the researcher to be clear about their role within the research process. Whether a researcher regards themselves as part of the process is rooted in their ontological and epistemological orientation as noted in the discussion above. For example, a researcher adopting a positivist position would not necessarily see such reflexivity as important given their stance is one of objectivity and therefore distancing themselves from the phenomenon of study. In contrast, those researchers following a subjective interpretive ontology regard themselves as very much a part of, and having an effect on, the research.

As noted by Delamont (2002) 'There is no location where the researcher can base herself to do research which is outside or beyond the social world' (p.8). As such, researchers of the latter orientation, including this researcher, are increasingly subscribing to a process of reflexivity whereby they consider their role in the research and reflect on how that has affected the process and outcomes of the research as well as transparency in terms of those processes and conclusions drawn.

#### **4.7 Limitations of the research methodology**

Despite the merits of the research methodology, inevitably there are limitations. The first relates to the philosophical approach. Adopting a subjective interpretivist approach means that what is included in the research process, including its findings, are decided by the researcher and undoubtedly shrouded in their own assumptions and beliefs. Nevertheless, drawing on this particular philosophy has, it is hoped, produced a richer and more in-depth understanding of employee voice than could have been achieved through other approaches.

A second limitation relates to the strategy of using one case study which, as noted above, is contentious and carries a high risk. For example, the participating organisation could have withdrawn access. Certainly, the protracted process of accessing the case caused a continuous worry. This was addressed by frequent communication with the key organisational actors, such as through progress reports, to provide reassurance about the research process.

The third relates to observation as a research method. For Silverman (2010) the challenge of such a method is its subjectivity in terms of perceived relevance of data. In other words, what is included as part of an observation is subjectively chosen by the researcher. Also, Bryman (2012) has suggested the method is intense and, whilst the researcher will be able to observe behaviour, the opportunity is not there to know the intentions or meaning of that behaviour. It was anticipated that by using multiple-methods some of these limitations would be alleviated.

The fourth relates to semi-structured interviews. As with observations, interviews are subjective relying on the nature of, and reflection on, individuals' experiences. Undoubtedly this was affected by memory, privileging the present over the backstory (Friedman 2014) and potentially influenced the reliability of the data (Hamel et al 1993; Hammersley 2007; Saunders et al 2012). The authenticity of interview data has been questioned by Watson (2011) whilst Gatrell (2009) has pointed to the potentially exploitative nature of the interview. Despite these challenges, given that the focus of the research was employee voice, it seemed counterintuitive not to provide as many opportunities as possible for employees to have a voice in the research process: interviews offering one such opportunity.

Additionally, the researcher was sensitive to, and took account of, the conflicting needs of interviewee vis-à-vis the interviewer. Practical issues were addressed such as giving advance warning of the interview format, interviewing respondents in their space and time, providing assurances about confidentiality and anonymity, giving an opt in/out option, informing that the interview could be stopped or questions skipped, and giving an idea of what would be covered.

#### **4.8 Summary**

This chapter has discussed the research methodology. The chapter was separated into six sections. Section one considered the philosophical traditions which underpin different research approaches. To highlight how these differences affect research practice, the second section discussed the research approaches used by HRM and Employment Relations scholars



to study employee voice. The third section stated the approach of this study: a subjectivist ontology, interpretivist epistemology and qualitative methodology. Section four discussed the research design. This is a qualitative single case study that is exploratory and explanatory, and includes the Context, Mechanism and Outcomes (CMO) configuration conceived by Pawson and Tilley (1997) that is used to organise data collection and analysis. Section five discussed the research process which included selecting and accessing the case, data analysis and principles, ethics and reflexivity. Finally, some of the limitations of the methodology were discussed such as using a single case. Following on from this discussion of the methodological approach, and having specifically highlighted the importance of understanding the context in which an organisation operates, the next chapter will discuss the context of the social care sector as it is in this sector that the studied case operates.

## **Chapter Five: The Social Care Sector**

### **5.1 Introduction**

This chapter discusses the social care sector. Following on from the discussion in the previous chapter, which emphasised the importance of having an understanding of the context in which a case is situated, this chapter will consider various aspects of social care as it was this sector in which the studied case operates. In so doing, a richer and more in-depth evaluation of the case will be achieved. It will also help to evaluate the factors that influenced decisions within the case regarding the choice of employee voice mechanism. To organise the process of understanding the environment, the CMO configuration (Pawson and Tilley 1997), also discussed in the previous chapter, is followed. The chapter has four sections.

Section one considers the context of social care and references a key policy turn, the 1990 National Health Services and Community Care Act. The Act led to the marketization of social care and an increase in the number of for-profit social care organisations. Section two considers the choices of employee voice mechanisms in social care organisations which are typically chosen by management and are low-level. Section three explores the outcomes of employee voice in social care. This reveals such problems as staff retention as social care employees tend to leave their employing organisation rather than express their voice through low-level mechanisms. This leads to the final section which discusses a paradox: rather than leave the sector, many social care employees move onto another social care organisation. This raises questions regarding the way in which employee voice in social care is valued.

### **5.2 The context of social care**

An awareness of the context in which an organisation operates is important, particularly in relation to the structural constraints that the environment imposes on organisations (Findlay et al 2017). Indeed, without an understanding of the broader context, it is impossible to understand the correct meaning of data that is collected (Myers 2013). With these points in mind, the contemporary UK social care sector is a culmination of numerous legislative and policy interventions made by successive governments. Those interventions have shaped how social care is delivered and, importantly, by whom and affects the nature of care work for those who are delivering services (Murphy and Turner 2014). To fully understand the current social care environment, an awareness of its history is essential.

### ***5.2.1 The history of social care and its marketization***

A substantive paper documenting the historical development of social care provision in the UK is provided by Thane (2009). That paper is drawn on here to highlight some key points as they relate to this thesis. The paper states that the only publicly funded social care for older and disabled people in the nineteenth century was through the Poor Law. This required every parish to levy rates to care for destitute people who did not have any support from their family. Poor Law ‘relief’ was however both limited in its scope and stigmatising to those who had to use it. It was during this period that the principle of charging for social services administered by local authorities was established.

Then, as now, local authorities had responsibility for providing social care services, for which they were able to make charges. During this period independent organisations, mainly from the voluntary (not-for-profit) sector, played a significant role in the provision of health and social care of older and disabled people. Indeed before the Second World War, the voluntary sector, often in collaboration with local authorities, was well established as a provider of social care services. This provided the framework for social care provision that carried on into the post-war Welfare State.

From the 1950s however, concern was expressed about the high and rising cost of social care coupled with concerns about rising life expectancy – concerns that continue to be expressed today. Reflecting this concern, the emphasis changed from providing mainly institutional-based care towards a preference for community-based care because of improvements in medical knowledge and treatment and arguments such as it better reflected the preferences of service users; it improved the quality of life for those receiving services; and, that community care was cheaper at a time when demand and costs of services were increasing.

This began a trajectory away from residential care toward community-based care. Further changes followed such as the 1968 Health Services and Public Health Act (implemented in 1971) which increased the powers of local authorities to provide care services. A particularly notable change was the 1970 Local Authority and Social Services Act which established a single social services department (SSD) in each local authority. The creation of SSDs followed the recommendations of a report by Seebohm (1968) which suggested that social care services had become fragmented (Carey 2015). Each SSD became responsible for providing domestic help, meals, residential accommodation and recreation, all of which could be charged for. Importantly, though SSDs were able to charge for services, providing social

care during this whole period was conceived as a service. This conceptualisation of care as a service was to change fundamentally during the 1980s and 1990s.

The political changes at the end of the 1970s and throughout the 1980s, which were discussed in chapter two, provided the backdrop for a key turning point affecting the social care sector. Compared to previous years, the most rapid change to social care was witnessed during this period due to a political commitment to cut public expenditure and an ideological preference for private rather than public social care provision. Fundamental to this change was the influence of a 'neo-liberal' political and economic environment (Hall and Soskice 2001). This environment was characterised by rigid hierarchies in which authority is embedded (Allen and Tuselman 2009) and through which relationships between employers and employees are typically low-trust and calculative (Frege and Godard 2014). It was against this backdrop that market principles were introduced to social care culminating in the 1990 National Health Services and Community Care Act (implemented in 1993).

It would be impossible to over-emphasise the way in which the Act changed the nature of the social care sector in the UK through its marketization and the application of business principles. The underlying philosophy of the Act re-framed the way social care was conceptualised. The language of charges became that of profit and what had been a social care service became a social care market.

The influence of the New Right which dominated the Thatcher period during the 1980s was the main impetus behind various policies that affected community care (Walker 1993). The main purpose of social care policy during this period was unreservedly to restrict or minimise the role of statutory providers whilst at the same time fragmenting social care services – the opposite of the intentions of the report by Seebohm (1968). Part of the rationale for the changes was an ever-increasing older population which, it was argued, threatened to place unlimited financial burdens on the state. Other factors included perceived inefficiencies of social care services delivered by local authorities; service provision was led by 'producers' (i.e. local authorities) rather than 'consumers' (i.e. service users); and the market provided an efficient mechanism to reduce cost and improve efficiency and quality (Twelvetrees 1998). The clear aim of the policy was to establish a mixed economy of social care provision that was driven by market principles (Balloch et al 2000) and bears similarities to key aspects of the hard unitarist frame discussed in chapter three.

The central prescription within the hard unitarist frame is the marketization of public services and the empowerment of consumers (Heery 2016). A market environment as it relates to social care means consumers have a choice between providers. This choice is regarded as necessary given it is the interests of consumers that are legitimate and take priority over those of employers and employees. Key then to this frame is aligning employee and employer interests with those of the consumer:

‘It is by capturing, not denying, the instrumental, fundamentally economic, rationality of workers and their employers that hard unitarists believe a more productive, mutually beneficial trilateral relationship can be forged’ (ibid p.142).

Following this logic, the idea is that markets are created through ‘deregulation’ and ‘incentivisation’ (e.g. Le Grand 2003; Le Grand and the Mutuals Taskforce 2012). Regulation, such as employment rules, can hamper the creation of markets. By contrast, incentivisation can enhance market creation. Incentivisation is a fundamental characteristic of hard unitarism.

The hard unitarist frame, as noted in chapter three, views employees as resources (Paauwe and Boselie 2003). Incentivisation practices espoused by this frame include Individual Performance Related Pay and profit-sharing schemes which are used increasingly in the marketization of public services (Heery 2016). Economists such as Gielen et al (2010) reflect this unitarist emphasis through their work that seeks to identify a link between labour (i.e. employees), productivity and Performance Related Pay. There are however implications of such practices. Whilst unitarists, whether hard or soft, would see the market mechanism as the most efficient and effective way of delivering public services, the 2008 global financial crisis highlighted that markets can fail, as noted in chapter two. A unitarist response to the financial crisis is reflected in the language used by Nijssen and Paauwe (2012). They call for greater company ‘agility’ which can be achieved by the ‘scaling of its workforce’; it is assumed such scaling of the workforce translates as making employees redundant. Such language is also evident when referring specifically to the practice of delivering social care.

A report by the United Kingdom Homecare Association (UKHCA; 2016) uses language such as: domiciliary care market, market capacity, market stability and instability and providers who trade with local authorities. In the same vein, the National Audit Office (NAO; 2014) reported that the 2012 Care Act: ‘...is expected to require authorities to promote and shape an efficient and effective care market’ (p.38). The same report states that different social care

organisations use different business models and therefore have different levels of financial risk. For example, to mitigate this risk in the residential care home sector there are practices known as ‘bulk purchase discounts’. This means purchasing a higher quantity of units for a lower unit cost, the unit in this instance being service user beds. The report also notes that: ‘There is strong local competition on price in most areas’ (p.38). Furthermore, prices that a local authority pay for care services have not kept up with inflation. As such, some organisations have withdrawn from contracts as they have become unprofitable. These examples help to highlight the way social care is referred to in much the same way as any other sector in the economy. It is possible that a soft unitarist frame offers a different perspective on social care delivery given its different view of employees.

Though the soft unitarist frame regards employees as important ‘assets’ to achieve business success, the values underpinning the frame are somewhat questionable. The values can be seen in the new service management with its roots in psychology and marked by ‘positivity’ discussed in chapter three (Seligman 2002). The focus here is on how services are experienced and therefore stresses the need for effective processes that ensure responsiveness and courtesy.

According to this frame, employees gain benefit through satisfying customers: ‘...the act of service is itself pleasurable’ (Heery 2016 p. 144). Indeed, a notable argument in this frame is that HRM provides a route to high performance, effectiveness and productivity. Importantly, the notion of employees ‘going the extra mile’ is considered in this frame as an expression of an employee’s commitment to the organisation (Piasna et al 2013). However, the social care sector stands out from other types of service providers. In contrast to some other services – such as selling a McDonalds burger, social care involves an actual relationship between those providing and those receiving a care service. It is however possible that the fragility of this relationship is used by social care organisations to lever more commitment, thus requiring social care employees to ‘go the extra mile’.

The key point of discussing social care in relation to these two frames is to highlight the fundamental change from a public service to a private market. Within both frames, creating a social care market is no different from creating a market in any other service sector. Such markets are created through competition. Competition in the social care market follows the same principles as conventional businesses: ‘markets find their own competitive equilibrium between price and quality’ (Care Quality Commission 2014 p.3). The changed language of

social care helps to highlight this point which is in contrast to the language used by Thane (2009) that refers to charges rather than profit. Similarly, a report by Unison (2016) refers to a homecare 'system' rather than a market. The concept of marketizing social care was, and continues to be, a contentious issue.

Some argue that profiteering from an individual's social care needs is anathema. Moreover, there is a fundamental difference in providing social care as a public service compared to providing it as a profit-making enterprise. Though forming part of the service sector, social care is quite different from say, providing a service in a branch of McDonalds. Marketization of social care has also changed the nature of the work. Originally, activities were quite literally domestic tasks such as shopping and housework whereas the work of a social care employee today is likely to embrace a host of activities:

'Counterintuitively to the popular belief that care work is unskilled work...the introduction of more demanding tasks and clients with higher needs demonstrates that domiciliary carers require increasing levels of skill, although this is not recognised or rewarded' (Bolton and Wibberley 2014 p.694).

In other words, the boundaries of a social care employee's role have been extended as social care organisations focus on seeking greater efficiencies within a social care market. The important point as it relates to employee voice, is that the way social care is conceived nationally, i.e. as a public or a private service, has an effect at company and employee level. The next section will consider the contemporary social care context and the organisations who provide social care services.

### ***5.2.2 Contemporary social care and social care organisations***

The contemporary UK social care sector faces myriad challenges, not least because social care needs continue to rise whilst, simultaneously, social care budgets are reducing (UKHCA 2016). National government is responsible for social care budgets and setting the amount of funding awarded to local authorities as well as devising social care policy and determining the statutory duty of local authorities. They then devolve funding to individual local authorities who in turn commission individual social care organisations to deliver services. The majority of formal social care in the UK which is commissioned by local authorities is, importantly, delivered by independent social care organisations. Local authorities are responsible for setting their own policies and priorities, deciding how to commission services and how funding is spent across services. Budgets have however been cut.

In England, local authorities have had to make savings of £1.1 billion in their social care budgets in 2015-2016 which take cuts since 2011 to £4.6 billion (Unison 2016). Over the last five years, 81% of local authorities in England reported having had to reduce their real-term spending on social care for older people given an 11% cut in real terms to social care budgets (Humphries et al 2016). In order to fund the short-fall, 93% of local authorities in England had used the full council tax precept<sup>2</sup>. Drawing data from the Low Pay Commission (2016), table 5.1 below highlights payments for social care between the UK regions and nations.

<b>Region</b>	<b>Price (per hour)</b>
South west	£16.86
South east	£16.68
Eastern	£15.15
Wales	£14.99
East midlands	£14.78
Scotland	£14.74
West midlands	£14.30
Greater London	£14.21
Yorkshire and Humber	£14.11
North west	£12.95
North east	£12.60
Northern Ireland	£12.35

**Table 5.1 Average price paid for social care by UK region/nation**

There is some variation in payments, but table 5.1 reveals these are minimal which suggests some parity amongst local authorities in the challenges they face regarding the cost of social care. However, what this serves to highlight is two anomalies regarding the rationale of marketizing social care.

Firstly, that the purpose of marketization is to create markets. However, how can markets be created when the starting point for those purchasing care is the same i.e. a finite resource from central government. Second, and related, whilst budgets continuously decrease there has been a parallel increase in the demand for services. This creates a particular issue in social care when compared to other service sectors: an increase in demand for social care does not equate to an increase in income (Legge 2005). That is, whilst an increase in demand for products or services in traditional service markets translates into greater income, the same is not true with

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<sup>2</sup> For the last two years local authorities have been allowed (by central government) to raise an extra 2% from their population to fund social care and this has been used to off-set the cost of the National Living Wage (Low Pay Commission 2016)



regard to public services where traditionally increased demand means increased costs with no relational increase in income. Combined, these two anomalies present challenges to social care organisations which in turn impact on social care employees.

There are an estimated 1.55 million people employed to provide social care services, a total which includes different types of social care such as domiciliary care (also known as homecare), residential care, day care and community care (NMDS-SC 2017). There are 10, 176 organisations providing domiciliary social care in the UK (UKHCA 2016). This type of social care is provided within a service user's own home and includes personal care such as assistance with bathing as well as other tasks such as cleaning or cooking. The majority of the organisations providing social care, of whatever type, make up what is referred to as the 'independent sector'. Though various definitions exist, this thesis defines the independent sector as commercial and not-for-profit organisations (Skills for Care 2016), in other words all social care organisations with the exception of the statutory sector. The important point here being that ownership matters (Grimshaw et al 2015) as it is increasingly independent sector organisations who provide social care and this can have an effect on employee voice.

Reflecting national government policy, there has been a consistent increase in social care provided by independent sector organisations. Moreover, there has been a consistent increase in the amount of social care provided specifically by the private for-profit sector compared to either statutory or not-for-profit organisations, the latter including charitable and voluntary organisations:

‘The withdrawal of local authorities and the NHS from the direct provision of long-term care has been a major strategic shift in adult social care policy over the last 30 years (Humphries et al 2016 p. 6).

To highlight the dominance of private for-profit social care organisations, figures for 1992 show only 2% of social care being provided by the private sector (Carey 2015). This is not surprising as it was before the 1990 National Health Services and Community Care Act was introduced. The Act was introduced, as noted above, in 1993 and required that local authorities contract out 85% of social care services with the remainder provided in-house by local authority employed social care employees. Figures for 1999 are thus quite different and suggest that 67.1% of domiciliary care in England was provided by the private sector (Matosevic et al 2001). By 2013 the figure had risen to over 70% (Bessa et al 2013). Precise current figures for private sector providers of domiciliary care are difficult to obtain. In part, this is because of various changes to the way the data is collected and also because of the

conflation of different sectors within the umbrella term of independent sector. However, current estimations suggest that in the region of 75% of all forms of social care services are delivered by the private sector (Skills for Care 2016). This change has important consequences for social care:

‘...the expansion of ever more independent providers reconstitutes a myriad of services as ‘business units’ which may concentrate introspectively upon core business interests whilst neglecting wider public service objectives’ (Carey 2015 p.2409).

To illustrate this point, an example is the increased volume of private equity involvement in the social care sector over the last ten years. This form of financing and ownership within social care organisations is particularly dominant amongst private for-profit companies yet less so when compared to public companies or not-for-profit organisations (Care Quality Commission 2014). Private equity involvement adds an additional layer of complexity to the social care sector which is captured in the following quote:

‘Private companies may be owned by an individual or by several individuals or by another company (or companies). In turn this other company (a “holding company”) may also be owned by individuals or by another company (or holding companies). (Care Quality Commission 2014 p.21).

This reconstitution of social care services highlights the change in thinking discussed as part of the history of the social care sector above. There has been a move away from thinking about social care as a service towards thinking about social care as a business; which can create tensions between different priorities (Carey 2015). For-profit social care organisations may be structured in particular ways for very specific reasons, such as for tax purposes<sup>3</sup> or to maximise opportunities to borrow money, and, where they have substantial assets, such as physical buildings, they are regarded as attractive to outside investors (Care Quality Commission 2014). Nevertheless, the differences in the constitution of social care organisations, specifically the vehicle through which social care is delivered, has an important bearing on those who are employed in the sector and how they express their voice.

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<sup>3</sup> An example of alleviating financial pressures was through the tax incentives for employee-owned enterprises, these include relief on capital gains tax and an exemption from income tax of £3600 for certain payments made to employees ([www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk)).

### **5.2.3 Contemporary social care and social care employees**

Of those employed in social care in England approximately 500,000 deliver services to adults in their own homes (i.e. domiciliary care) and are overwhelmingly (80%) women, (NMDS-SC 2017). The largest age group of social care employees is between 25 and 54 and 65.4% are of British origin. Reviewing the literature on the nature of contemporary social care work presents a grim picture suggesting myriad challenges facing those who work in the sector. These challenges include an increasing use of employment practices such as zero hour contracts compounding the casual and insecure nature of the work; staff turnover<sup>4</sup> and employment vacancies are relatively high compared to other sectors (ekosgen 2013); an absence of procedures to resolve disputes; and, opportunities for career development are low (Bach and Kessler 2012; Grimshaw et al 2015; Hussein et al 2016; ONS 2014; Rubery et al 2015; Unison 2016). All of which place further pressure on a profession contending with multiple challenges by the very nature of the work itself.

Social care is a service that is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week (Grimshaw et al 2015). Providing social care to people in their own homes is solitary work (Rubery and Urwin 2011). Depending on the needs of the service user sometimes social care employees ‘double-up’ but for the most part they work alone (Rubery et al 2015). The work is ‘off-site’ and dispersed, there is no factory or shop floor: ‘...working in clients’ homes, of course, means that work is spatially highly fragmented’ (Breslin and Wood 2015). It involves a workplace that is ever-changing, i.e. the service users’ home that can differ in various aspects, e.g. cleanliness, layout, inhabitants and equipment all of which creates tensions in terms of monitoring and controlling care and making difficult the maintenance of efficiency levels (Bolton and Wibberley 2014). Working alone at night is prevalent for employees delivering domiciliary care (ekosgen 2013). The work itself is highly taxing both emotionally and physically:

‘Despite the complexity, autonomy and gruelling physical and emotional work involved in domiciliary care, it is not a role that is either highly regarded, thus attracting status, or highly rewarded, thus attracting decent pay and conditions. On paper at least, domiciliary care is reduced to a tick list of basic physical tasks to be completed in a set period of time; the required physical, mental and emotional stamina and skill that are needed to care for clients are entirely neglected’ (Bolton and Wibberley 2014 p. 687).

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<sup>4</sup> Staff turnover is calculated by dividing the number of staff who have left an organisation by the total number of those employed.

This description implies a standardisation of social care work which suggests employees have limited agency given the highly procedural nature of the role (Atkinson and Lucas 2013). An insight into the procedural nature of the work is provided by Bolton and Wibberley (2014) through their discussion of the 'rota' and the 'care plan' arguing that the former shapes care work whilst the latter defines it. Typically the care plan lists the tasks that need to be performed during a visit. Social care employees have to read the plan before starting their work and then follow its instructions and they are forbidden to perform tasks not on the plan. The authors regard this as a bureaucratic means of controlling employees and, far from being benign, it represents the dominant interests of the social care organisation but rarely those of the social care employees. However, this also highlights a paradox regarding the standardisation of care work on the one hand whilst implying flexibility on the other.

The standardisation of care plans has enabled a situation where any employee is able to deliver the service to a service user. The care plan is standardised whilst also being flexible in terms of which employee delivers the service. A practice used by some managers is for employees purposely not to be given the same service user in order to retain flexibility of provision (Lucas and Carr-West 2012). This is contradictory to the preference of social care employees who cite the opportunity to be able to offer continuity of care to service users as a key feature of their work (Rubery et al 2015). This presents a conflict between standardising the way work is organised and the flexibility of the service. This is compounded by new technologies, such as mobile handheld devices, that are increasingly used to standardise care work whilst simultaneously ensuring greater flexibility. Further, though the new technologies have been designed to standardise the work they can be regarded negatively if seen as a device to monitor the use of resources, save costs and increase efficiencies (Carey 2015).

Despite such practices, Bolton and Wibberley (2014) argue social care employees are remarkable at time management. They evaluate the situation, work quickly, develop efficiencies and prioritise what is done and when, all within the context of there being no account in the care plan for the unpredictability of the work nor the relationship with the service user. Further, employees often do off-plan tasks, e.g. putting out bins. The rotas, they argue, define time parameters and intensify the work; care plans offer a control agenda via a task-based approach:

‘...as the political economy of domiciliary care changes within the context of financialised capitalism, more activities that used to be in the formal labour process are now squeezed out, such as time to talk to clients or cleaning tasks, and new activities such as health care tasks are squeezed in, and consequently the labour process is intensified’ (ibid p.694).

Such intensification is compounded by factors discussed above such as limiting the time an employee spends with a service user. These relentless pressures brought by the marketization of the care sector provide examples of the perception of care work as a ‘cost’ that must be reduced in order for social care organisations to be more competitive (ibid p.695). Further, these pressures impact on choices and decisions about internal mechanisms regarding employee voice and how it is expressed. The next section turns to the second part of the CMO configuration by considering the employee voice mechanisms typical of the social care sector.

### **5.3 The mechanisms of employee voice in social care**

The mechanisms of employee voice in social care are affected by the challenges faced by social care organisations discussed above, i.e. social care needs are rising whilst budgets are reducing. One of the biggest expenditures in a social care organisation’s budget is employees. Staffing costs make up approximately 80% of total costs in domiciliary care (Low Pay Commission 2016). The majority of those providing social care are working part-time and, as noted above, are women, both of which have implications vis-à-vis employee voice mechanisms.

Part-time working, casualisation and other such practices impair the ability of employees to have any influence at work (Dundon et al 2017). Despite an abundance of new technologies, if employees are not physically in the workplace their ability to have any influence or any say becomes severely restricted. Furthermore: ‘Women, particularly those in part-time jobs, may have limited access to representation and decision-making processes in the labour market’ (Piasna et al 2013 p.4098). A key finding from research by Piasna et al (ibid) is that vulnerable workers, such as women, had the least opportunity for participation in decisions that shaped their work environment. This finding is borne out in the social care sector.

As noted above, the majority of social care organisations are for-profit and, much the same as their counterparts in other economic sectors, the employee voice mechanisms that were discussed in chapter two are also typical of social care. In other words, they are likely to reflect an efficiency objective and management preferences which are for mechanisms that are direct and individual (Bryson et al 2004), often limited to opening up lines of

communication (Barry and Wilkinson 2015) and regarded as being low-level (Wilkinson and Fay 2011). Additionally in social care, employees are observed to be subjected to more autocratic management styles (Atkinson and Lucas 2013). This means as well as employee voice being low-level, it is also subordinated whereas management voice is privileged. Another characteristic of the social care sector that can work against voice is, as noted above, the fragmented nature of social care work which is such that employees often work in isolation. Unless employees are continuously present in the workplace, their use of employee voice practices can be restricted (Dundon et al 2017; Piasna et al 2013). Moreover, such fragmentation restricts opportunities to come together collectively.

Restricted opportunities for employees to come together collectively have further consequences on employee voice, one of which is a negative impact on the traditional methods of employee representation and organising (Murphy and Turner 2014). Collective action concerning, for example, terms and conditions of employment such as holiday entitlement or sick leave may not be so reconcilable where there is no representative or protective structure in place in an organisation. Indeed, social care in particular is characterised by weak examples of employment relations institutions, such as trade unions, collective bargaining, working time and protection rules - only 8% of domiciliary social care organisations recognise a trade union (Grimshaw et al 2015). Therefore it is employers rather than employees who are provided with significant opportunities to shape employment conditions at a local level. Such restricted opportunities for a collective voice and low trade union representation reflect a unitarist philosophy in the social care environment.

Within the hard unitarist frame, when employees are not satisfied they can simply choose to leave the organisation. Through the market mechanism employers are at liberty to hire and fire whilst employees have the choice to leave. For those who remain, practices designed to increase labour productivity such as Performance Related Pay may be experienced. Writing over twenty years ago Rubery (1995) cautioned about Performance Related Pay. She argued that the nature of the payment system and the context in which it is applied, such as the use of management discretion and the individualisation of pay, would lead to the fragmentation of pay systems. In turn, this would reduce the likelihood of any collective resistance to pay and reduce opportunities to monitor pay trends meaning less transparency. Additionally she argued it can mean any form of collective organisation is hampered. Unsurprisingly then, a further characteristic of this frame is a negative view of trade unions - trade unions would

hamper an efficient social care market. Similarly, soft unitarists regard trade unions as unnecessary.

Trade unions in the soft unitarist frame serve only to highlight weaknesses in HRM practice and are therefore regarded as a failure of these practices. Notably, trade unions featured at the higher level of the continuum (Gollan et al 2015) and escalator (Marchington et al 1992) which were discussed in chapter two (The varieties of employee voice) suggesting they confer greater depth of voice. However, the mechanisms that are more likely to be found in social care reflect those with less depth.

Common practices in social care are an open door policy, meetings, employee observations and supervisions and newsletters (ekosgen 2013) and an annual appraisal system (Grimshaw et al 2015). A study by Grimshaw et al (ibid) highlights the importance of embedding such practices into the organisation and reported that the majority of social care employees had some influence over day-to-day work tasks. However the same study stated that whilst employees did not have any influence in strategic or corporate decision-making, nevertheless, they did want a voice in their employing organisation. Similarly, Lucas et al (2009) found that social care employees regarded positively the opportunity to be involved in decision-making in their employing organisation. This reflects findings across all employment sectors reported in chapter two (e.g. Bryson and Freeman 2007; Freeman et al 2007; The Smith Institute 2016; Wilkinson et al 2015). In other words, employees in the social care sector are no different to employees in other sectors when it comes to wanting to have a voice at work.

However, research by Lucas et al (2009) found that social care employees recognised there were limits to how involved they could be with decision-making and over what decisions: working hours was provided as an example of where they would not be able to have any influence. The same report also acknowledged that some employees felt that change was imposed on them rather than them having some influence over that change. Interestingly, this study also acknowledges movement in the social care sector by employees; employees move from one social care organisation to another. A similar finding was revealed by Franklin (2014). This presents an interesting paradox: though turnover in social care is high, employees are not necessarily leaving the sector but moving within it. This paradox will be explored in more detail in the section below which considers the outcomes of social care.

## **5.4 Outcomes of employee voice in social care: why ownership matters**

Decreasing social care budgets and increasing demand for services mean social care organisations have to look at ways of remaining viable in a competitive market. Given that the majority operate as private for-profit organisations, they compete on service and on price; referred to as the ‘parameters of profitability’ (Turnbull et al 2004). Key to service and price in social care, i.e. creating the parameters of profitability, are the social care employees. Following the logic that ownership matters, some interesting anomalies exist in social care regarding outcomes.

One anomaly is that employee turnover is greater amongst for-profit social care organisations when compared to turnover in either the local authority or not-for-profit sectors (Care Quality Commission 2014; ekosgen 2013; Hussein et al 2016). In other words, social care employees who are employed by either a local authority or a not-for-profit social care organisation are more likely to remain with that organisation longer. A second is that employment standards are especially poor in for-profit social care organisations, a particular concern expressed by employees being the insecurity of working hours: ‘...while the favoured policy approach towards public service contracting emphasises the innovating capabilities of the for-profit private sector, our findings point to the reality of a hard-nosed HRM approach towards pay and quality of working conditions’ (Grimshaw et al 2015 p.522). These two anomalies will be explored further in the next sections.

### ***5.4.1 Recruitment and retention***

The challenges faced by the social care sector regarding the recruitment and retention of employees has been highlighted by several academics (e.g. Hussein et al 2016). The vacancy rate across the social care sector is 4.8% compared to 2.6% for the whole economy (Humphries et al 2016). A possible factor contributing to this issue is that, given there is parity of funding awarded to local authorities which is then used to purchase social care from mainly private for-profit social care organisations, the latter struggle to differentiate themselves from other providers, i.e. their competitors. To address the issue of recruitment, several practices are used by social care organisations.

One of the most common recruitment practices is word-of-mouth, followed by advertisements in the local press and advertising in local Jobcentre Plus offices (ekosgen 2013). An important factor in determining a decision to apply to a particular social care organisation by a potential employee is its reputation locally (Lucas et al 2009) whereas pay was not regarded as being a



factor in determining whether or not to apply for a job and, importantly, pay is not hugely variable across competitors (ekosgen 2013). This last point is unsurprising given, again, the point about the parity of funding awarded to individual local authorities. Other practices that are used include various incentive schemes such as pay premiums for working bank holidays, store vouchers and free uniforms. Where staff were offered incentives, social care organisations were found to have particularly good staff retention (ibid). There are however some social care organisations reportedly using more questionable practices when recruiting employees in order to keep costs to a minimum.

Such questionable recruitment practices include employees having to pay for their own uniforms or paying upfront costs such as the cost of being checked by the Disclosure and Barring Service<sup>5</sup> (DBS; Grimshaw et al 2015). In addition, there are reportedly practices that are illegal such as ‘cash-in-hand’ payments to employees or paying below National Living Wage (Franklin 2014; Humphries et al 2016). Other less malignant practices, though also having consequences, are those designed to keep costs down such as reducing training opportunities, paying staff at the lowest possible level and encouraging service users to seek more assistance than was agreed within the local authority contract (Bolton 2015). A related issue is retaining employees once they have been recruited.

The social care sector experiences high staff turnover rates when compared to turnover rates for the economy as a whole. Staff turnover figures for the UK economy are approximately 12% (CIPD 2013; cited in Franklin 2014). In contrast, a report by the NAO (2014) states that the annual turnover in the social care sector is 22%. Another report, by UKHCA (2016), suggests a much bleaker picture when focusing specifically on domiciliary care. The report states that in England in 2015, the turnover rate for home care workers was 32.4% and by 2016 this figure had risen to 41.4%. Similar figures are reported by NMDS-SC (2017) who state that for the social care sector in general, i.e. including senior care workers, registered nurses and registered managers, turnover rates are 27.3%. However, when focusing specifically on employees in domiciliary care, the figure rises to 38.1%. Further analysis shows that the turnover rates are highest amongst for-profit care providers (Hussein et al 2016). In contrast, below average turnover is reported when social care is provided through a

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<sup>5</sup> DBS is part of the UK Home Office and provides a service which enables organisations from the public, private and third sectors to check whether a potential candidate is suitable for certain work, such as working with vulnerable adults (<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/disclosure-and-barring-service>).

local authority (ekosgen 2013). There are several consequences of a high staff turnover for both employers and employees.

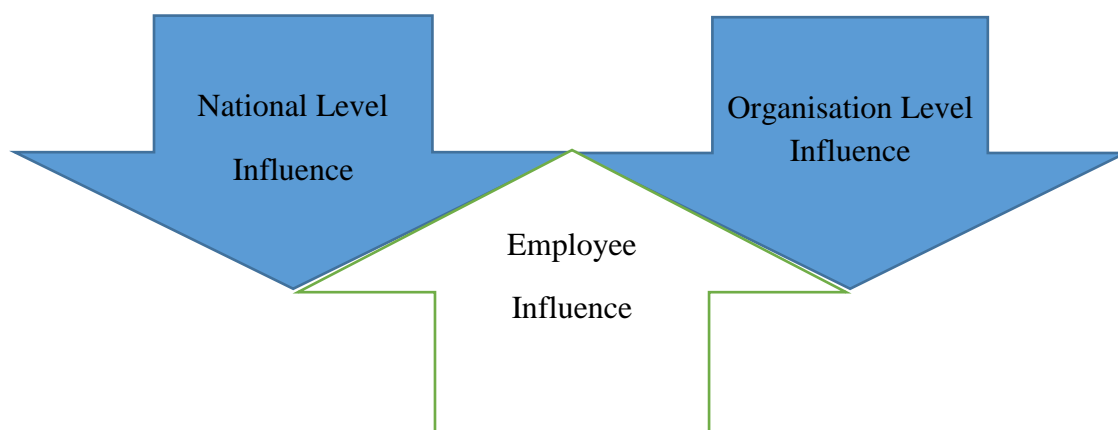
For the social care organisations, the consequences of a high staff turnover rate include the costs involved in constantly having to recruit staff (Hussein et al 2016); possibly having to recruit agency workers; and using a manager's time to recruit, cover shifts and train new recruits (ekosgen 2013). A further implication is that social care organisations are reluctant to 'invest' in their staff if they are likely to leave (NAO 2014) and social care organisations are particularly nervous of losing staff to competitors (Skills for Care 2016). For social care employees, the consequences are numerous and include financial insecurity and instability; reduced opportunities for career progression; and, they may not reach the relevant stage to become eligible for statutory employment rights and therefore do not enjoy the terms and conditions of employment of those with more stable employment. These adverse consequences of social care beg questions regarding the cause of such high turnover rates.

#### ***5.4.2 Employment in social care***

One reason for the high employee turnover rates in social care relates to the increasing use of zero hour contracts. Zero hour contracts mean an employer is not obliged to offer work nor is the employee obliged to accept work when it is offered; and workers are entitled to the same rights as regular workers though they may have breaks in their contracts which would affect their accrued rights ([www.acas.org.uk](http://www.acas.org.uk)). Approximately 30% of those employed in social care have zero hour contracts (NAO 2014). This figure rises to approximately 60% when controlling for domiciliary care (NMDS-SC 2017). A second reason is the pay in social care.

Though now paid the living wage, this rate is less attractive considering social care employees typically purchase their own uniforms (NAO 2014) and are typically not paid for the time they spend travelling between service users' homes (Hussein et al 2016). A further issue is the length of time employees have to provide care to service users. A report by Unison (2016) suggests 74% of local authorities in England commissioned domiciliary care visits that lasted 15 minutes or less. This is a key concern raised in the report in terms of employees effectively working for nothing as they stay with the service user longer than the 'paid for' time. Whilst some employees may prefer such flexible terms of employment for others it presents challenges, such as not being able to secure a mortgage or borrowing for other purchases.

Importantly, the national level environment has played a part in influencing the types of mechanisms available at organisational level (Piasna et al 2013). The national level and organisation level environments both place pressures on employee voice that affect its outcomes from the perspective of employees, illustrated in the figure below.



**Figure 5.1 Downward pressures on employee voice**

A significant outcome of this pressure, as it relates here, is the recruitment and retention of employees as discussed above. A second, and related outcome, is the poor terms and conditions of employment that social care employees have. Furthermore, as noted in the section above concerning mechanisms, employee voice mechanisms are likely to be low-level affording employees little influence in their employing organisation. Given such challenging conditions begs the question of why anyone would work in social care. Yet, by asking this question a paradox in social care regarding outcomes is revealed. Despite such high turnover rates, poor employment conditions and limited opportunities to influence decision-making, social care employees consistently report a love of the job and a desire to make a difference to the lives of service users. As such, approximately one-third of those who leave a job in care move to another job in care; they do not leave the sector (Franklin 2014).

### **5.5 The paradox of social care**

Given the downward pressures that ‘strip out the care from caring labour’ (Bolton and Wibberley 2014 p.695) and the derisory conditions of social care work, an obvious question would be why do people work in the sector? Indeed, such conditions may go some way to explain the high turnover rates in social care with some employees choosing to ‘exit’ (Hirschman 1970) the employing organisation. The answer becomes clear when employees

are asked. Paradoxically, despite the challenges, employees express a positive experience of delivering social care to service users. A common finding from research in this area is the desire to make a difference to the lives of service users. Over 1000 social care employees responding to an on-line survey stated that they did the job because they wanted to make a difference (Unison 2016). Similarly, a study of American home care providers reported positive aspects of the work which included the companionship and caring relationship developed with clients (Stacey 2011). This however highlights a further paradox.

Social care employees express a love for the job with relationships with service users being integral to this and in particular, as with the study by Unison (2016), the desire to make a difference to the lives of service users. Paradoxically, one of the features employees dislike is the poor wages; the love of the job however is often used as a reason to offset this paradox (Hebson et al 2015). In other words, how employees feel about their work overrides a desire for higher wages. Love of the job however is only part of a complex set of factors that affect the choices made, and constraints experienced, by social care employees and why leaving an organisation is not quite as straightforward as the 'exit, voice and loyalty' configuration (Hirschman 1970) might suggest.

Gendered social norms are often suggested as shaping the intrinsic motivation to care for others but this can act as a form of constraint on employees involved in social care as altruistic attachments to caring for others may prevent them from expressing their voice over other aspects of their work, such as pay (Folbre 2012). Such social norms are based on a caring identity that is concerned with fulfilling others' needs combined with the selflessness of the employees and also on the fulfilment of the desire of the employees to feel valuable (Skeggs 1997). Hebson et al (2015) take the paradox further by looking at how economic and cultural conditions shape the norms and values of social care employees.

For Hebson et al (ibid) economic and social factors can be just as influential as the actual job of care provision itself in terms of shaping reported levels of high job satisfaction. They cite numerous research studies that highlight the paradox of care: high job satisfaction and low pay, the former due to caring motivations including relationships with service users explained by gendered norms, values and preferences. For example, Palmer and Eveline (2012; cited in Hebson et al 2015) refer to a 'family care logic' that is used by employers and employees to mean work is done for emotional not financial rewards. In so doing, these social norms can lead social care employees to privilege altruism over financial gain (Atkinson and Lucas

2013). In other words, the strength of social norms is such that employees are manoeuvred towards expressing the positive aspects of their work whilst downplaying less appealing aspects. However, Hebson et al (2015) counter this argument by suggesting that regardless of intrinsic motivation, it does not explain why care work should mean less money and contend that the picture is more complex.

A more useful way to understand the paradox, they argue, is from the perspective of the employees and the circumstances and complexities of their lives. Viewed in this way, the situation for an employee is one of 'satisficing' compared to 'satisfied' (Hebson et al 2015 p.317). To highlight this point they cite research by Stacey (2005) who found social care employees liked the autonomy of the work when compared to their experience in other parts of the service sector; shop work was regarded as more controlling. A study by Lucas et al (2009) bears similar findings. They reported employees regarded the repetitiveness of jobs such as shop work negatively whilst positively pointing to the variation of care work. Further, Ekosgen (2013) found employees in social care organisations with high retention were afforded high levels of autonomy, e.g. being involved in designing a service users' care plan. This supports the argument put forward above by Bolton and Wibberley (2014) discussed earlier regarding the negative effects of standardising care plans and employees having no input. The point from the perspective of Hebson et al (2015) is that work history bore some effect on a social care employees' judgements vis-à-vis their current experiences. A further influencing factor which they highlight was the social networks of employees, such as family and friends, who were also working in care provision (see also Lucas et al 2009).

The social networks of employees often means they enter care work because someone they know works in the sector: 49 of the 70 people interviewed by Hebson et al (2015) had family or close friends working in care provision. As such, by including circumstances, a more nuanced picture of employee motivation is revealed that helps us understand this paradoxical outcome of care work. Further, it becomes clearer why care work is seen as more attractive within a context where there is a limited pool of alternative options. Viewed from an employee's perspective, despite the restricted choices, not to mention contending with other constraints and responsibilities, care work becomes the best option over other poor options.

Of course another possibility is that employees are well aware of the negative aspects of the job but to counteract this they focus on the positive aspects rather than the derogatory ones that are often portrayed. In other words, social care employees acknowledge it is a bad job but

to 'save face' (Goffman 1956) they present a picture that care work is something that is worthwhile. A further plausible explanation is that employees do enjoy the work and believe they are doing something worthwhile; what they do is of value. These points are reflected in an earlier study which highlighted that favourable views commonly expressed by social care employees include the autonomy of the work, being able to use their own initiative, regarding care work as a vocation and, not something everyone could do (Lucas et al 2009). In other words, the social care employees valued, and were proud, of the work they did.

Such valuing of, and pride in, their work is reflected in what Bolton and Wibberley (2014) refer to as an 'ethic of care' which is maintained by employees by going above and beyond what was contractually required such as the example provided earlier; putting the service user's bins out for them. Similarly Breslin and Wood (2015) highlight the informal rules at play in the relationship between social care employees and service users that were more aligned with employees' own values of social justice and allowed them to redress what they perceived to be as an imbalance in the moral economy. It is also reflected in their idea of 'gifting'. This means extra services are gifted to service users despite the presence of formal rules. In other words, social care employees were giving more than was required and in so doing, exercising their voice through breaking or ignoring, the rules. The idea of gifting seems quite different to the philosophy underpinning the concept of 'going the extra mile' (Legge 2005; Piasna et al 2013). This presents a number of additional paradoxes.

The first paradox is that the HRM literature suggests it is employers imploring employees to go the extra mile whereas gifting implies it is the employees who are choosing to do so. This presents a problem for social care organisations highlighting the second paradox. Whilst relying on the extra effort provided by employees, the social care sector is at the same time seeking to increase its profitability through standardising and rationalising the pace of care-giving activity (Bolton and Wibberley 2014). In other words, when employees are gifting a difficulty is created for the social care organisation regarding the standardisation and commodification of the work. This creates a third paradox: social care organisations need to differentiate themselves from their competitors, other social care organisations.

Combined, these factors suggest that there are national level downward pressures on social care organisations which have consequences for employees. It is social care employees who bear the downward pressure of fierce competition within the care sector (Bolton and Wibberley (ibid) as illustrated in figure 5.1 above and who are regarded as a cost which needs

to be reduced. Importantly, this affects how employee voice is expressed through mechanisms that reflect efficiency objectives, chosen by management and are typically low-level thus creating a problem of a high staff turnover rate in social care. In so doing, exiting becomes the mechanism through which employees express their voice. Yet, many employees go on to work in another social care organisation, they do not leave the sector.

## **5.6 Summary**

This chapter has discussed social care as it is the sector in which the studied case operates. Having provided a summary of the historical development of social care, it then referenced a key policy turn, the 1990 National Health Services and Community Care Act which, it was argued, changed the landscape of the social care sector through marketization. Using the lens of the frames of reference, marketization was evidenced through the changed language of social care and that organisations providing social care changed from being local authority and voluntary sector providers to private for-profit companies. Following the argument that ownership matters, this in turn, influenced and shaped the choices of employee voice mechanisms made by social care organisations.

Section two considered the choices of employee voice mechanisms in social care organisations. It found that voice mechanisms are akin to those in other parts of the economy, i.e. reflect efficiency objectives, are chosen by management, rarely involve trade unions and are low-level thus affording social care employees little influence in the organisation and risking voice going unheard. These findings impacted on the outcomes of employee voice. The third section examined the outcomes of employee voice in social care. This highlighted national level pressures on social care organisations bringing challenges such as high employee turnover, poor terms and conditions of employment and the use of zero hour contracts. These challenges highlighted a paradox in social care which were discussed in the final section. Social care employees expressed a love of the job and a desire to make a difference. However, that it is for-profit companies delivering the majority of social care, compounds the recruitment and retention problem with employees choosing to exit the employing organisation rather than express themselves through low-level voice mechanisms. Their voice is heard only inasmuch as they leave the company, though some remain in the sector. This raised questions regarding the way in which employee voice in social care is valued. Against this backdrop, the studied case, Vivo-Co, provides a fruitful example to highlight the multiple contextual factors that influence the mechanisms through which employee voice is expressed and the outcomes for social care employees.

## **Chapter Six: Findings**

### **6.1 Introduction**

This chapter presents the findings of research undertaken at Vivo-Co. The findings are set against the backdrop of the social care sector (chapter five), follow a methodological approach that draws on data from observations, semi-structured interviews and documentary evidence, (chapter four), use the theoretical lens of the frames of reference (chapter three), address the limitation concerning alternative ways of understanding employee voice (chapter two) and address the research questions (chapter one). Of which all derive from the aim of the study concerning whether employee voice is different in an employee-owned enterprise compared to that of conventional businesses. The chapter is separated into five sections.

Section one begins with an overview of the company. Section two discusses organisational features such as actors and how space is occupied, company values, communication systems and conventional voice mechanisms. Section three presents findings regarding the context in which employee-ownership emerged in Vivo-Co. This includes the challenge to Vivo-Co of reduced funding from the local authority and its response, which was through a strategy of growth and addressing the recruitment and retention of employees. Section four discusses the mechanism of employee-ownership and the assumptions which were made about what it would achieve. This included increasing efficiency, garnering employee commitment and encouraging employees to ‘go the extra mile’. Section five discusses the outcomes of employee-ownership in relation to employee voice. This reveals some opportunities, such as employee representatives being able to influence aspects of the governance processes. The findings also revealed that employee voice often went unheard or was closed down as it was hampered by employee compliance, organisational hierarchy and management resistance. Significantly, this was not an outcome of the mechanism. Rather, it was revealed that it was a result of the way in which voice was valued in Vivo-Co.

### **6.2 Organisational profile: Vivo-Co**

Vivo-Co is an employee-owned enterprise which provides health and social care services. It was established in the mid-2000s with approximately thirty staff, most of whom were social care employees as distinct from other types of employee, such as managers or health care professionals. Since that time it has grown to six branches which are spread geographically across England. Until recently, each branch operated independently albeit as a franchise of the original company (Source A).



Two of the branches are regarded by Vivo-Co as ‘super-branches’ because they cover large city-wide areas. The remaining four branches cover smaller local authority districts. There is a head office that is physically separate from all of the branches though geographically close to one of the branches. The head office is occupied by a Chief Executive Officer, a senior executive team (five people including the Chief Executive Officer) and technical and administrative support staff. During the research period, there were approximately 800 employee-owners, the majority of whom were women providing social care services.

The services offered by Vivo-Co fall into three broad categories (Source A). Firstly, domiciliary care services are provided within a service user’s own home. This includes personal care such as assistance with bathing, as well as other tasks such as cleaning or cooking. Secondly, supported living services are provided to service users who have a range of disabilities, enabling them to live independently. Thirdly, there are complex care services that are delivered to service users who have more complicated needs including, sometimes, medical needs. Domiciliary care and supported living services are provided by qualified social care employees whilst complex care services are delivered by qualified nurses. The majority of services provided by Vivo-Co fall into the category of domiciliary care.

Of the services delivered by Vivo-Co, most are commissioned by local authorities, though they do have some private paying clients, the latter constituting about 10-15% of the total income (Source B). The commissioners (local authorities) of services provided by Vivo-Co use a ‘time and task’ model of care, i.e. payment is based on the time it takes an employee to carry out specific tasks on behalf of the service user. This model of social care delivery is relevant here as it impacts on social care employees and therefore is returned to below (Organisational Communications).

The types of contract used by the commissioners are in the form of a ‘zoned prime provider’. Typically, a prime provider is a single provider procured by the local authority to deliver a set of services at an agreed price. It then sub-contracts the work and manages the local supply in the market to deliver the required service (Bolton 2015). However, in Vivo-Co the contract was described by one of the senior executives as:

‘Us [Vivo-Co] and another provider are commissioned to provide all of the work but we are not guaranteed volume – it is essentially a mix of a block and spot contract’.

In other words, and in contrast to how most prime provider contracts operate, Vivo-Co did not sub-contract the work but rather delivered it themselves. This meant a layer of regulation and cost was removed given that the prime provider would typically sub-contract the work and then oversee its delivery. It also meant Vivo-Co secured a greater volume of social care provision. Securing ever-greater volume of contracts was a key goal for the Chief Executive Officer as it was related to his objective of achieving efficiency. As such this issue will be discussed in more detail below (Context of Employee-Ownership).

### **6.3 Organisational features**

There are several notable features evidenced in Vivo-Co which had a bearing on the way employee-ownership manifested. Those discussed in this section are organisational structure and actors, space, values, communications and employee voice mechanisms.

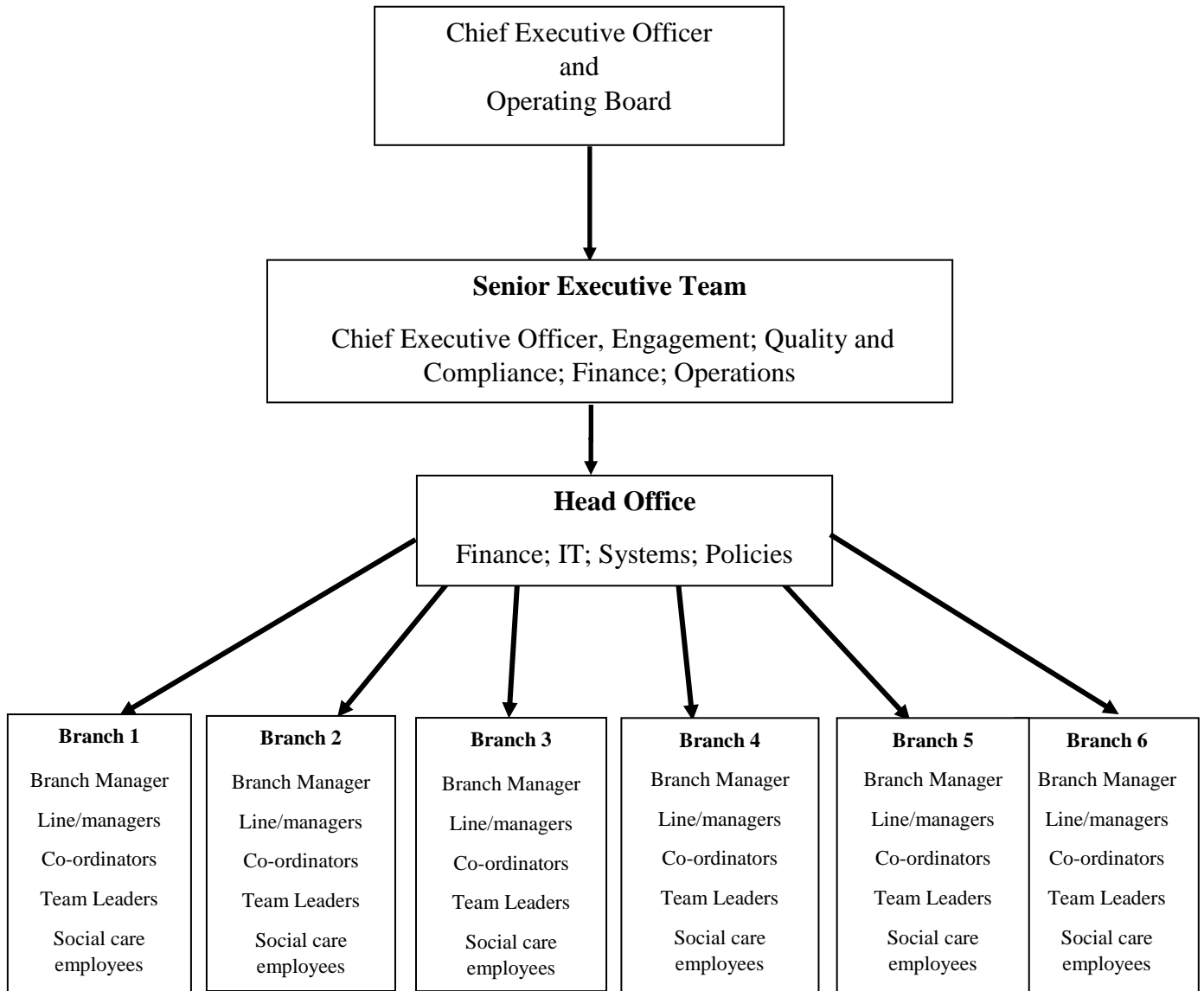
#### ***6.3.1 Organisational structure and actors***

Vivo-Co organises and delivers social care services through a conventional hierarchical structure which is illustrated in figure 6.1 overleaf (Source C). As noted above, most of the 800 employee owners are social care employees whilst the remainder are senior management, line management, co-ordinators, team leaders and office support workers. As the focus here is on employee voice through employee-ownership, it is the key employee-ownership actors that are of primary interest: senior executive team, operating board and social care employees. Given their importance to this research, more detail on each of the groups is provided below.

As with conventional organisations, the Chief Executive Officer of Vivo-Co is at the top of the organisational structure. He is responsible for the strategic development and business development of the organisation, identifying and developing new branches, employee engagement, new product development and financial planning (Source B). His role is supported by an operating board and a senior executive team.

The operating board was made up of non-executive directors who were external to the organisation and senior executives (see below). The role of the board was to oversee the operational aspects of Vivo-Co, set and deliver its strategy and meet its performance targets. The board met quarterly and at each meeting a particular issue was focused on, e.g. compliance, finance, engagement. Two of the four non-executive directors as well as the Chief Executive Officer regularly attended meetings of the General Council, the governance

arm of the employee-ownership model. By contrast, none of the employee-owners other than the senior executives attended meetings of the operating board. This is an important point regarding employee voice within the governance mechanism and will be discussed in more detail below (Outcomes of Employee-Ownership).



**Figure 6.1: Vivo-Co organisational structure**

Of the senior executives, one is a Director of Engagement. His role was to devise and implement strategies for the engagement and recruitment of employees. A point to highlight here as it will be of relevance later in this chapter (Context of Employee-Ownership) is that this was a new post which brought with it changes to the way social care employees were recruited. A second member of the senior executive team was the Director of Quality and Compliance. His responsibility was to ensure Vivo-Co fulfilled its statutory regulatory

obligations which are monitored by the Care Quality Commission (CQC) – an independent regulator of health and social care services in England. Of the two remaining members of the senior executive team, one was a Director of Finance and the other a Director of Operations.

As well as meetings with the operating board, the senior executive team met separately and more frequently to discuss the day-to-day aspects of the company. As highlighted in figure 6.1, the senior executive team is supported by a number of middle managers as well as a number of individuals providing technical and administrative support.

The largest occupational group in Vivo-Co, as noted above, are social care employees. Many of the characteristics of social care work in Vivo-Co corresponded to those of social care work discussed in chapter five. For example, the majority of work is performed by employees in Vivo-Co who are women, the work they perform is off-site and the work is fragmented and isolating as it was typically carried out by a single employee in the home of a service user. A notable point, which was observed when visiting one of the branches, was the limited opportunities for social care employees to come together as a group. This issue is discussed in more detail below (Organisational Space).

Nevertheless, despite these limited opportunities to come together, and reflecting findings of earlier studies (e.g. Hebson et al 2015), there was evidence of social care employees in Vivo-Co having high levels of satisfaction with their work and citing close relationships with service users as a reason for this (Source D, E, F and G). Again, this, as well as other aspects of the role of the social care employees, will be discussed in greater detail in subsequent sections. Of the social care employees, five became employee representatives when the mechanism of employee-ownership was introduced in Vivo-Co.

The role of employee representative formed an integral part of the governance structure of employee-ownership. Their role was to represent all of the social care employees. They did this in several ways, such as representing social care employees at meetings of the General Council. As such, the representatives' role and the function of the General Council will be discussed in greater detail below (The Mechanism of Employee-ownership).

### ***6.3.2 Organisational space***

The organisational space of Vivo-Co offered an interesting first sight of employee-ownership in practice. What was notable when entering Vivo-Co, was the way in which space was

occupied, by whom and for what purpose. Particularly notable was the space which was available to social care employees. As noted in chapter five, much of the work of social care employees is carried out in isolation, in a service user's home. As such, opportunities to meet with colleagues, for example, to share information about service users and to interact and communicate with one another, though valuable, are rare.

The physical aspects of Vivo-Co were not conducive to creating opportunities for its social care employees to meet one another. To illustrate this point, the head office of Vivo-Co is contrasted to one of the branches. The head office and the branch in question occupy two buildings that are physically separate from one another although geographically close, being only one street apart. The senior executive team and office support staff occupied one building which was referred to as the 'Group Office'.

The Group Office was a large old building spread over three floors all of which was occupied by the organisation. The space was tastefully decorated in what were referred to as the 'company colours'. This building did not have a reception area meaning sometimes there was no-one there to greet visitors. Nevertheless, the building had a relaxed feel, it was spacious, clean and tidy and it was reasonably inviting. Each person had their own desk and ample room. People, whether employees or visitors, could walk into the building straight off the street and then move freely around the building. There was no form of security preventing access to any part of the building. Each time the researcher visited, the atmosphere was calm with classical music playing in the background and people working quietly at their desks.

Similarly, the second building, that housed social care employees and additional office support staff, was a large old building and occupied three floors. Again, the décor reflected the company colours. In contrast however, there was a reception area and there was always a receptionist at the desk. There were a number of notable artefacts in this area. One was a board displaying a traffic light system. This was an important visual mechanism used to impart information about the performance of the company and is therefore discussed in more detail below (Organisational Employee Voice Mechanisms). A second artefact was a sign that was displayed in the reception which read:

'Putting people before profit'.

Another sign was hanging in the training room, just off the reception area. This read:

‘Be the owners, act like owners’.

Another sign, which was handwritten, was on a locked door leading to the upstairs offices that read:

‘No [social care employees] beyond this point without an appointment’.

This locked door was a further difference to the Group Office. In this second building it was only the reception area that was accessible to social care employees. The door leading to the second and third floors of the building was locked. Behind these locked doors were the offices for the branch manager, managers, co-ordinators, supervisors and the office support staff. There was also a ‘social space’. However, as this was behind the locked door it meant social care employees were unable to access it. In contrast, open and accessible social space was provided to everyone in the Group Office.

Asked about the separation of offices, the Director of Quality and Compliance stated:

‘It’s good to have a separation between ‘workers’ and ‘management’.

For him, the separation between employees and management was a positive feature of the organisation. As it was, the social care employees used the reception area as a place to meet and interact with colleagues. For example, whilst it was possible for them to complete and return time sheets electronically, it was observed that many social care employees chose to complete the forms by hand and then physically return them to the reception. What is notable is that they did this voluntarily as they were not paid for returning forms to the reception. Asked why they did this, the reason given by the receptionist was, importantly, that it provided a rare opportunity for them to communicate with their colleagues.

When the social care employees were observed congregating in the reception space it was noisy, vibrant and animated. During fieldwork, social care employees came in and out, stopping for conversations, sharing information and catching up on news. During this time, they appeared relaxed in the space and seemed to be taking ownership of it. Their voices were clear and expressive. However, there were no facilities provided here, such as tea and coffee making facilities nor were there any toilet facilities; facilities such as these were behind the

locked door. This limited the length of time social care employees occupied the reception space. The company values of Vivo-Co offered further insight into the organisation.

### **6.3.3 Organisational values**

The company values of Vivo-Co, which were written by its Chief Executive Officer, reflect the dual nature of the organisation as a provider of social care and an employee-owned enterprise that was evidenced through documentary data (Source A). As a provider of care services, there is an emphasis on the values concerning the personal characteristics of social care employees. For example, there are words used on the company website such as:

‘Trustworthiness, reliability, committed, integrity, positive mental attitude, honesty’.

In so doing, it is the personal attributes of the employees that are emphasised not the skills, experience or knowledge required to perform the work. Reflecting the employee-ownership status of the company, one of the values states:

‘Employee-owners will share responsibility as well as benefits’ (Source A).

In other words, the responsibilities associated with employee-ownership are stated first and the benefits are second. Another value was:

‘To go the extra mile to deliver a quality service. Doing it because we care’.

As well as this being one of Vivo-Co’s values per se, this particular value was invoked by the Chief Executive Officer and other key actors several times and in different settings. For example, a competition was held in each branch that involved employees writing on a board any instances where they had ‘gone the extra mile’ during the previous week.

The board was placed in the reception area of each branch in order that it was clearly visible for everyone to see. Depending on the number of those putting themselves forward, the branch manager would decide who won. The winner of the competition was given a prize, typically a gift voucher. A specific example of a social care employee going the extra mile was observed during a visit to one of the branches. It read:

‘Saving a service user’s life’.

### **6.3.4 Organisational communications**

The communication systems in Vivo-Co operated at both organisational and branch level. Mirroring the organisation’s hierarchical configuration, illustrated in figure 6.1 above,

communication systems in Vivo-Co flowed from the top to the bottom of the whole organisation (Source C).

At organisational level, the Chief Executive Officer and other senior executives communicated key messages and information through branch managers and layers of other personnel to the social care employees. Such communications might include raising awareness of changes to existing policies. The forms of communication were both direct and indirect via phone calls, electronic communications, quarterly manager forums, face-to-face meetings and memos.

At branch level, communications were predominantly through team meetings and meetings between social care employees and their supervisors. Discussions were observed at a meeting of the managers' forum regarding the implementation of a more sophisticated communications system that would be introduced across the whole organisation. The new system would consist of a mobile telephone given to each social care employee to enable them to check in and out of a service user's home via the device.

At the meeting the external representatives who were responsible for the new technology, including recording its usage, gave a presentation on how the technology would be implemented and used by employees. The phones would mean Vivo-Co would receive reports on individual employees regarding how they had used the phones, as well as monitoring aspects of their work such as the length of time they were with a service user. Given the 'time and task model' of care delivery which Vivo-Co was commissioned to deliver, being able to monitor aspects of a social care employees' work provided the company with valuable information.

During implementation of the system, a middle manager informed those attending the meeting that there would be strict guidance provided to all social care employees on how they should use the phones. She also stated clearly that any employee found to be abusing the phone, for example making personal calls, would have money deducted from their wages. The new communication system was also discussed at a team meeting of social care employees which the researcher was invited to attend (Source E).

The team meeting was attended by six social care employees, their employee representative of the General Council and their branch manager. The employee representative and the branch



manager stated that the rationale for introducing the new communication system was to collect information more efficiently. They went on to explain that the attendance rate of each branch was set and monitored by the commissioning local authority. The new system would help to ensure that information provided to the local authority was collected more efficiently.

The information that was to be collected would include whether the social care employee arrived at the service user's home at the contracted time, left early or did not arrive at all. The last is referred to as a 'no show' in Vivo-Co. If the branch had consistently low attendance scores, it risked having its contract withdrawn by the local authority. An example however was given by a social care employee at the meeting where she had changed the order of her scheduled visits set out on her rota, something she would not be able to do when the new system came into being.

The employee explained that on her rota, she was scheduled to see Mrs Smith first and Mr Wilson second. However, she knew that Mr Wilson was always up out of bed before Mrs Smith. Also, Mr Wilson was geographically first on her route. As such, it made more sense, she suggested to her employee representative and the branch manager, to visit Mr Wilson before visiting Mrs Smith. Further, this would enable Mrs Smith to have a little longer in bed – which she liked. However, because of her decision, the employee representative and the branch manager explained, the visit to Mrs Smith had resulted in a 'no show' even though she had attended.

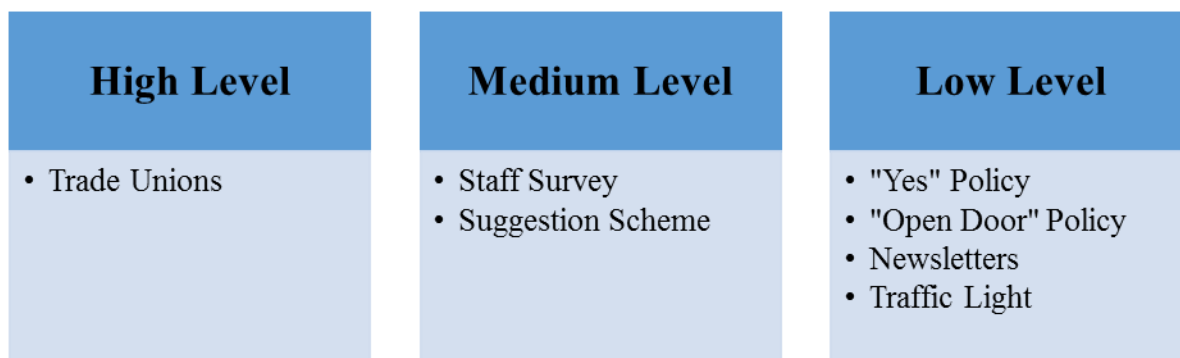
This example highlights the pressures facing Vivo-Co to meet the targets set by the local authority and particularly the pressures of a 'time and task' model of delivery. To address this issue, Vivo-Co was introducing new systems that would monitor the use of 'resources', in other words, the social care employees. In so doing, the company would save costs and increase efficiencies. However, it also highlights the more pragmatic approach taken by the employee.

To her, the approach she used made practical sense as both service users would be up and out of bed when she arrived. Moreover, what she is suggesting is an efficiency measure: it was more efficient to see Mr Wilson first. And, in so doing, she was 'gifting' Mrs Smith some extra time in bed. The new system would prevent opportunities for such autonomy and therefore might have the opposite outcome of increasing costs and decreasing efficiencies: the rigidity of the system would not allow for the flexibility needed for care provision. Though the voice of the social care employee had been heard by the employee representative and the branch manager, it went unheard in terms of having any value regarding costs and efficiencies.

### 6.3.5 Organisational employee voice mechanisms

Separate from the communication systems described above, and mechanisms yielded through the employee-ownership model which will be dealt with in detail later in this chapter, the Chief Executive Officer informed of various voice mechanisms that are used in Vivo-Co which, though preceding it, continued once employee-ownership was implemented.

Seven mechanisms were listed: trade unions, staff survey, a suggestion scheme, a 'yes' policy, an 'open door' policy, newsletters and a traffic light system. Aside from trade unions, all of the mechanisms were initiated by the Chief Executive Officer. With the exception of the 'yes' policy, all are regarded as typical of voice mechanisms used by conventional businesses (Marchington et al 1992) which were discussed in chapter two. The mechanisms used in Vivo-Co and the degree of influence each yields according to the escalator metaphor (ibid), are presented in figure 6.2 below.



**Figure 6.2 Vivo-Co conventional voice mechanisms**

The first mechanism was through the traditional route of a trade union. It was noted several times by the Chief Executive Officer that Vivo-Co recognised trade unions. However, it transpired that the company did not have a formal collective agreement with a trade union. When the Chief Executive Officer was asked specifically about this issue he answered:

‘There is no formal union recognition but [social care employees], through their supervisors, know that they could join a trade union if they want to’.

Despite this endorsement, several, often disparaging, comments were made by organisational actors in relation to trade unions. For example, the need for a trade union within an employee-owned enterprise was questioned by one of the founder members whilst the Director of

Quality and Compliance and the Director of Finance expressed suspicion of trade unions. Again, the significance of this issue lends itself to further discussion which will be provided in a later section (Outcomes of Employee-Ownership).

The second mechanism, which was administered in every branch and analysed by branch managers, was a staff survey that sought employee voice regarding levels of job satisfaction. The researcher was able to analyse findings from the most recent survey which had been administered in one of the branches (Source D). The survey reported that:

‘Overall 80% of staff are happy working for their own company’.

However, closer examination of the figures revealed that the survey had only been completed by 17% of the employee-owners. Of this cohort, 80% were either satisfied or very satisfied, whereas the satisfaction levels of the remaining 83% of staff who did not complete the questionnaire were unknown.

The third mechanism was a scheme that, according to the Chief Executive Officer, enabled employees to make suggestions on ways to improve aspects of their work or the organisation. He regarded the suggestion scheme as an efficient way of receiving ideas from social care employees. There was a box in each branch for their suggestions which was placed in the reception area. Ideas were then assessed by the branch manager and if the branch manager deemed the ideas ‘good suggestions’, they forwarded them to the Chief Executive Officer. A document produced by the Chief Executive Officer outlined the process of the suggestion scheme (Source G) and stated:

‘A key ambition of [Vivo-Co] is to act swiftly on any great suggestions to be made by workers – they are after all the people working at the ‘coal-face’ who will confront day-to-day issues and are best placed to identify ‘[Vivo-Co] fixes’...employees will act like owners when their voice is heard – have a say in how their company is run’.

There are several notable points regarding the scheme. Firstly, the de-personalised process of sharing ideas, i.e. via a box. Secondly, the lack of an explanation of what a ‘good suggestion’ might be. Thirdly, the weighted language of ‘good’ suggestion as opposed to the less loaded and much simpler request of ‘suggestions’. Fourth is the contradictory ways social care employees are referred to: as ‘workers’, ‘owners’ and ‘employees’.

The fourth mechanism was a 'yes' policy. This was intended to encourage all employees to communicate directly with the Chief Executive Officer on any matters of concern to them. He explained that the policy meant he was open to all conversations about any topic.

The fifth mechanism was an 'open door policy'. Similar to the 'yes' policy, this policy meant anyone could speak to the Chief Executive Officer about any matter of concern whenever they felt the need. Though participants of this research were not asked directly about the efficacy of this mechanism, two participants stated they felt that the Chief Executive Officer was always accessible: one of these was a supervisor and an employee representative of the General Council and the second was a middle manager. The middle manager stated that the Chief Executive Officer was more readily available compared to those in other places he had worked and voluntarily described him as a 'consultative paternalist'. His experience however is in contrast to that of social care employees, whose experience was, as noted above, of locked doors. Indeed this policy seemed contrary to the notion of locked doors.

The sixth mechanism was newsletters (Source F). The Vivo-Co newsletters were largely made up of 'good news stories' and produced by someone at either social care employee or supervisory level. The nature of each newsletter was information-sharing and fun bringing positive news of individuals within the branch who, for example, had been promoted or had achieved something in their work they were particularly proud to share. It also provided an opportunity to share personal news, such as a birth or wedding. What is relevant here, is that the newsletter also provided an outlet through which to share information about the General Council, one of the main governance processes of employee-ownership, including the names and contact details of its representatives.

The final mechanism was a traffic light system. This was a visual, succinct and simplistic mechanism used within each branch to express the voice of the Chief Executive Officer. The system was used to indicate the performance of the branch as well as providing information on the number of care hours per week, social care employee capacity and service quality. Red signalled that a branch was under-performing, amber signalled no change and green signalled improvements to performance.

During interviews, the Chief Executive Officer was enthusiastic about the system regarding it as a key way to share what he regarded as important information with social care employees. This information would aid their understanding of, and involvement with, the business aspects

of the company. In his view, it was through this system that employees would become knowledgeable of the business side of Vivo-Co and would be enthused to take responsibility for it. However, during the six month observation period, the evidence suggested the ambitions of the Chief Executive Officer were not being realised.

In one branch, the board displaying the traffic lights was on a wall directly behind the reception desk in the office used by the social care employees. In other words, it was very visible when entering the reception area, but, the information on the board was never updated nor were employees seen to look at the system, make any comment about it, or ask any questions about it. As such, in this particular branch the system was not effective in achieving the results desired by the Chief Executive Officer.

The next set of findings address the research questions presented in chapter one and follow the format of the CMO configuration discussed in chapter four. As such, the section begins by considering the context in which employee-ownership emerged in Vivo-Co.

#### **6.4 The context of employee-ownership**

The first research question in chapter one asked: what contextual factors influenced the choice of mechanism in the studied case? To address the question, this section presents the findings of the context in which employee-ownership emerged in Vivo-Co.

There were myriad challenges regarding the external environment that placed pressure on Vivo-Co, which affected the choice of mechanism. Of these, the key challenge was reduced funding from the local authority. This was addressed internally by, firstly adopting a ‘growth strategy’ and secondly addressing the ‘recruitment and retention problem’. Combined, these factors led to the ‘solution’; employee-ownership.

##### **6.4.1 Reducing funds**

One of the most pervasive challenges faced by Vivo-Co was continuously reducing funding from national government awarded to local authorities. This meant, according to its Chief Executive Officer, that he was constantly having to reassess the way social care services were provided and seek ways to reduce costs. The biggest single cost to Vivo-Co, he said, was staffing: social care employees. To combat these pressures, he argued:

‘The company has to become more efficient and agile’.

He used both of these terms frequently in a variety of settings. Reflecting these needs, at a Managers' Forum meeting, he outlined the challenges facing Vivo-Co, an example of one of these is provided below.

'We now have to pay the living wage...this is making it harder to make a profit...our profit margins are tight'.

He went on to explain that the situation was exacerbated by the fact that:

'The labour market has shifted and there is less unemployment...there are more people looking for work in the retail rather than the care sector. Less unemployment means a smaller pool of people for us to attract into social care'.

To address the challenges he argued:

'We need to work harder at aligning individual behaviour with the business goals'.

He informed the meeting of several ways of achieving greater efficiency, agility and behaviour alignment with the goals of the business. Providing evidence are examples such as planned changes to the way training was being delivered to social care employees and the planned changes to the organisation's communications systems discussed earlier (Organisational Communications). These were important changes bringing consequences for social care employees and therefore the impact on employee voice. As such, both of these issues are discussed below (see Outcomes of Employee-ownership). There were also examples of market-oriented practices adopted in Vivo-Co.

#### ***6.4.2 A strategy of growth***

To combat reduced local authority funding, the Chief Executive Officer referred to having a 'growth strategy'. The purpose of the strategy was to achieve economies of scale by increasing the volume of contracts. In so doing, the company would become more efficient, agile, and behaviour would be aligned with the goals of the business.

Achieving economies of scale was one way of increasing the efficiency of Vivo-Co according to the Chief Executive Officer. As noted above (Organisational Profile: Vivo-Co), the company is a prime provider, though unlike other prime providers it did not sub-contract the work, rather it was delivered by Vivo-Co. This achieved economies of scale by increasing the volume of contracts.

The importance of increasing the volume of contracts is reflected in a presentation given at a social care sector event by the Chief Executive Officer (Source H). He stated that one of the ways that value is created in the business is through:

‘...the volume of the services we provide. The more hours we deliver, the more profitable the business becomes, which allows us to provide better terms and conditions [of employment] and a higher quality service’.

This emphasis by the Chief Executive Officer to become more efficient through achieving economies of scale by increasing the volume of contracts helps to highlight the challenging environment in which Vivo-Co was operating. This led to internal changes by way of responding to these challenges. Further evidence of this was expressed by one of the non-executive directors, who is also the chair of the General Council. He explained:

‘Vivo-Co is competing with other [social care organisations], some of them have the advantage of having access to loan finance and they could win a contract through ‘loss-leading’.

Asked what loss-leading practices were, he stated:

‘In the social care sector, loss-leading involves an organisation lowering its costs of care delivery compared to the costs of its competitors. The purpose of doing this is to secure a contract from the local authority in the short-term, but then by increasing the number of contracts it has, it achieves sustainability in the longer term.’

Other practices were also in evidence. The Chief Executive Officer was particularly anxious of being taken-over by a competitor. He referred to this as:

‘A hostile take-over’.

His anxiety about a hostile take-over was observed to manifest in two ways. The first was through his concerns regarding commercial confidentiality. This concern is important as it was to directly affect the General Council, the main employee-ownership process enabling employee voice. What it meant in practice was that the operating board of Vivo-Co had representation on the General Council whilst there was no representation from the General Council on the operating board. This was to have a fundamental impact on employee voice. As such, this issue will be discussed in more detail below (Outcomes of Employee-ownership). The second manifestation of anxiety concerned the assets of Vivo-Co.

Social care organisations with significant assets can be vulnerable to hostile take-overs (Care Quality Commission 2014). Vivo-Co was not vulnerable regarding capital assets as its offices were rented. However, there were other ‘assets’ that were of potential value to competitors and therefore a cause for concern to the Chief Executive Officer. These were, firstly, Vivo-Co’s contracts for social care delivery from the local authority and, secondly, the social care employees.

To combat competition for contracts, the solution was to increase the volume of contracts achieved through a growth strategy of securing more and more branches. In so doing, Vivo-Co would be in a stronger position to avoid a hostile take-over according to the Chief Executive Officer, the specific term he used in this regard was ‘strength in numbers’. His rationale was that individual branches were vulnerable to practices such as take-overs and loss-leading. However, if the company was operating as a whole, it was in a much stronger position. Combatting the potential of losing social care employees to competitors was a bigger challenge the Chief Executive Officer argued and highlighted what he referred to as the internal challenge of the ‘recruitment and retention problem’.

#### ***6.4.3 The ‘recruitment and retention problem’***

Within Vivo-Co, the Chief Executive Officer was heavily focused on what he regarded as the ‘recruitment and retention problem’. It was, he stated,

‘The greatest challenge in Vivo-Co’.

This is illustrated further by the following example. At a Managers’ Forum meeting attended by branch managers and managers (Source I), the Chief Executive Officer asked everyone what kept them awake at night. Having listened to their replies he went on to share with them:

‘Recruitment. That’s what keeps me awake at night’.

The reason that recruitment and retention of social care employees was of so much importance to him was because it incurred a cost. He explained that this cost was exacerbated by high staff turnover through, for example, managers’ time having to re-recruit, managers having to deliver care services themselves and utilising agency workers. In contrast, he stated, high staff retention can help to create a competitive advantage for a social care organisation.

The way a competitive advantage is achieved in a social care organisation, the Chief Executive Officer explained, was through being able to ensure the continuity of care delivery.



Such continuity led to a better quality of care for service users. To deal with the retention problem, he argued, Vivo-Co, needed to:

‘Fix the recruitment problem’.

Several methods of recruitment were being used in Vivo-Co. Reflecting those discussed in chapter five, these included word-of-mouth, advertising in the local press, company website, working with local agencies such as Jobcentre Plus and further education colleges and offering financial incentives to social care employees who were able to attract someone to the company. However, given what he felt to be the gravity of the problem, the Chief Executive Officer identified three ways to deal with fixing the recruitment problem. The first was through implementing new recruitment procedures.

The new procedures would involve an across-company, centralised, single process for recruitment including a single access point (rather than via individual branches), generic paperwork, shared recruitment tracker, data and metrics and key indicators and performance measures. In other words, whereas previously multiple systems had been used, the new system provided a way of standardising procedures with the intention of being more efficient and cost-effective.

The second way of fixing the recruitment problem, according to the Chief Executive Officer, was through creating a new post of Director of Engagement. One aspect of the new role was the recruitment of social care employees, a role which had previously been carried out by each of the six branch managers and one other person from their branch – Vivo-Co did not have a dedicated Human Resource Management department which meant several employees were involved in the process. At a meeting of branch managers, where recruitment was discussed, the Director of Engagement stated that the aim of the new process was:

‘To get a better quality of people as [social care employees]. Recruiters have to be in a position to act really quickly otherwise we’ll lose the ‘hot’ ones [i.e. social care employees] to our competitors’.

Importantly, though the branch managers said they welcomed the new centralised recruitment system and the offer of support to recruit social care employees, they stated they wanted to retain some involvement in the process. They expressed concern that the new system could deter some people from applying as it was less personal than the current arrangement. Their preferred arrangement relied heavily on the existing networks of employees. They were

concerned the new system might lose some of what they referred to as the 'localness' of the current system, in other words, existing social care employees making their own recommendations from amongst friends and family.

Though acknowledging these concerns, the Chief Executive Officer stated that it was important that the company became more:

'Lean and efficient in its recruitment processes'.

He further commented:

'We have got to work flatter, we can't keep going up and down the hierarchy before decisions can be made; we have to be agile; we're not the NHS [National Health Service]; we can't lose our edge'.

As such, and despite branch managers' concerns about the new processes, the efficiency argument invoked by the Chief Executive Officer, and supported by the Director of Engagement, took priority. In so doing, the voice of the branch managers, not to mention their experience and knowledge of recruitment processes commonly used in the social care sector, was suppressed. A further issue is that social care employees were not asked about a solution to this problem despite it being them who were the focus of the new system.

The third way of addressing the recruitment problem in Vivo-Co, according to the Chief Executive Officer, was through employee-ownership. That it was his decision to choose this particular mechanism is important as it would shape and influence the way employee-ownership evolved in Vivo-Co. That it was his decision was conferred through his position as Chief Executive Officer. Whilst his position did not preclude seeking the views of others regarding the mechanism, these were not sought. His choice was underpinned by his own motivation and rationale regarding employee-ownership.

His motivation was driven by what he saw as the problem of needing to increase company efficiency and reduce its costs and one of the biggest costs to Vivo-Co was the recruitment of social care employees and their retention. Whilst Vivo-Co was growing in size through increasing its number of branches, it was struggling to retain social care employees: the more Vivo-Co grew in size the bigger the issue of retention became. Solving the recruitment and retention problem in Vivo-Co through employee-ownership would, the Chief Executive Officer argued, alleviate some of the financial challenges and contribute towards a more

successful business. As such, the motivation in Vivo-Co for employee-ownership was framed by him as a way of addressing the ‘problem’ of staff retention.

His rationale for choosing employee-ownership was based on an assumption that ownership, and the associated financial benefits, would attract people to the company. Attracted by the financial benefits, those people would be less likely to leave given they would own the company. Financial benefits yielded through ownership was, he thought, the incentive to attract potential recruits. Moreover, employee-ownership would help address the efficiency objective. The CEO stated:

‘Employee-ownership is about improving performance’.

Performance would be improved, he believed, through social care employees being more committed to the organisation and therefore they would be more likely, he argued, to:

‘Go the extra mile’.

This statement made by the Chief Executive Officer was reflected in the company values discussed earlier (Organisational Values). In other words, employee-ownership was being implemented to address a financial problem in the company; it was not being implemented because of any perceived benefits to the employees such as providing them with a voice in the organisation. His assumption was that the employee-ownership model would help to:

- a) Solve the problem of staff retention, by
- b) Financially incentivising potential recruits, which would
- c) Develop in those new recruits a sense of ownership, and would
- d) Lead to greater employee commitment and involvement.

Combined, these four points provided the foundation for implementing employee-ownership from the perspective of the Chief Executive Officer. His purpose for employee-ownership was to ‘fix’ the recruitment problem and lead to greater staff retention. It would garner social care employees’ commitment through the process of financially incentivising them. They would become owners of the business helping to create a more efficient and agile business. Through ownership, social care employees would take on more responsibility and be more committed to Vivo-Co, they were implored by the Chief Executive Officer to:

‘Think like owners and act like owners’.

Furthermore, when social care employees began to think and act like owners, according to the Chief Executive Officer, they would have an incentive to ‘go the extra mile’. The key person then driving the choice of mechanism, employee-ownership, was the Chief Executive Officer, a situation which in turn influenced the way it evolved.

## **6.5 The mechanism of employee-ownership**

The second research question in chapter one asked: how did the mechanism differ to those in conventional businesses? The conventional voice mechanisms used in Vivo-Co have been described above. The findings of those yielded through employee-ownership in Vivo-Co are presented in this section, all of which differ from those of conventional businesses in relation to employee voice.

### ***6.5.1 The type of employee-ownership***

Once he had decided on the mechanism, the Chief Executive Officer worked with some of the operating board and with a legal advisor to decide on the type of employee-ownership that would be adopted by Vivo-Co. Those from the operating board became the ‘founder members’, the first members of the employee-ownership governance mechanism. The decision was for a model of employee-ownership which would apply across all six branches and the Group Office and so would be entirely owned by the Vivo-Co workforce via an Employee Benefit Trust<sup>6</sup>.

Through this Trust, employee-ownership in Vivo-Co is involuntary and indirect; individuals are automatically entered into an Employee Share Ownership Plan once they have served a six month probationary period (Source J). In practice, this means that employee-owners in Vivo-Co receive shares without any direct cost or risk on their part unlike, for example, direct ownership where individual employees purchase shares. This type of employee-ownership also yields particular governance processes. These processes are significant as they provide the means of enabling employee voice. There were three processes in Vivo-Co which are described below: governing document, Annual General Meeting and a governing body.

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<sup>6</sup> As it operated in Vivo-Co, the Employee Benefit Trust involved the company taking out a loan to finance the distribution of shares to employees. The Employee Benefit Trust uses its share of the company profits to pay off the loan before then giving shares to employees.

#### a. Governing document

The first process is a governing document – the Articles of Association (Source K). All UK limited companies are required by company legislation to have a governing document<sup>7</sup>; more simplistically referred to as ‘Articles’. As with conventional companies, the Articles in Vivo-Co provide the infrastructure for the company. However, in contrast to conventional companies, the ‘infrastructure’ in Vivo-Co was employee-ownership. As such, there were two aspects to the design of the Articles. The first is setting the technicalities, parameters, rules and regulations of Vivo-Co as an employee-owned company. The second is setting the powers and procedures of the governing body, referred to as a ‘General Council’ in Vivo-Co.

The Articles in Vivo-Co were designed by the legal advisor, who is an expert in employee-ownership, and were then agreed by the founder members and some of the senior executives, including the Chief Executive Officer, and then lodged with Companies House<sup>8</sup>. However, once lodged, this does not mean the Articles cannot be changed. An opportunity to amend the Articles was presented at the first meeting of the General Council. This provided an opportunity for ‘employee representatives’, those representing social care employees, to express their voice on behalf of the social care employees. This is discussed in more detail below (Outcomes of Employee-ownership).

#### b. Annual General Meeting

The second governance process is an Annual General Meeting. As with a governing document, an Annual General Meeting is a mandatory requirement of all incorporated companies<sup>9</sup>, in other words it includes those which are Employee Share Ownership Plans as well as conventional companies. As the name implies, meetings are held annually, and importantly, they are held with members. It is here that there is a difference between conventional businesses and those that are employee-owned such as Vivo-Co.

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<sup>7</sup> Source: <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/companies-house>.

<sup>8</sup> Source: [www.gov.uk/guidance/model-articles-of-association-for-limited-companies](http://www.gov.uk/guidance/model-articles-of-association-for-limited-companies)

<sup>9</sup> Companies House is a national government body responsible for incorporating and dissolving limited companies.

Typically, members of a conventional company are shareholders. In contrast, the members in Vivo-Co are the employee-owners; the largest group of which are social care employees. Members are invited to attend and vote on particular matters concerning the organisation at Annual General Meetings. By Vivo-Co holding an Annual General Meeting, an opportunity is provided for the direct involvement of employee-owners, i.e. predominantly social care employees. Further, this would give them the opportunity to come together in one place as well as the opportunity to express their voice. Again, this is discussed in more detail below (Outcomes of Employee-ownership).

c. Governing body

The third process is a governing body. As noted earlier, this was referred to in Vivo-Co as a 'General Council'. The General Council was the body through which the Articles were enacted. Of the three governance processes, it offered a more frequent process of enabling employee voice.

Meetings of the General Council were held quarterly, lasted one full day and were rotated between the different branches. Most of the meetings followed prescribed agenda items set by the Chief Executive Officer and chair of the General Council. This included items such as apologies for absence, minutes from the previous meeting and a report by the Chief Executive Officer. These meetings were important as a means of enabling indirect employee voice. Significantly, this was through representatives who attended meetings and acted on behalf of employee-owners. Given the significance of the role of representatives, a more detailed explanation of the process of electing them to the General Council and an explanation of the specific role of the 'employee representatives', those representing the voice of social care employees, is presented below.

### ***6.5.2 Electing the General Council***

The process of electing the constituents of the General Council was prescribed by the Articles. The Articles stated the categories of constituents and the number of representatives within each constituency. The same process was used to elect representatives to each of these constituencies. Table 6.1 below illustrates the General Council constituents, the maximum number per constituency and the actual number at the time of the fieldwork.

<b>Constituent</b>	<b>Maximum</b>	<b>Actual</b>	<b>Gender</b>
Managers	1	0	No representative
Group office	1	1	Female
Non-executive directors	5	2	1 male; 1 female
Employees	8	5	3 male; 2 female

**Table 6.1 Demographics of the General Council**

As highlighted in table 6.1, the Articles provided for one manager representative, one Group Office representative and a maximum of five non-executive director representatives. During the fieldwork, no manager was appointed to this role given that, according to the Chief Executive Officer:

‘They can’t make up their minds who it should be’.

However, it emerged from discussions at General Council meetings that a suitable system was not yet in place to elect a manager representative. By the fifth meeting, a system was agreed and subsequently a manager representative was appointed. Though not directly involved with meetings of the General Council, the managers did discuss the General Council and the broader subject of employee-ownership at the Managers’ Forum meetings. In addition, managers had direct contact in each branch with an employee representative.

There was one Group office representative who, as suggested by their title, represented all of the Group office staff, approximately 20 people. This category also included the Chief Executive Officer who was always present at meetings in his role as an officer of the organisation and therefore not as an elected representative.

There were two non-executive directors on the General Council. Both were regarded as experts in employee-ownership by the Chief Executive Officer. One of the non-executive directors was also the chair of the General Council; he was recommended by the Chief Executive Officer.

With regard to the last category, employee representatives, all Vivo-Co supervisors, coordinators and social care employees fell into this category and therefore were eligible for election within it. To elect employee representatives, each of the six branches elected one person from within the branch; the two remaining places were kept for a time when Vivo-Co increased its number of branches. The person with the most nominations became a constituent of the General Council.

This ability to elect employee representatives is an important expression of employee voice. To illustrate its significance, an alternative process would be for senior executives to select the employee representative. In this scenario, it is the voice of senior executives, not employees, that is heard. By contrast, through electing a representative, all social care employees in Vivo-Co had an opportunity to express their voice in the process. Of equal importance, each social care employee had the opportunity of becoming a representative.

Of the elected employee representatives, there were originally six, three men and three women, though this total was subsequently reduced to five; one female left the organisation after the first General Council meeting and was not replaced. Four of the five had been social care employees but were now holding supervisory roles whilst the fifth was a social care employee. The four who held supervisory roles were not additionally remunerated for their role on the General Council as it was regarded integral to their salaried post. The representative who was a social care employee was not a salaried employee and was on a zero hour contract. As such, she was remunerated for her role on the General Council.

The role of the employee representative provided an important democratic voice mechanism given that they had the task of representing the majority of employee-owners, social care employees. Social care employees were the primary group in Vivo-Co that employee-ownership was targeted at. They constituted the largest single group. The significance of the role of employee representative is therefore crucial in providing a voice to the 800 social care employees as employee-owners.

### ***6.5.3 The role of employee representatives***

The employee representatives were fundamental to employee voice in Vivo-Co. The role gave life to employee-ownership and in so doing meant employee voice would become a reality. By way of introducing them, table 6.2 overleaf provides a brief summary of each. To protect their identity whilst retaining their personality, each has been given a pseudonym.



<b>Representative</b>	<b>Profile</b>
Susan	Susan is female and in her 50s. Before joining Vivo-Co she worked outside of the care sector. She came to Vivo-Co via the job centre and has been there for about three years. She began as a social care employee, progressed to a supervisor then to a senior supervisor. She still provides social care on an ad hoc basis.
Kevin	Kevin is male and in his 30s. Before joining Vivo-Co he worked outside of the social care sector. However, he wanted a better work-life balance and a friend suggested working in the social care sector. He has been at Vivo-Co for ten years. He began as a social care employee, progressed to supervisor and then manager. He still provides social care.
Peter	Peter is male and in his 60s. He has substantial previous experience in the social care sector. He came to Vivo-Co as a career progression from a different social care organisation. He has been at Vivo-Co about seven years and has always been at supervisory level in the organisation. He no longer provides social care.
Joanne	Joanne is female and in her 50s. She has substantial previous experience in the social care sector. She came to Vivo-Co via a friend's recommendation. She has been at Vivo-Co for several years. She had held the role of social care employee, then progressed to supervisor and then, on her request, reverted to back to a social care employee.
Tom	Tom is male and in his 20s. He came to Vivo-Co after leaving school via a family contact. He began as a social care employee and then progressed to supervisor. He no longer provides social care.

**Table 6.2 Summary of each employee representative**

The purpose of the role of employee representative, from the perspective of the employee representatives, was to be the voice of social care employees; to ensure the voices of social care employees were heard. This point was made by all of the employee representatives, the following provide examples:

‘The most important thing for us is having a seat at the table [that will enable us] to be the voice of the [social care employees]; get the carers’ voice heard; we are the go-between for the [social care employees]’ (Kevin).

‘I *want* to get my staff’s voice through, I *want* the staff to understand their voice can be heard; I *want* them to understand they can be involved; I *want* them to take ownership’ (Susan’s emphasis).

‘I think my role on the General Council is to facilitate the views of the [social care employees]; take ideas and suggestions to [the General Council]; I think as a rep you have to stand your ground on issues you think are important to the [social care employees]’ (Tom).

A clear sense of responsibility is expressed in all of the statements above. The representatives felt it was their responsibility in the role to represent social care employees. The quote from Susan highlights this point; she saw it as her role to invigorate and energise social care employees and she wanted them to ‘want’ employee-ownership. The employee representatives also noted the opportunity their role gave them to work with one another. The main opportunity they had to do so was through the General Council meetings.

The contact between employee representatives at General Council meetings was regarded by the representatives as a distinct advantage of the employee-ownership model. They stated it provided a valuable opportunity to discuss ideas and ambitions for their branch as well as sharing innovations they were currently involved with.

Kevin spoke about holding a sports event to encourage social care employees to come together whilst Joanne was hosting a charitable event. Susan discussed wanting to take this contact further by organising visits to one another’s branches. She felt that it would provide an opportunity to find out the ways in which each branch were communicating with social care employees about the General Council.

In support of Susan’s idea, Tom suggested establishing an internal system which would enable all representatives to communicate with one another outside of General Council meetings. Again, this would provide a means of learning about employee-ownership as it was being implemented in each branch and it was used by social care employees. Tom noted:

‘We are one team working towards something that’s important and fulfilling’.

The role of employee representative was, importantly, to provide a way of transmitting the voice of social care employees. It was also regarded as a way of enabling the representatives to provide support to social care employees. All of the employee representatives recognised the dedication and commitment that was needed for, what they consistently referred to as, the:

‘Profession of care provision’.

Whilst most were no longer involved day-to-day in providing social care, they all became animated and effusive when talking about it. They were determined to do everything they could to support their social care colleagues in their work. Indeed, given they all had experience of being a social care employee, they were aware of the challenges of the role which they made frequent references to during interviews.

Each interview with the employee representatives began by asking questions about their employment background and finding out how they came to work at Vivo-Co. All of the representatives had taken a different route to working at Vivo-Co and whilst some had previous experience of working in the care sector others had not. One representative, Joanne, began as a social care employee and was then promoted to a supervisory role.

After only a few months in her new role as a supervisor, Joanne requested that she return to providing social care. A factor in making this decision was that she found the role of supervisor to be too stressful. However, she also stated that she preferred the role of social care employee because of the contact it gave her with service users. The importance of this connection with service users was expressed by all of the employee representatives.

Like Joanne, most of the employee representatives had begun as a social care employee and had progressed to supervisory level. Each of them was quite clearly proud of their continuing or previous role as a social care employee. Though now holding a supervisory role, Susan still occasionally provided social care. Talking about the role of a social care employee she commented:

‘The job satisfaction I get, it’s one of those jobs that when you’re out in the field and you do even a very small thing for someone, [e.g.] just putting some sugar in their tea when they’re distressed, putting their clothes on the radiator to warm in the winter, that small thing has made a huge difference to that person’s life; so, happy service users; it’s a constant challenge but it is constantly rewarding. Everyone has to work, the difference here [Vivo-Co] is that you *want* to come to work’ (Susan’s emphasis).

Similarly, Mike stated:

‘Changing people’s lives; it’s hard to make that break away from actually caring for someone, but you have to realise that in your new role you can still make a difference, you can make changes to people’s lives just in different ways; I can make sure that I’m here to support [social care employees] to do a good job’.

The concern to make a difference is clear in both statements above and was reflected during interviews with the other employee representatives. Indeed, though most of the employee representatives were no longer involved in direct care delivery they were keen to emphasise that their current role still had an impact on the delivery of care. The following point made by Kevin reflects those made by other representatives:

‘We’re able to take some of the stress away from [social care employees] so they can just focus on their job, on the service users, so they don’t have to worry so much about day-to-day things’.

The role was therefore viewed by employee representatives as extending their ability to have an impact on the lives of service users through the support they gave to social care employees. Particularly notable was that though most of the representatives had moved on to more senior roles, they continued to provide social care and did so because they chose to rather than because they had to. Mike stated:

‘There is a culture of care here; there is a mentality; we are professionals’.

The employee representatives saw their role as crucial in enabling social care employees to focus on their work with service users. A focus on service users was also evident amongst social care employees.

At a team meeting of social care employees, they were asked to write on a post-it note the reasons they worked at Vivo-Co. Of the six who were present, all wrote that they worked at Vivo-Co because they wanted to make a difference to the service users. They expressed a love of the job and being able to make a difference to the lives of services users was fundamental in how they viewed their role. The role of employee representatives in helping to support social care employees through being their voice via the governance processes was therefore regarded by them as crucial. How far they were able to do so is considered in the next section which presents findings of the outcomes of employee voice through the governance processes of employee-ownership in Vivo-Co. The findings are organised into factors which aided and those which hampered employee voice.

## **6.6 The outcomes of employee-ownership**

The two remaining research questions which were presented in chapter one asked: how did employee voice operate through the mechanism and what were the consequences of the mechanism for key organisational actors?

This section addresses these two questions by presenting the findings of how employee voice operated through the three governance processes which were described in the section above. This was either directly by the social care employees themselves or indirectly via the employee representatives. Also, by presenting findings of the outcomes for employee voice. In so doing, some opportunities for employee voice to be expressed which were yielded through the processes are discussed whilst a number of more challenging factors are also revealed.

### ***6.6.1 Governance processes***

Employee-ownership was introduced in Vivo-Co as a way to address the recruitment and retention of social care employees. The choice of employee-ownership and the decision to implement it were both made by the Chief Executive Officer. By not involving social care employees in this decision, he set the tone for the way in which employee voice would operate in Vivo-Co. The assumptions he made about employee-ownership, i.e. it would incentivise social care employees through generating a sense of ownership which would then lead to greater employee commitment and involvement, were to influence how employee-ownership operated and its outcomes vis-a-vis employee voice.

#### **a. Employee voice: Articles of Association**

The first governance mechanism, the Articles of Association, was devised by the Chief Executive Officer, some members of the operating board and an employee-ownership expert. Social care employees played no part in this process and were not involved in the design of the Articles. However, some influence over the Articles was enabled through the mechanism of the General Council.

At the first General Council meeting the opportunity arose to amend the Articles. The request to do so had been made by one of Vivo-Co's external funders. The funder requested that the Articles were amended so that a decision to either fold the company or agree to its take-over had to be agreed by at least 75% of employee-owners. This was as opposed to the decision being made by the senior executives, which was how it currently was in the Articles. If the request was accepted, this would mean that the General Council, or the senior executive team or both could not agree to either scenario without the agreement of at least 75% of employee-owners. At the meeting, the request, and its implications, were explained to the employee representatives who were then asked to vote on whether to agree to the amendment.

The representatives voted to accept the amendment. This was a substantial decision that gave majority control to employee-owners, the social care employees. Though it had been suggested by the funder, this amendment through the process of the General Council provided the employee representatives with their first opportunity to exert their voice on behalf of social care employees on a key governance mechanism. In so doing, they were able to ensure the voice of social care employees was heard in relation to the future of the company concerning closure or take-over. This finding provides an example of employee voice being heard which was yielded through having the right to a voice.

b. Employee voice: Annual General Meeting

The second governance mechanism yielded through employee-ownership which would potentially enable social care employees to express their voice was through an Annual General Meeting. However, there was an absence of such a meeting in Vivo-Co during the research period. Two separate requests to hold such a meeting were made by Peter, an employee representative.

The first time Peter made the request it generated some discussion between the Chief Executive Officer and other senior figures at one of the General Council meetings. A decision was not made however. The second time it was made was during a General Council meeting and again by Peter. This time the Chief Executive Officer responded that a decision on an Annual General Meeting had not yet been made. He went on to say that in the meantime, individual branches could organise a smaller version of an Annual General Meeting if they wanted. How this would have worked in practice was not discussed. For example, how decisions would have been made given that the smaller meeting would have had no powers. A decision about an Annual General Meeting that would cover the whole of the organisation was not made during the fieldwork. This was an important opportunity through which social care employees could have expressed their voice that was missed.

The reason this was an important opportunity is because of items that are discussed at such meetings. For example, a key topic in Annual General Meetings of conventional companies is the allocation of profits. As noted above (The mechanism of employee-ownership: Annual General Meeting), in conventional companies, the members who attend Annual General Meetings are shareholders. It is therefore shareholders who make decisions about the allocation of profit. By contrast, in Vivo-Co, it is social care employees, in their role as

members, who would make decisions about profit allocation, for example whether it is extracted from the company or re-invested back into the company. The opportunity for social care employees to influence such decisions was through this Annual General Meeting process. Yet they were not afforded this opportunity. Nevertheless, this did not mean that they did not benefit at all.

The social care employees in Vivo-Co did benefit from better terms and conditions of employment compared to their counterparts in other social care organisations. An assessment of job advertisements across the six Vivo-Co branches revealed favourable terms and conditions (Source A). Social care employees in Vivo-Co may receive the following benefits:

- Holiday and sick pay
- Employment contracts guaranteeing a weekly minimum of 16 hours
- Training and qualifications including National Vocational Qualifications
- Profit sharing
- ‘Employee Advantage’ scheme
- Mileage allowance
- DBS checks
- Enhanced rates for Bank Holidays
- Paid training
- One free uniform.

The explanation given by the Chief Executive Officer for the differences in terms and conditions of employment compared to those of the competitors was that Vivo-Co did not have external shareholders. The absence of shareholders was noted (chapter two) to be an important difference between employee-owned enterprise compared to those social care organisations who do have shareholders, particularly, he noted when they are:

‘Extracting profit from the organisation’.

As such, social care employees did benefit from Vivo-Co being an employee-owned company through the terms and conditions of employment which were offered. There was also evidence of social care employees in Vivo-Co having high levels of satisfaction with their work and citing close relationships with service users as a reason for this (Source D, E, F and

G). However, what was absent, was their voice in the process of making the decision about profit allocation. An Annual General Meeting would have enabled them to express their voice on this issue; the absence of such a meeting was a missed opportunity. An equally relevant issue was whether social care employees were aware of this missed opportunity.

Though the social care employees were the main target of employee-ownership, there was, according to a number of those taking part in the research, a perceived lack of understanding about the mechanism. The following comments were typical:

‘There is a customised workforce who do not understand employee-ownership’ (Chair, General Council).

‘It is the carers who are making the business but they don’t understand that’ (Susan, employee representative).

This lack of understanding was exacerbated by several factors. One of these was the issue of space that was discussed in an earlier section of this chapter (Organisational Space), particularly the lack of opportunities for social care employees to come together. This meant limited opportunities for employees to discuss any topics - including employee-ownership.

A second factor related to training. During fieldwork, the company changed the way training was delivered. Training had been provided by an appropriately trained employee-owner. In one of the branches, the trained individual went on long term sick so an external consultancy was commissioned to deliver the training. This method of training however incurred a higher cost to Vivo-Co that was compounded by a fear expressed by the Chief Executive Officer that social care employees would be ‘poached’ by other social care organisations. Subsequently, Vivo-Co changed its method of training delivery from face-to-face group training to an on-line website training provider. This was an important change for Vivo-Co and for its social care employees.

For Vivo-Co this change in the way training was provided reduced its costs. It also made redundant one of the conditions of employment in the list above; that social care employees are paid for training. For them, it meant they were no longer required to attend the office to receive training. Rather, they could access the virtual training provider from a location of their choice and at a time that was convenient to them. However, it is also important to note that this meant another opportunity for social care employees to meet was lost. Given the isolating nature of social care work described in chapter five, coming into the office for training



provided a rare and valuable opportunity for social care employees to meet and interact with their colleagues, and perhaps discuss employee-ownership.

A third factor contributing to the lack of understanding of employee-ownership by social care employees were the communication systems in Vivo-Co, again these were discussed earlier in this chapter (Organisational Communications). It was noted by several General Council members and members of the senior executive team that the flow of communications into and out of the General Council was poor. For example, the chair of the General Council stated:

‘There’s a communication malfunction from the General Council to the rest of the organisation; we’re not getting a two-way conversation; there’s only downwards communications’.

The chair did acknowledge that communication needed to be two-way and that at that time, it was not happening. Rather than a lack of understanding or a lack of effective communications, a different, and more disturbing interpretation is offered by the Director of Quality and Compliance. He stated:

‘They [social care employees] aren’t interested in ownership, they just don’t care, it’s mainly to do with apathy and they have busy lives’.

Furthermore, he suggested, the organisation was dealing with what he referred to as:

‘A ‘tough’ audience’.

The tough audience, in his view, were the social care employees. He went on to explain this comment by stating that Vivo-Co had a policy to employ people who have been unemployed for a long time and from within the local community, many of whom, he stated,

‘Would not be employable by other organisations’.

One reason he gave for this was:

‘For example, they’ve not got previous experience of providing social care’.

However, implicit in the comment and its explanation was that some social care employees did not have the intellectual capacity to understand, nor were they interested in, employee-ownership. A further explanation for the lack of interest, he explained, was

‘It’s also because of the fragmented nature of care work that makes it difficult for [social care employees] to come together’.

Certainly the physical aspects described above of one of branches bore this point out vis-à-vis there not being a communal space dedicated to social care employees. This was also borne out by a number of other research participants. Peter, one of the employee representatives stated:

‘They have no workplace’.

Nevertheless, there were no plans to address this issue by creating spaces where social care employees were able to meet together, or, for that matter, allowing them into the communal spaces behind the locked doors. Indeed, opportunities to meet together were being withdrawn, such as the changes to the delivery of social care training. The Chief Executive Officer commented that engaging social care employees was:

‘A work in progress’.

This suggested that involving social care employees in employee-ownership was a long-term project rather than something that could be achieved quickly. A related issue was that this lack of understanding and poor communication systems regarding employee-ownership created unrealistic expectations amongst those social care employees who did show some interest. This view was put forward by the Director of Quality and Compliance.

He suggested that the employee-ownership processes had not been thought through before the General Council had been established. This lack of prescription was something he regarded negatively. He expressed concern that unless processes were carefully developed there was a risk that expectations would be raised amongst social care employees regarding what the General Council was able to achieve. If it was unable to deliver on these expectations then they would feel let down and betrayed which would lead to a lack of trust in the body. This issue of raising expectations was also commented upon by two of the employee representatives who noted:

‘Expectations are raised; people expect they will get a bonus but don’t understand the process of a bonus being achieved, they just think it’s automatic; they don’t understand their role in affecting the bonus; it needs to be communicated better; it is the carers who are making the business but they don’t understand that, they don’t understand how they are making the business or how the bonus is made’ (Peter).

‘Things move slowly; you enthuse the [social care employees] then they get frustrated when things happen slowly’ (Susan).

From the comments above, it is clear that for some, it was perceived that the social care employees lacked knowledge and understanding of employee-ownership. Importantly, this lack of knowledge was often presented as a failure on the part of social care employees rather than a problem of Vivo-Co. Furthermore, factors such as an Annual General Meeting would have provided an opportunity not only for social care employees to come together but also an opportunity for them to learn more about employee-ownership. As with the finding above, this finding provides an example of how the governance processes of employee-ownership enabled employee voice to be expressed. However, unlike the previous findings, this time it was closed down.

c. Employee voice: General Council

The third governance process that held the potential of enabling employee voice was the General Council. This would be achieved through employee representatives representing social care employees at General Council meetings. It is with this process that the role of employee representatives was fundamental. Given its greater frequency, more findings are provided compared to those of the other processes. There are eight examples and of those the first two provide evidence of representatives being able to express their voice and exert some influence via the General Council. The remaining six relate to evidence of representatives having their voice either closed down or not heard, again via the General Council.

1. The weekly payment system

The first example where an employee representative was able to express their voice and exert influence was through a discussion at one of the General Council meetings regarding the terms and conditions of employment for social care employees. Despite this being a topic several of the senior executives had stated on several occasions could not be discussed, the Director of Finance stated there would be changes made to one of the branches regarding the payment system. All of the staff at all of the branches were paid monthly except for this branch where social care employees were paid weekly. The rationale given was that it would standardise the payment system across the company.

Kevin, the representative of the branch affected, was assertive in challenging this proposal. He explained that it would be impossible for social care employees to survive from one month to the next given the low wages and insecure nature of the work. Despite objections from the Director, the meeting eventually agreed that social care employees at the branch would

remain on weekly pay. This finding provides an example of how the governance process of the General Council enabled employee voice to be expressed.

## 2. What's in a name?

The next example of employee representatives having their voice heard relates to something that was considered by the Chief Executive Officer to be a straightforward matter, though this ultimately proved not to be the case. It concerned whose names should go on the company's legal documents. Ultimately, the decision was taken by the General Council to include the names of employee representatives on the document but the process of reaching the decision highlights how the mechanism of the General Council afforded employee representatives the opportunity to speak up, share their views and contribute to a decision.

At the fourth General Council meeting there was a discussion of whose names should appear on the Trust Deed document. For this part of the meeting, the legal advisor, who is also a non-executive director, was taking part in the discussion by telephone. The Chief Executive Officer was suggesting that he, the chair of the General Council and two non-executive directors should act as signatories; the two non-executive directors would be the legal advisor and the chair of the operating board.

The chair of the General Council disagreed with this suggestion. He suggested that anyone reading the document would see three names of people who were external to the organisation. He argued:

‘This will not look good, particularly to [social care employees]; it'd look better if at least one or two of the signatories were employee representatives’.

An intense discussion followed between the Chief Executive Officer and the chair with the external legal advisor contributing every once in a while. During this part of the discussion there was no input from the representatives. The Chief Executive Officer responded by justifying his argument through stating:

‘There's no status to the role; there's no remuneration; it's just a technicality’.

Given a lack of response to this statement from others in the meeting, the Chief Executive Officer then went on to provide further justification for his choice of signatories. He stated that there was the potential of reputational damage if an employee representative, who was also a signatory, was facing disciplinary procedures. Such a scenario, he stated:

‘Would make it awkward for the business’.

He continued his argument by suggesting that an employee representative might leave the organisation or might not be contactable to sign paperwork because they were not office based. At this point Susan, an employee representative, offered to be a signatory.

Following the Chief Executive Officer’s line of argument, i.e. that a signatory needed to be someone who was contactable, she made her offer given her role was office based meaning she would be available to sign documents. This was followed by an offer to be a signatory from another employee representative, Kevin.

As with Susan, Kevin followed a line of argument used by the Chief Executive Officer, justifying his offer in terms of having been with the company for ten years, which he noted, was in contrast to the transient employment of some of the social care employees. In response, the Chief Executive Officer disregarded both offers, he stated:

‘My view is with the long term future of the business.’

In so doing, the offers by the two representatives are not acknowledged. What the Chief Executive Officer is doing in the above statement is reaffirming his initial justification. Furthermore, his comment suggests that the view of the others was not for the long term good of the business. In response, the chair replied:

‘My view is more principle-oriented’.

The suggestion by the chair is that the view of the Chief Executive Officer is not based on principles. Perhaps more disparagingly, particularly given the presence of the employee representatives, the Chief Executive Officer then went on to ask:

‘What if an employee representative is a signatory and they have stolen some money from a client?’

This response suggests a distrust of social care employees and is in contrast to the presumed trustworthiness of the signatories suggested by the Chief Executive Officer: one of whom is himself, another the chair of the General Council, another an external lawyer and the fourth, the chair of the operating board and a business owner, all of whom are white middle-class

men. This view was a direct challenge to the one put forward by the chair and the employee representatives that social care employees are trustworthy.

Nevertheless, as a result of this discussion, and despite the efforts of the Chief Executive Officer to block employee representatives acting as signatories, Susan and Kevin did become signatories. This provides an example of how representatives were able not only to express their voice but also to challenge the views of others; the General Council had provided the opportunity to do so. However, their role was often undermined by the senior executives and non-executive directors which created challenges for the representatives. The first of these challenges relates to what they were allowed to discuss at General Council meetings.

### 3. What can I talk about?

The question 'what can I talk about' was asked at meetings of the General Council several times by the employee representatives. From their perspective, the purpose of the General Council was to express the voice of social care employees. It became clear however that this was not straightforward. The issue of what could and could not be discussed by employee representatives was an issue at every General Council meeting.

At the first meeting Peter, one of the employee representatives, sought guidance about what could be discussed. Concerned about ensuring their inclusion at the meeting, Peter had consulted with social care employees within his branch about the General Council beforehand and asked them for topics that they would like to be included for discussion at the meeting.

From this communication he compiled a list of 17 items (Source L) put forward by the social care employees. He distributed the list to everyone at the meeting and suggested that, as well as responding to the items, it could also be used to set the parameters for the topics that, he stated, 'were allowed to be discussed'.

The items fell into two categories: firstly, relating to the work of a social care employee and secondly, the terms and conditions of employment. The table below shows the number of items falling into each category as well as providing some examples of items within each category.

<b>Category</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Examples</b>
Terms and conditions	9	More communication with supervisors Pay review
Work-related	8	Umbrellas with company logo Car parking passes

**Table 6.3 Topics for discussion at the General Council**

As highlighted in the table above, there was an almost even split between items relating to the terms and conditions of employment and work-related items. Importantly, it reflects the topics social care employees wanted to talk about. What it does not include are issues concerning governance nor more general comments about Vivo-Co as an organisation.

Some social care employees wanted to discuss topics relating to their terms and conditions of employment. Some social care employees wanted to discuss work-related items. As an example, there were issues at some of the branches relating to car parking, especially in the super-branches that were based in city centres. At one of these there were only three parking spaces outside the office that were usually taken up by office staff. This meant that when social care employees were visiting the office they either had to park some way away from the office or park on double yellow lines outside of the office and risk being fined. When they were rushing in between visits to service users they would often choose the latter.

Peter was keen for a response to the list in order that he could feed back. The response from the Chief Executive Officer was one of resistance:

‘Operational issues, such as terms and conditions of employment, cannot be discussed’.

The explanation given as to why terms and conditions could not be discussed was that it was not the role of the General Council to discuss such issues though why this was the case was not explained. It was clear that some of the senior executives and non-executive directors had a well-defined idea of the subjects that could and could not be discussed by employee representatives, closing down any opportunity to discuss issues of an operational nature. Yet, there was a clear aspiration by employee representatives to discuss issues of this nature that reflected the very practical and real concerns of social care employees. Furthermore, the Chief Executive Officer stated that if any social care employee did have an issue with their terms and conditions they were, or should be, clear on the protocol: they should speak with their supervisor.

Peter would have to feed this back to the social care employees and ensure they were clear on the protocol. The view of the Chief Executive Officer was that it was not the role of the General Council to discuss terms and conditions of employment, despite it being discussed at the meeting described in the earlier example (The weekly payment system). His view was that there were specific topics that were allowed to be discussed and employee representatives must comply with those topics.

This view was repeated by the Chief Executive Officer several times and in different settings. For example, at one of the General Council meetings, he stated:

‘It’s not the General Council’s role to interfere with the operational side of things. We can’t let the General Council get in the way of having an agile business’.

The implication in the statement above was that the governance side of Vivo-Co could obstruct the business side. To avert this, the Chief Executive Officer invokes the primacy and the physical prowess of the business whilst subordinating the governance arrangements. His view was echoed by others:

‘The board of directors should be given the space to run the company’ (Director of Quality and Compliance).

‘They [General Council] are not here to run the company; managers should be left to manage; they [General Council] are not here to talk about [operational] issues’ (Non-executive director).

The view that the General Council was not the place to discuss operational issues was clearly expressed. The reason given for this was that it would negatively impact on the business. The comments reveal a view that elevates the operational aspects of the business whilst subordinating the governance aspects. Though the General Council had provided the vehicle through which Peter could speak on behalf of social care employees, his voice, though heard, was closed down. In so doing, the voice of the social care employees had been suppressed.

#### 4. Little fishes like us

A second challenge to employee voice concerned the relationship between the operating board and the General Council. According to the Articles, a close relationship between the General Council and the operating board was a prerequisite. Members of the operating board (made up of the five company senior executives, including the Chief Executive Officer, and



four non-executive directors) attended General Council meetings twice a year and the Chief Executive Officer attended every meeting to represent the operating board. In other words, and an important point to note, there was always representation on the General Council from the operating board. Yet, there was never representation on the operating board from the employee representatives making it questionable whether a close relationship was possible.

Asked whether it was typical of employee-owned companies to have no representation from the General Council on an operating board, two of the non-executive directors, the same two who are considered experts in employee-ownership by the Chief Executive Officer, stated that the situation in Vivo-Co was not typical of other employee-owned companies. Most employee-owned companies, they stated, do have employee representatives on the operating board. The desire to be represented on the operating board was expressed by employee representatives a number of times.

At the first meeting of the General Council, Peter, one of the employee representatives, asked whether it was possible to have an employee representative sit on the operating board. Both the Chief Executive Officer and the chair said the issue could be discussed at the subsequent General Council meeting. As it transpired, the issue was not discussed at the subsequent or any further meetings. The issue was however discussed separately during an interview by the researcher with the Chief Executive Officer.

Asked whether employee representation on the operating board was something that could happen in the future, the Chief Executive Officer stated probably not. He explained that he had given some thought to the matter and had initially thought it was a good idea, but then he had changed his mind. He felt it could compromise the representative, then provided the following as an example of his point:

‘If they [the representative] were party to a decision that was subsequently not endorsed by the General Council it could make it awkward for them. As it is, if the operating board make a decision that is not supported by the General Council then at least none of the representatives have been party to it’.

He then went on to suggest that the operating board might be talking about disciplinary procedures that may affect that representative. Furthermore, there were issues of commercial confidentiality. Based on the potential of a disciplinary scenario or a breach of commercial confidentiality, he had decided that there would not be an employee representative on the

operating board. In contrast, it was proposed by the chair of the General Council and accepted by its representatives that of the four General Council meetings a year, two would be attended by the operating board for half of the meeting.

What this meant in practice was that, whilst the senior executives and operating board were privy to the General Council, the reverse was not the case. The operating board had access to the General Council via attending its meetings and receiving its documentation whereas the same access was not afforded to the General Council. Whilst without the intervention of the chair there would have been no contact at all, it did however mean employee representatives were not fully knowledgeable of the whole organisation which could hamper their ability to make informed decisions given they only had access to part of the information. Additionally it meant a power base was created that favoured the operating board whilst impeding the voice of social care employees via the representatives. Despite this imbalance of power and a desire to be represented on the operating board, the employee representatives expressed feeling humbled and privileged to be undertaking the role.

A sense of pride was evidenced by most of the employee representatives. It was something to be proud of and was regarded as an honour. This is captured in the following statement made by Kevin:

‘It’s a brilliant opportunity for all the reps’.

There was however also a sense of servility in the statement. This is more clearly expressed in the following statement made by Susan, another of the employee representatives:

‘I’m privileged to be part of it’.

A sense of privilege was also expressed by Kevin. He described the General Council as being made up of:

‘An elite group’.

A similarly deferential view was expressed by Tom, a third representative. He used the following words to describe the General Council:

‘Exclusive’ and ‘influential’.

He followed this description by stating:

‘It’s great for little fishes like us’.

In contrast, the ‘big fish’ was identified by the representative as the Chief Executive Officer reflecting Vivo-Co’s organisational hierarchy, illustrated in figure 6.1 above. Some employee representatives did however recognise that there was a degree of autonomy and power brought about through the role, the following statements providing examples:

‘The power to be able to direct the company; it gives you the power to achieve what you want to for your branch’ (Susan).

‘It’s an opportunity to develop and build ourselves professionally’ (Kevin).

‘It’s great for my CV, it gives you life skills and it means I have access to powerful people’ (Tom).

Nevertheless, the distinction between those with power and those without continued, as evidenced in the last comment by Tom. By powerful people, Tom was referring, again, to the Chief Executive Officer and this again reflects the hierarchical nature of the organisation. He was clear that it was unlikely such an opportunity to interact with the Chief Executive Officer would have arisen if he were not an employee representative – this despite being an employee-owner himself in the same way as the Chief Executive Officer and despite Vivo-Co having an ‘open door’ policy as described earlier (see Organisational Employee Voice Mechanisms). As such, this finding provides an example of how the governance processes of employee-ownership were hampered by the organisational hierarchy which meant employee voice was not allowed to be expressed. Another example highlights this point further.

##### 5. What are we getting?

At one of the General Council meetings, the Director of Finance posed a challenge to the employee representatives by stating:

‘Some representatives are by-passing their line managers and taking issues straight to the General Council’.

The view being expressed in this statement highlights again the tension between the hierarchical order of the organisation and the governance mechanism of employee-ownership, the former was being ignored in favour of the latter by the employee representative according to the Director. Similar tensions were experienced by employee representatives regarding their managers.

Joanne expressed a fear of challenging her managers stating that she did not have the confidence to do so. Others expressed a difficulty of challenging what they referred to as their 'superiors'. Peter commented:

'Managers will have to release the reins to the new owners'.

However, this would present a challenge to managers he suggested, given the lack of respect afforded to the role of employee representative by some of them. Tom, another representative, felt that regardless of the new governance process, management would continue to make decisions without consulting either the General Council or social care employees.

During an interview, though keen to point out the very good relationship he had with his manager, he stated he could nevertheless understand how this happened when the representative held a less senior position organisationally. He commented:

'I don't know how those reps lower down the hierarchy can get respect, especially from those higher up in the organisation than them; it's hard to ask a [social care employee] who is also a representative to ask their supervisor to do work on their behalf'.

He also noted that, given the primacy of the organisational hierarchy, a further challenge of the General Council was making sure managers worked alongside employee representatives. Similar comments were made by other employee representatives that included feeling managers and executives did not fully understand the role of representatives whilst others stated they did not feel they were being supported in their role by their managers. This point was made by Susan.

During an interview, Susan explained that when she returned from General Council meetings her managers wanted to know:

'What are we getting from your time spent at General Council meetings?'

She was keen to point out to them:

'I do come back with something'.

This included sharing information and ideas that had been discussed at the meetings, communicating key action points to social care employees and the opportunity to work with

the other representatives. Unsurprisingly, these tensions were making it difficult for her to fulfil the role of representative and were sometimes causing direct conflict between her and the manager. Comments from Peter reflect this last point:

‘Senior management impose things without asking the people it will affect whether it will work; they [senior management] seek ideas, but not our opinions and they don’t listen; the company is too hierarchical’.

These tensions were observed by the Chief Executive Officer. He noted there were issues relating to the status given by managers to employee representatives. He explained this issue by suggesting that, given the employee representatives were operating within an organisation that had a hierarchical structure, position and status tended to be privileged. The implementation of employee-ownership created challenges to position and status as he saw it. In practice, this meant that employee representatives were sometimes cautious in their role. As with other examples, this provides an example of how the hierarchical configuration of the organisation disabled employee voice through the governance process of the General Council. This was noted in a further example concerning the employee representatives and some of the non-executive directors from the operating board.

#### 6. Being disrespectful

A stilted dynamic was observed at General Council meetings between employee representatives and non-executive directors and could best be described as one of respectful distance. The operating board met twice with the General Council during the period of research. Outside of these meetings there was no mechanism whereby the two groups could communicate.

During the two meetings observed, the non-executive directors were courteous and respectful to employee representatives as was the reverse. Interactions were however always formal and seemed to follow a particular protocol. For example, preceding both meetings lunch was provided by Vivo-Co. During lunch, the non-executive directors were observed to stand and talk to one another about work-related matters. The employee representatives were also observed to talk about work-related issues. However, both groups did this amongst themselves. The representatives sat at the meeting table separately from the non-executive directors who remained standing. In other words, there was very limited interaction between the two groups. A particular issue arose in the fifth General Council meeting that highlights the stilted dynamic between the two groups.

The meeting was attended by the operating board for the second half. At the meeting, the issue of attendance by employee representatives was raised by one of the non-executive directors. Attendance was considered low with only two of the five representatives present. The non-executive director was clearly unhappy at this.

She asked whether the missing representatives had given apologies. One representative definitely had, a second definitely had not whilst it was unclear whether an electronic communication that had been sent by the third was providing apologies or not. She was particularly unhappy given the operating board were due to attend part of the meeting; regarding the low attendance as ‘disrespectful’. To combat this happening again she suggested that each branch had a second representative to attend when the main person was unavailable.

The suggestion was challenged by the Chief Executive Officer who argued that it would undermine the role of the representative as well as the time and expense that had gone into training the current representatives. The non-executive director accepted the argument he put forward though remained annoyed. In her view the employee representatives had not observed the protocol of meetings, i.e. not respecting the gravitas of the operating board and therefore making every effort to attend, not giving apologies, and by not observing the protocol they had showed a lack of respect. None of the employee representatives spoke during this discussion.

#### 7. The bigger picture

A further challenge to employee voice which was evidenced was a lack of respect for the role of employee representative by some of the senior executives and managers. Evidence of this is provided by the process of electing employee representatives, described above, and how it is questioned by the Director of Quality and Compliance. He suggested that:

‘The process of recruitment to the General Council doesn’t lend itself to securing the best people onto the General Council’.

Asked who the best people were he stated:

‘The ones with an eye on the bigger picture’.

Asked what this meant he stated:

‘The ones who understand the whole business, not just their part of it, and have the interests of the company at heart’.

He followed this last comment by reflecting on what he regarded as the unfairness of the system for ‘recruiting’ (as opposed to electing) employee representatives, compared to that for senior executives. The former had to undertake what he referred to as:

‘A rigorous recruitment process.’

This process was considered rigorous because it was carried out by other senior executives as well as by members of the operating board. In contrast, employee representatives did not undergo such processes. Such rigour, he suggested, meant:

‘The best people, those with the interests of the company at heart were employed as senior executives’.

However, the same was not true of the employee representatives, in his view. Following his logic, the employee representatives were not the best people to be on the General Council as they did not have their eye on the bigger picture. Being allowed to attend operating board meetings may have alleviated some of the Director’s concerns regarding this matter. However, in his view, nor did they have the interests of the company at heart. A more appropriate process, if this logic is followed, might have been the one given as an example described above, i.e. senior executives selecting rather than electing employee representatives. This reveals hostility from this Director towards the democratic process of electing representatives. This is evidenced further in additional comments he made.

He expressed a concern that employee representatives did not understand or appreciate the gravity of the role. According to him the role should be laid down for General Council representatives. He stated:

‘If the role is not set out, some people will just follow their own interests. Some people don’t understand the bigger picture and so shouldn’t be on the General Council because they may only be representing their own views and these may not be what are best for the company. They [employee representatives] should know what they are dealing with and the implications of any decisions they take’.

When the views of this Director are compared to those of the employee representatives there is a clear disconnection about how the role and its significance are perceived; the latter

expressing a clear understanding of the significance of the role. A similarly derogatory comment was made by the Director of Finance. At the fifth meeting of the General Council she requested to know:

‘What is the company getting out of the representatives role?’

The implication in the statement was that Vivo-Co was not gaining anything from the role. She went on to make the point that representatives are able to make a financial claim for their time spent on General Council business. In so doing, representatives were incurring a cost to the business though it was unclear what the organisation was getting in return, thus suggesting a distrust of, and a resistance to, the role of representatives. None of the employee representatives replied to the Director’s question.

#### 8. Stop acting like a shop steward

The final challenge concerned what were perceived to be similarities between the role of employee representatives and the role of trade union shop stewards which produced conflicting views within Vivo-Co.

The view was expressed by one of the founder members that although Vivo-Co ‘recognised’ them, if employee-ownership was working effectively there should be no need for trade unions. He stated:

‘It saddens me that employee owners want to join a trade union because that suggests there is something wrong’.

One of the senior executives, the Director of Quality and Compliance, in a manner that was critical of trade unions, suggested that some of the representatives were:

‘Acting like trade union shop stewards’.

This negative view of trade unions was expressed several times more by the same person during interviews where he made it clear he had little time for trade unions. Other derisory comments were made about trade unions in most of the General Council meetings.

Despite the anti-union sentiment of these views, Susan, one of the employee representatives stated at a General Council that:

‘I think my role is very similar to that of a shop steward’.



Before she was able to explain why she thought the role was similar and in what way, the Chief Executive Officer stated:

‘That is precisely *not* the role of an employee representative; anyone saying this is the role is sending out the *wrong message*’ (Chief Executive Officer’s emphasis).

The discussion then moved to the representativeness of the role. The Director of Quality and Compliance had already expressed concern about the capabilities of employee representatives in comparison to the senior executives and the rigorous recruitment processes they had to endure compared to representatives. During the General Council meeting he expressed the view that:

‘Representatives are only representing the [employees] and not all employee-owners. Employee representatives should represent all employees. Each time an issue is raised in a General Council meeting by a representative I’d like to know which representative is bringing the issue and how many people are affected by it’.

Notably, there was no counter-argument put to the senior executive by the employee representatives. Further, despite such animosity towards any kind of protection for social care employees, such as through a trade union, the same was not true of protecting the company.

Peter, one of the employee representatives, explained that if any of the social care employees had concerns about aspects of their employment these concerns would be dealt with through the organisational hierarchy. In the first instance, they would speak to their supervisor and if the issue was not resolved it would make its way up the hierarchical chain of command. Interestingly though, anything not resolved through this process, Vivo-Co commissioned to an external HRM consultancy.

The same HRM company was commissioned by Vivo-Co to ensure compliance with statutory employment requirements as well as more general advice and guidance on employment-related issues. Asked about the role of the consultancy, the Director of Quality and Compliance stated:

‘It is similar to that of an insurance company, it provides a level of protection for Vivo-Co against any matters brought by any of our employees [i.e. employee-owners] such as disciplinary or issues about terms and conditions. We have to follow the advice provided by the consultancy to the letter, if we don’t, it could invalidate any claims’.

This protection provided to Vivo-Co through the consultancy was in contrast to the protection for social care employees. Though some of the social care employees were voluntarily members of trade unions, the majority were reliant on statutory protection. As noted in chapter two, traditionally trade unions acted as a form of social insurance for employees (Mares 2001). The low numbers who were members of a trade union meant that social care employees in Vivo-Co were not benefitting from such protection. Furthermore, despite the founder member seeing it as a failure of the employee-ownership model that some social care employees wanted to join a trade union, the company itself was benefitting from external support. This example again highlights how the governance process of employee-ownership enabled employee voice to be expressed through employee representatives trying to explain their role. However, their voice was resisted by the Chief Executive Officer and other senior executives by being closed down.

The Chief Executive Officer and other senior executives and non-executive directors were resistant to the representative nature of the role of employee representative. They used the organisational hierarchy to close voice down or simply not hear it and used employee-ownership as a means to secure employee compliance. They valued voice though only in a narrowly defined way. To them, employee voice was a means to an end, the end being a more efficient business. When employee voice did not meet this definition, it was resisted by management who invoked the organisational hierarchy in order to gain employee compliance.

## **6.7 Summary**

This chapter presented the findings of the case study undertaken at Vivo-Co, an employee-owned social care organisation. The chapter began with a company profile of Vivo-Co. It then presented findings relating to particular organisational features such as some of the key organisational actors and how space is occupied. Section three presented findings in relation to the contextual factors in which employee-ownership emerged in Vivo-Co. This included reduced funding from the local authority which created problems regarding the efficiency of the organisation. The problems were addressed through a growth strategy and addressing recruitment and retention. Section four discussed the mechanism of employee-ownership which, it was assumed by the Chief Executive Officer, would increase efficiency by reducing costs, garnering commitment and encouraging employees to 'go the extra mile'. It also included the specific governance processes yielded through employee-ownership which differentiate it from conventional businesses. In Vivo-Co, these were the Articles of

Association, Annual General Meeting and the General Council. Section five discussed the findings in relation to the outcomes of employee voice through consideration of the way voice operated through the employee-ownership governance processes.

The key findings from the research provided evidence of some positive outcomes, such as more favourable terms and conditions of employment for social care employees compared to their counterparts in other social care organisations. Also, there were opportunities for employee representatives to influence decision-making processes at General Council meetings. All of which point to the differences in employee voice compared to conventional businesses. These differences were yielded through the right to a voice, its embeddedness and the sophisticated governance processes, meaning employee voice had the potential of being part of the fabric of Vivo-Co. However, the pressures on, and the dominance of, senior executives often counteracted and weakened voice suggesting it was little more than a fabrication. Management regarded employee-ownership as a tool that would achieve the objective of company efficiency. This objective was reinforced through factors such as employee compliance, the organisational hierarchy and the resistance of management. As a result, even when employee voice did reflect an efficiency objective, it often still went unheard. In so doing, the way in which voice was valued in Vivo-Co was questioned. The next chapter will provide an analysis of these findings in the context of the employee voice literature (chapter two) and the frames of reference (chapter three).

## Chapter Seven: Discussion

### 7.1 Introduction

This chapter addresses the aim of the research, to evaluate whether employee voice in an employee-owned enterprise is different to that in conventional business, through a discussion of the research findings presented in the previous chapter. The discussion compares and contrasts the findings with the employee voice literature, discussed in chapter two, and is underpinned by the frames of reference, discussed in chapter three (Fox 1966; 1974; Storey 1989; Bray et al 2015). There are seven sections within the chapter. The first two provide a reminder of the key points arising from the employee voice literature and the frames of reference whilst the remaining sections provide the evaluation.

Section three evaluates the context of employee voice through employee-ownership in Vivo-Co. The literature suggested that employee-ownership is often introduced as a financial incentive. This was evident in Vivo-Co based on assumptions by senior executives that employees are motivated by financial gain. Section four evaluates how employee-ownership affects employee voice. Through factors highlighted in the literature, such as more sophisticated voice processes, there is the potential for all voices to be heard. The evidence here is consistent with this literature inasmuch as the potential was created by the mechanism. Section five considers the outcomes of employee voice through employee-ownership. The literature suggested potential challenges to voice in an employee-owned enterprise through management concerns of compliance, hierarchy and resistance. Consistent with this literature, employee-ownership in Vivo-Co was regarded as a management tool that would achieve the objective of company efficiency. A key finding here is that, even when voice reflected this objective, it often still went unheard. Within the context of literature regarding ‘unheard voice’, section six discusses voice in Vivo-Co being counteracted and weakened. This leads to the final section which discusses the recurring themes of voice as ‘fabric’ or ‘fabrication’. The potential did exist for employee voice to be part of the organisational fabric because employee-ownership yielded the right to a voice, the embeddedness of the mechanism and its sophisticated voice processes. However, given the pervasive nature of a hard unitarist philosophy within Vivo-Co, voice was also conceived as a fabrication. The thesis concludes that employee voice is not something that will spontaneously appear through employee-ownership. Rather, employee voice is a philosophy concerning the value placed on the right to be heard. This leads to the contribution of this thesis; the difference in employee voice is created not because of a mechanism, but because of the way in which it is valued.

## **7.2 Employee voice literature: key aspects**

Chapter two argued that, by considering employee voice in a historical context, a richer and more substantive legacy is revealed (Wilkinson et al 2014). By drawing on the Employment Relations literature, the chapter highlighted the origins of employee voice which was channelled through trade unions. Trade unions were the key employee voice mechanism during much of the twentieth century and focused on the equity concerns of employees. However, a changed government during the 1980s and the introduction of HRM practices into the workplace led to a transformation of employee voice (Dundon et al 2017).

Contemporary employee voice is more likely to be channelled through an array of mechanisms via an HRM function. By drawing on the escalator metaphor developed by Marchington et al (1992), it was revealed that through HRM, employee voice mechanisms are likely to be initiated and designed by managers, reflect an efficiency objective and are regarded as low-level in terms of the influence they afford employees. This was in contrast to employee voice either in trade unions or through other non-union employee representation schemes (Gollan et al 2015) which are regarded as affording employees greater influence. Furthermore, rarely are employees' views sought in terms of voice preferences (Marchington 2007). Within the context of an HRM-defined employee voice, a recent debate amongst some Employment Relations scholars is that voices may go unheard (Gunawardana 2014; Wilkinson et al 2018).

Unheard voice can be as a result of practices such as agenda-setting by managers which design-out employee voice (Donaghey et al 2011<sup>a</sup>). In other words, managers include on agendas items they wish to discuss whilst omitting those employees want to discuss. This debate helped to highlight the point that much of what we know about contemporary employee voice is drawn from conventional businesses whilst less is known about it through alternative mechanisms through which voice may be heard. This prompted an exploration of employee voice through employee-ownership.

The exploration of employee-ownership in the UK revealed two primary forms, worker co-operatives and ESOPs. These two forms were argued to yield different levels and intensities of voice. Employee voice through worker co-operatives was regarded by Marchington et al (1992) to yield a high level of influence whereas forms such as ESOPs were positioned at the middle range of the voice continuum by Gollan et al (2015). What the discussion also

revealed was the growth in popularity of ESOPs during the 1980s. One reason for this growth was a conducive political and public policy environment (Pendleton 2001). Characteristic of this environment was a neo-liberal philosophy (Hall and Soskice 2001) that privileged the market and emphasised individualism (Legge 2005). At company level, reasons for adopting ESOPs were to promote employee involvement, assist with the recruitment and retention of staff, increase remuneration, improve productivity and prevent take-overs. A renewed interest in ESOPs more recently was attributed to factors such as the 2008 global financial crisis (Findlay et al 2017; Heery 2016; see also Boxall and Purcell 2011). The rationale being that employee-ownership provides an alternative way of organising a business compared to that of conventional businesses. This prompted further investigation of the factors that could aid employee voice through employee-ownership.

The literature highlighted factors that could aid employee voice through employee-ownership which were yielded through the governance processes of such enterprises. Employee-ownership bestows a right to a voice (Pendleton 2001), through its embeddedness within the organisation (Bernstein 1976) and which is channelled through sophisticated voice processes (Flanders et al 1968; Salaman and Storey 2016). This can lead to employee voice being considered as part of the organisational fabric. However, there were also challenges to employee voice which were identified through the mechanism of employee-ownership. These included factors such as ‘employee compliance’ (Cathcart 2014), ‘organisational hierarchy’ (Atzeni 2012) and ‘management resistance’ (McCarthy and Palcic 2012). Combined, these factors suggested employee voice in an employee-owned enterprise may be nothing more than a fabrication.

To evaluate whether employee voice in an employee-owned enterprise is different to that in conventional businesses, the frames of reference (Fox 1966; 1974; Storey 1989; Bray et al 2015) provided a theoretical framework. The frames of reference were discussed in chapter three, therefore the following section provides a reminder of some of the key characteristics of the three frames that were relevant to the findings of this study: hard and soft unitarism and collaborative pluralism.

### **7.3 The frames of reference: key aspects**

The frames of reference provide a useful tool to analyse the findings of Vivo-Co. Given the detailed discussion of the frames of reference in chapter three, this section is restricted to a reminder of the key points of the three frames as they related to employee voice in Vivo-Co:

hard and soft unitarist frames (Storey 1989) and the collaborative pluralism frame (Bray et al 2015). Table 7.1 summarises these key points of each frame.

Frame	Key features
Hard unitarism	Efficiency focused; resource-based; outcomes oriented; gaining competitive advantage; regards employees as calculative and driven by financial reward; emphasis on hierarchy and standardisation; direction and control is via a unified chain of command, close supervision and based on rewards; ‘enforced compliance’ (Bray et al 2015); employee voice has a transactional value and relates to the ‘labour problem’ of absenteeism and turnover; key voice mechanisms are incentivisation and ‘exit’ and trade unions are unnecessary.
Soft unitarism	Efficiency and process focused; assumes a commonality of interests and harmony in the workplace; regards employees as assets; information-sharing; direct consultation; task-based participation, profit-sharing and employee engagement; need for unions regarded as a failure; employee voice has an instrumental value which is to increase organisational performance and efficiency; performance is related to bottom-line results and ‘going the extra mile’ (Legge 2005).
Collaborative pluralism	Efficiency and equity focused; managers, employees and their representatives are legitimate parties to co-operative relationships with sometimes separate and sometimes shared goals; based on values of mutual respect, loyalty, trust and equity; employee voice is a moral imperative (Budd 2004) and regarded as the ‘right to be heard’ (Gollan 2013).

**Table 7.1 Key features of the frames of reference**

The frames are helpful to the analysis for three reasons. Firstly, they draw attention to the contextual environment in which Vivo-Co operates which influenced the choice of mechanism. Secondly, they draw attention to the philosophy of the key employee-ownership actors, which in turn influenced how it evolved and how it affected other organisational actors. Thirdly, they enable comparisons to be made of employee voice between the frames. For example, the Chief Executive’s concern regarding the ‘problem’ of employee recruitment and retention which is akin to hard unitarism was quite different when compared to the concern of employee representatives which was to ensure the voice of social care employees was heard which is akin to collaborative pluralism.

The intention of the forthcoming evaluation is to address the aim of this thesis; to explore whether employee voice in an employee-owned enterprise is different to that in conventional

businesses. The evaluation is organised according to the CMO configuration (Pawson and Tilley 1997) which was discussed in chapter four and was also followed in chapters five and six. It is therefore separated into three sections, each of which begins with a reminder of the research question that is being addressed within that section. As such, the first section evaluates the context in which the mechanism of employee-ownership emerged in Vivo-Co.

#### **7.4 The context of employee voice: national, sector and organisational pressures**

The first research question presented in chapter one asked what contextual factors influenced the choice of mechanism in the studied case. Context is regarded as an important factor in shaping how a phenomenon emerges and develops within an organisation (Bryman and Bell 2011; Heery 2016; Myers 2013). An evaluation of contextual factors in relation to Vivo-Co enabled insight into the national environment which influenced the manifestation of employee voice within the social care sector and in turn influenced the decision for employee-ownership in Vivo-Co.

##### ***7.4.1 The national context of employee voice***

Employee voice in the UK has tended to be shaped by the national level environment (Dobbins and Dundon 2017). The national level environment during much of the twentieth century meant that employee voice was about equity, i.e. pluralist, concerns and was channelled through the mechanism of trade unions. Trade unions provided a level of protection to employees by acting to correct or mediate the employment relationship when necessary (Benson and Brown 2010). They enabled a collective voice that was independent of management and designed to act predominantly on behalf of employees in areas such as pay negotiations and terms and conditions of employment. Voice in this context was conceived as a form of ‘social insurance’ (Mares 2001). In so doing, the concept of equity shaped an understanding of employee voice during this period (Budd 2004). However, changes in the national environment meant a ‘transformation’ of employee voice (Dundon et al 2017) skewing it towards efficiency with much less focus on equity concerns (Dobbins and Dundon 2017).

The contemporary environment as it relates to employee voice has a much greater emphasis on the unitarist concern of efficiency (Cullinane and Dundon 2014). Within this environment, key concerns of managers in conventional businesses include fears of hostile take-overs and breaches of commercial confidentiality; all of which present challenges for employee voice. In such an environment, Employment Relations scholars argue, employee voice in



conventional businesses is expressed through low-level and often weak mechanisms that reflect the preferences of employers and amount to little more than opening up lines of communication (Barry and Wilkinson 2015; Bryson et al 2004; Croucher et al 2010; Dobbins and Dundon 2011; Johnstone and Ackers 2015). Similarly, Cullinane and Dundon (2014) argue ‘...reservoirs of adversarial employer unitarism still flourish in obstructing workplace voice’ (p. 2586). These challenges to employee voice at national level are reflected at sector level, the social care sector as it relates here.

#### ***7.4.2 The social care context of employee voice***

Against the backdrop of a unitarist environment, the myriad challenges facing the social care sector were discussed in chapter five and provide an example of how the national environment of employee voice can have an impact at sector level. The marketization of social care led by the Thatcher government during the 1980s was highlighted as a specific turning point that changed the nature of social care provision. During this period, social care changed from being a ‘service’ to becoming a ‘business’ (Carey 2015). This means that in its contemporary form, the social care sector is dominated by organisations which operate privately for-profit (Hussein et al 2016) which has consequences for employee voice.

A consequence of privately run social care organisations is often poor terms and conditions of employment for the mainly female workforce whose work is fragmented, whose employers continuously seek to reduce ‘costs’ and whose access to voice is through low-level voice mechanisms (Hussein et al 2016; ONS 2014; Rubery et al 2015; Unison 2016). Again, this reflects a unitarist environment, whether via a hard version as discussed by Storey (1989) reflected in practices such as standardisation of care work (Bolton and Wibberley 2014), or, a Traditional version discussed by Cullinane and Dundon (2014) reflected in employers directing activities in relation to time, place, content and method of work. All of which mitigates against social care employees being able to express their voice, except, by taking the ‘exit’ route (Hirschman 1970).

Social care is plagued by high staff turnover (NMDS-SC 2017; UKHCA 2016). This brings costs to employees and employers alike. Yet, paradoxically, when social care employees do express their voice they consistently report a love of the job and a desire to make a difference to the lives of service users (Hebson et al 2015; Unison 2016). As such, there is a tendency for some social care employees to move between social care organisations rather than leave the

sector (Franklin 2014). The evidence from Vivo-Co corresponds to some of these national level and sector level factors whilst contradicting others.

#### ***7.4.3 The organisational context of employee voice***

Similar to the concerns expressed by managers in conventional businesses, the unitarist concern for company efficiency was expressed in Vivo-Co. Efficiency was of paramount importance. Reflecting this objective, the challenges of providing social care meant it was difficult to predict ‘peaks and troughs’ in service delivery that in turn created ‘uncertainty’ for the organisation.

Peaks in the context of social care translate as higher demand for services whilst troughs refer to a decrease in demand such as a service user being hospitalised or because they have died. This uncertainty was compounded by pressures of reduced funding from the local authority who were purchasing social care services from Vivo-Co. Given reducing funding from national government, the local authority were continuously having to reduce their own budgets as well as imposing rigid monitoring of targets and attendance rates, recording data such as when there had been a ‘no-show’. These pressures manifested in Vivo-Co as a continuous stress on efficiency by senior executives. Drawing on the frames of reference, this emphasis on efficiency manifested in ways akin to a hard unitarist frame.

Consistent with hard unitarism, senior executives were constantly seeking ways of increasing income and reducing costs. The ‘strategy of growth’ involved increasing ‘income’ (i.e. local authority funding), gaining a ‘competitive advantage’, avoiding ‘hostile take-overs’ and avoiding breaches of ‘commercial confidentiality’. This meant increasing the volume of social care through acquiring more and more branches and by Vivo-Co delivering contracts themselves rather than sub-contracting to other social care organisations. In so doing, this would reduce the risk of ‘hostile take-overs’ (Croucher et al 2010). Avoiding breaches of ‘commercial confidentiality’ was evidenced through a concern that employee representatives might breach commercial confidentiality and therefore meant they could not be trusted to have their names on the company’s governing documents nor attend meetings of the operating board. This strategy also involved reducing costs which also bore a resemblance to the hard unitarist frame.

The strategy to reduce costs was evidenced in various ways such as the ‘standardisation’ of the communication system and changes to the way in which training was delivered, from

group to web-based training. In so doing, important opportunities for social care employees to express their voice were reduced whilst also compounding the fragmented nature of social care work by reducing the already limited number of opportunities they had to come together collectively. The most profound part of the cost-reduction strategy however, was the ‘solution’ to the ‘labour problem’ of ‘staff turnover’. The solution being the choice of employee-ownership.

#### ***7.4.4 The choice of employee-ownership***

That it was a senior executive choice to implement employee-ownership corresponds with the literature regarding who chooses mechanisms in conventional businesses. In conventional businesses, it is typically managers who make the decisions about voice mechanisms (Dobbins and Dundon 2011; Gomez et al 2009; Johnstone and Ackers 2015; Wilkinson et al 2015). Similarly, Croucher et al (2010) suggests that the same is true of employee-ownership which tends to be a ‘management choice’, as it was in Vivo-Co. However, the literature, also states that the choice of mechanism is driven by a manager’s own philosophy (Budd 2004; Kochan et al 1984; Wilkinson and Fay 2011). The choice of employee-ownership as a mechanism in Vivo-Co was influenced by the senior executives, particularly the Chief Executive, and based on a hard unitarist philosophy which was as a means of incentivisation.

Based on an assumption that employees are calculative and driven by financial gain, incentivisation is a key way of motivating employees in the hard unitarist frame (Legge 2005; Le Grand and the Mutuels Taskforce 2012). In Vivo-Co, it was assumed it would encourage social care employees to stay with the organisation rather than ‘exit’ (Hirschman 1970). The philosophy of the Chief Executive Officer regarded employee-ownership as a ‘perceived pay-off’ (Wilkinson and Fay 2011) based on his assumption that it would bring tangible benefits to the business. He assumed employee-ownership would solve the hard unitarist ‘labour problem’ of staff retention by incentivising social care employees. Here, social care employees are regarded by the Chief Executive Officer as a resource who are calculative and driven by financial reward. By having a financial ‘stake’ in the company through the ownership structure, he believed, a sense of ownership would develop amongst social care employees.

#### ***7.4.5 Employee preferences for employee voice mechanisms***

The social care employees had had no say in the choice of mechanism. The autocratic philosophy of the Chief Executive Officer meant that the social care employees were never

asked for their views on the recruitment and retention problem. They had no voice in influencing the choice of mechanism despite it being them who were its main target. This is consistent with the point that few studies incorporate the views of employees in terms of voice preferences (Marchington 2007). Moreover, had they been asked, then their motivation would have been revealed.

Corresponding to previous studies (Hebson et al 2015; Unison 2016), social care employees in Vivo-Co were motivated by factors such as a love of the job and a concern to make a difference to the lives of service users. This finding is also borne out in studies of employee-owners in other sectors (e.g. Brown et al 2019). A further similarity with the literature (Hussein et al 2016; NAO 2014) was that they were not motivated by financial gain. Rather, their motivations reflected what Bolton and Wibberley (2014) referred to as an ‘ethic of care’. This revealed a disparity between the way the senior executives thought social care employees were motivated and the way they actually were.

Never did it occur to the senior executives that the motivation of social care employees would be the greater well-being of service users, or that they might not be incentivised by financial gain nor would financial gain motivate them to go the extra mile. Indeed, when they were heard, social care employees in Vivo-Co expressed a love of the job and provided several examples that could be regarded as going the extra mile, such as the example in the previous chapter of saving a service user’s life; they did not need to be incentivised to go the extra mile, they were doing so already. Had they been asked about their motivations and their preferences for voice mechanisms then the choice of mechanism may have been the same or may have been different, the important point being that they were asked. That it was the choice of senior executives, which was influenced by their own philosophy, in turn had a bearing on the way the mechanism evolved.

### **7.5 The mechanism of employee ownership**

The second question presented in chapter one asked how the mechanism differed to those typical of conventional businesses. To address the question, this section begins by evaluating the findings from Vivo-Co in relation to the literature regarding the strengths of employee-ownership.

### ***7.5.1 The strengths of employee-ownership***

Three factors were identified in the literature relating employee-ownership, discussed in chapter two (Employee Voice through Employee-ownership), which were considered to positively affect employee voice by providing the opportunity for it to be part of an organisation's fabric: employee-ownership bestows a right to a voice (Pendleton 2001) through its embeddedness (Bernstein 1976) and its expression through sophisticated governance processes (Flanders et al 1968; Salaman and Storey 2016). This section deals with each of these propositions in relation to Vivo-Co.

#### **a. The right to a voice**

The first factor identified in the literature that can positively affect employee voice in an employee-owned enterprise is yielded through the 'constitutional establishment of rights' (Pendleton 2001 p.110). In other words, rights are established that are enshrined in the organisation's governing document and enacted through various processes. In so doing, employees are able to use their right to a voice to influence decisions. The idea of a right to a voice is akin to the collaborative pluralism frame alongside the right to be heard. It is through having a right to a voice that a key difference between employee-ownership and conventional businesses is provided. An example of this right to express voice was provided in the previous chapter.

The example related to the proposal by the Director of Finance that one of the branches that was still paying social care employees on a weekly basis should change to being paid monthly. Having the right to a voice enabled one of the employee representatives to argue against this proposal. Reflecting the equity-based nature of collaborative pluralism and the right to exercise voice, he put forward the case from the perspective of the social care employees who would not be able to afford to go from one month to the next without being paid. He was successful in making the case and it was through having a right to a voice that he was able to do so. Through having the right to a voice yielded by the mechanism of employee-ownership, this example highlights that the representative had provided an opportunity. However, if the concept of a right to a voice in an employee-owned enterprise is applied to all employee-owners, then a different picture emerges.

There was an expectation by the Chief Executive Officer that social care employees would take increased responsibility through their new role as employee-owners. This was invoked through one of the company values emphasising employee-owners 'sharing responsibility'.

Similarly, the signs displayed in the office used by social care employees, which were discussed in the previous chapter, portrayed quite different and contradictory messages to that of having rights.

One of the signs required social care employees to have an appointment in order to speak to their managers. Social care employees did not have a key to enter the locked door in order to attend 'appointments' with their managers. The idea of having locked doors seemed to contradict the 'open door' policy advocated by the Chief Executive Officer. Open door policies were regarded as a common mechanism in the social care sector (ekosgen 2013), however, they seem anathema to employee-ownership. Why would an owner of an enterprise need to gain access through a locked door for which they had no key, in order to speak with another owner? As employee-owners, there is an expectation they would have access to all parts of the building. This seemed to reflect the hard unitarist philosophy of the organisation's hierarchical configuration that demarcated managers and social care employees rather than reflecting employee-ownership.

Yet, according to another sign, employees were expected to 'act like owners'. Combined, these signs correspond to the notion of 'employee compliance' discussed by Cathcart (2014) in relation to the employee-owned John Lewis Partnership. As such, the collaborative pluralist idea of voice as a right in Vivo-Co seemed counterintuitive to the hard unitarist philosophy espoused by management. In contrast, the idea of voice as a right is an integral feature of collaborative pluralism, with all parties to the employment relationship having legitimacy to express their voice. In Vivo-Co this right to, and legitimacy of, employee voice was not realised.

#### b. The embeddedness of voice

The second factor in the literature affecting employee voice in an employee-owned enterprise is through its 'embeddedness' (Bernstein 1976) within the organisation. This embeddedness comes through employee voice being enshrined and actualised through various governance processes. And, though ostensibly a governance mechanism, through these governance processes, employee-ownership provides the potential for an inter-relatedness between employee voice at different hierarchical levels, such as workplace level and corporate level (ibid). In other words there is a potential to connect organisational voices.

Creating the potential to connect voices reflects the collaborative pluralism frame which regards managers, employees and employee representatives as legitimate parties to co-operative relationships based on values of mutual respect, loyalty, trust and equity (Bray et al 2015) and creates the potential for voice to be heard (Gollan 2013). These governance processes are therefore important as they can send a strong message to employees that their voice is important and cannot easily be ignored nor easily removed. In this sense, employee-ownership is deemed to have more permanence. This is in contrast to the voice initiatives that are argued to be typical of conventional businesses.

As noted in the discussion above concerning the right to a voice, in conventional businesses employees either have no voice mechanism at all or, when they do, those mechanisms are fragile: they are ad hoc and low-level (Dundon et al 2017; Wilkinson and Fay 2011). By contrast, mechanisms that are embedded and inter-related, such as employee-ownership, are regarded positively (e.g. Boxall and Purcell 2011; Purcell and Georgiadis 2007). Indeed, through its embeddedness yielded from employee-ownership, employee voice becomes integral to what Dundon et al (2017) refer to as the 'organisational infrastructure'.

In theory at least, employee-ownership in Vivo-Co provided a sophisticated means through which voice could be expressed which is untypical of conventional business and also untypical in the social care sector (Grimshaw et al 2015; Rubery et al 2011). A specific example was provided in the previous chapter that related to employee representatives being allowed to have their name on various legal documents.

Being able to exert their voice on this issue sent out a strong message to those representatives concerned that their voice did matter whilst also sending a strong message to the remaining representatives as well as all those who looked at the documents. Indeed, their voice mattered to the extent that they were able to overturn the original choice of those who would be named on the document. This example highlights the possibility of integrating employee voice into the fabric through the governance processes of employee-ownership.

#### c. Employee-ownership governance processes

The third factor identified in the literature which can positively affect employee voice in an employee-owned are the governance processes. These processes were regarded favourably by Flanders et al (1968) and were considered by Salaman and Storey (2016) to encourage all forms of voice at all organisational levels in their discussions of the John Lewis Partnership.

Such processes created structural relationships within the Partnership enabling conversations throughout the whole organisation rather than segmented organisationally, departmentally or hierarchically. In agreement with the points made by Flanders et al (1968) and Salaman and Storey (2016), the governance processes in Vivo-Co did provide the opportunity for relationships within the organisation and the expression of voice. However, the evidence also suggested contradiction as there were mixed findings regarding whether the processes ensured employee voice was part of the fabric of Vivo-Co. The governance processes of employee-ownership in Vivo-Co were the Articles of Association, an Annual General Meeting and the General Council.

### 1. Governance processes: Articles of Association

The Articles of Association in Vivo-Co were designed by the Chief Executive Officer and other senior figures in the organisation. Social care employees had no direct involvement with the formation of the Articles. An example did arise at one of the General Council meetings, discussed in the previous chapter, which created the opportunity for employee representatives to influence the Articles and have them amended meaning that all employee-owners had to have a voice in a scenario where someone wanted to sell the company.

### 2. Governance processes: Annual General Meeting

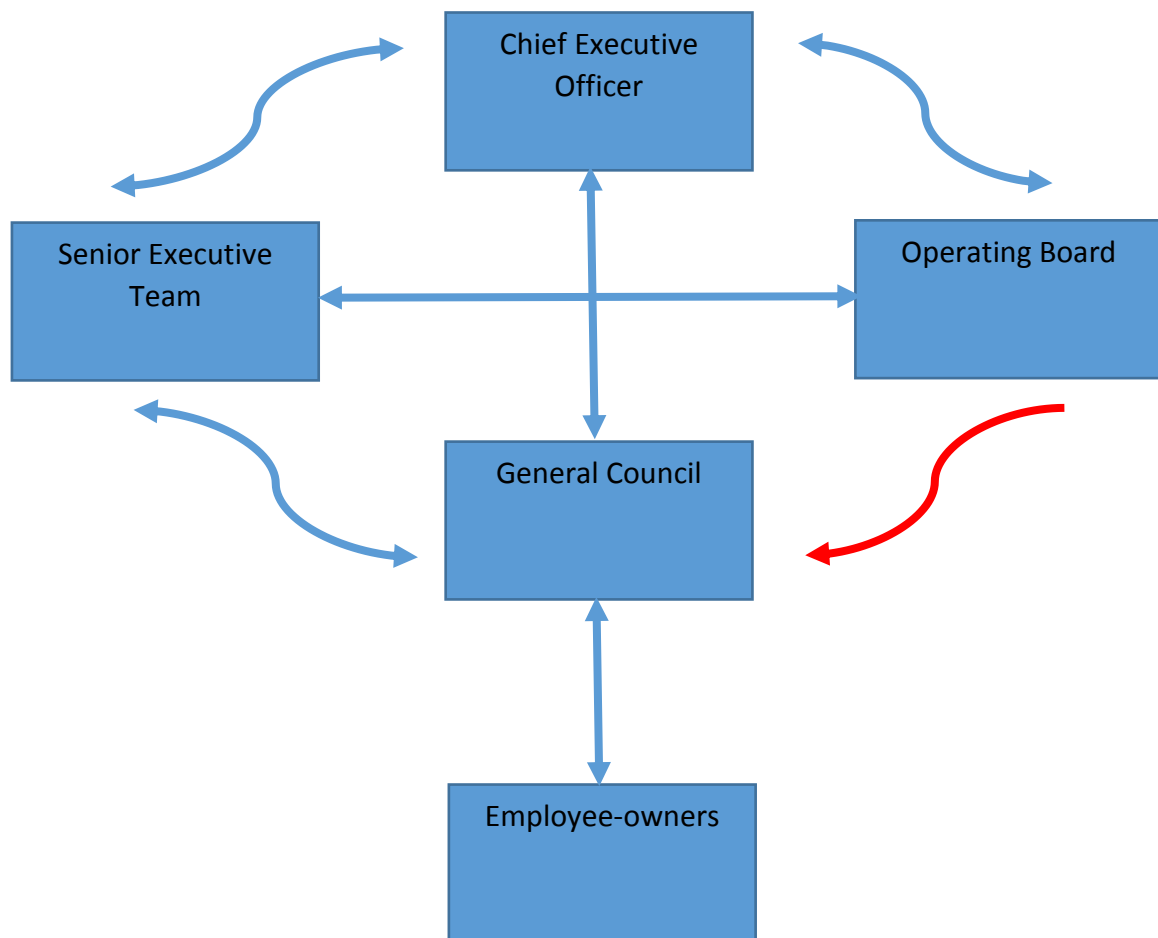
As discussed in chapter six, an Annual General Meeting is held with members, i.e. employee-owners in Vivo-Co, who are invited to attend and vote on particular matters concerning the organisation. By Vivo-Co holding an Annual General Meeting, an opportunity is provided for the direct involvement of employee-owners, predominantly social care employees. Further, this would give them the opportunity to come together in one place as well as the opportunity to express their voice. Notably, an Annual General Meeting, had not been planned in Vivo-Co. Information about such a meeting, though requested several times by the employee representatives, was not forthcoming.

### 3. Governance processes: General Council

In contrast to the two governance processes above, the General Council did provide a means of expressing employee voice, particularly through its representatives who brought life to the model. The General Council provided evidence of how employee-ownership could be used to link together voices across Vivo-Co similar to that of the John Lewis Partnership.



As illustrated in figure 7.1, though far from perfect, voice was conceived as taking a circular route around the organisation and provided a means of inter-connecting the different voices within Vivo-Co. This reflects collaborative pluralism regarding the legitimacy of all voice which is in contrast to the linear and typically downward route of voice in conventional businesses and that of the way employee voice travelled in Vivo-Co as an organisation which was illustrated in chapter six, figure 6.1 (see Vivo-Co organisational structure).



**Figure 7.1 Vivo-Co governance structure**

Employee-ownership, as it is conceived in figure 7.1 provided the potential of the upward, downward and sideward flow of communication. This is a positive feature of the mechanism as such a flow of communication was considered essential in developing a mutually supportive employment relations environment by Pateman (1970) and Budd (2014).

As such, the mechanism of employee-ownership did provide the means for conversations between different constituents in Vivo-Co. It enabled different constituents of the General Council to bring with them their own philosophies and their own ideas about, and aspirations for, employee-ownership and were therefore able to influence how it would evolve. This reflects the collaborative pluralism frame in terms of the legitimacy of voice. Employee-ownership enabled such legitimacy, such as enabling employee representatives to be the voice of social care employees. Importantly, that the voice of representatives was at times either ignored or closed down was not a problem of the mechanism, rather, a problem in the way it was executed through a hard unitarist frame. To highlight this point, what is particularly notable in figure 7.1 is the red line between the operating board and the General Council.

This line serves to highlight a one-way communication system between the operating board and the General Council that was revealed in Vivo-Co. According to the two employee-ownership experts who were non-executive directors of Vivo-Co, this was unusual. Typically, there would be a two-way communication system between the two groups, as it is in the John Lewis Partnership. However, in Vivo-Co, whilst there was representation from the operating board on the General Council there was no representation from the General Council on the operating board, this despite requests for representation from employee representatives. This lack of representation is emblematic of the Chief Executive Officer's hard unitarist philosophy for, and his execution of, employee-ownership. It also serves to highlight a paradox of the model.

Consistent with the literature on employee-ownership, the evidence from Vivo-Co reveals it can form part of the organisation's fabric. Employee -ownership has the potential to enable voice and ensure voice is heard when compared to a conventional business. This is because employee voice is provided through the governance processes, e.g. an Annual General Meeting, where employees have a real opportunity to express their voice when compared to other lower-level mechanisms. Processes such as an Annual General Meeting are the means for enabling employee voice as they are integral to the organisation's fabric in an employee-owned enterprise. However, if employees are not able to exercise their voice, because for example an Annual General Meeting has not been considered, then the point is redundant. This highlights a grey area in the literature regarding the influence yielded by the mechanism.

The escalator metaphor (Marchington et al 1992) was used in chapter two to highlight how managers' choices in conventional businesses tend toward the lower end of the escalator. In

conventional businesses, as noted above, voice choices reflect the preferences of managers for low-level, direct and individual forms (Bryson et al 2004; Freeman et al 2007; Marchington et al 1992; Wilkinson and Fay 2011). Furthermore, mechanisms are introduced in a manner regarded as ad hoc (Dundon et al 2017; Wilkinson and Fay 2011) and as ‘flavour of the month’ (Legge 2005) meaning employee voice can be fragile in its structure and its efficacy and is regarded by employees as having been bolted on, or lacking coherence or integration, to other policies and practices (Wilkinson and Fay 2011). Similarly, in Vivo-Co, the choice was made by senior executives. However, the choice was for a mechanism which was regarded as being more sophisticated, which, given it was underpinned by a hard unitarist philosophy, therefore seemed counterintuitive.

### ***7.5.2 The philosophy of employee-ownership***

Employee-ownership is regarded as having greater ‘strength’ (Gollan et al 2015) in terms of enabling employee voice. To understand why, the escalator metaphor (figure 2.1; p.22) and employee voice continuum (figure 2.2; p.26), which were discussed in chapter two, are used here to further explore employee voice through employee-ownership compared to other mechanisms. The escalator metaphor (Marchington et al 1992), placed employee-ownership at the highest level and specifically referenced the John Lewis Partnership as an example of a company yielding this level of influence. In contrast, conventional mechanisms, such as team briefings, were placed at the lower level. The ‘voice continuum’ (Gollan et al 2015) was also discussed in chapter two. Though also conceiving employee-ownership at a higher level than conventional voice mechanisms, Gollan et al (ibid) placed it on the middle level of their voice continuum. The reason they placed it lower is that employee voice is not independent of management. This highlights an anomaly of employee-ownership regarding employee voice between the escalator and the continuum.

Following the escalator, employee voice through employee-ownership will be strong. By contrast, following the continuum, voice will be stronger in an employee-owned enterprise compared to conventional businesses though not as strong as if it had been combined with an independent voice, such as through a trade union. However, neither Marchington et al’s escalator nor Gollan et al’s continuum take account of the point that the ability to exercise voice is not only dependent on the mechanism but also on the philosophy of those choosing and implementing the mechanism. The argument here, drawn from the evidence in Vivo-Co, is that the strength of voice is yielded not because of the mechanism but rather the philosophy of those introducing it. Whilst that philosophy could be collaborative pluralism, in the case of

Vivo-Co, employee-ownership was actually underpinned by a hard unitarist philosophy akin to that espoused by Le Grand (2003) and Kurtulus and Kruse (2017; cited in Brown et al 2019). In so doing, the potential of the mechanism was not fully realised. Furthermore, it helps to explain why the choice of mechanism by the Chief Executive Officer, *prima facie*, seems counterintuitive. However, when considering his philosophy rather than the mechanism, the reason for this anomaly becomes clearer.

## **7.6 The outcomes of employee-ownership on employee voice**

This section is concerned with the remaining questions presented in chapter one which were how employee voice operates through the mechanism and what were the consequences of the mechanism for key organisational actors. The literature highlighted three factors in employee-owned enterprises which could negatively affect employee voice. These were hierarchy, compliance and resistance. Consistent with this literature, these factors were evident in Vivo-Co which meant employee voice not only went unheard, but was at times closed down revealing hostility towards, lack of trust in and fear of, employee voice suggesting it was a fabrication.

### ***7.6.1 Employee-ownership and employee compliance***

The first area for discussion that was highlighted was the concerning theme of ‘employee compliance’ found in the employee-owned John Lewis Partnership (Cathcart 2014). What this meant in practice was that regardless of their status as employee-owners, the partners were placed in a situation where they had little option other than to be compliant with the will of their managers. A contrasting view of employee-ownership, which was discussed earlier, was that it can act as an incentive for employees.

This latter view is supported by Le Grand (2003) who argued employee-owners are incentivised by the prospect of financial gain. Incentivisation via employee-ownership also corresponds to the research by Gospel and Pendleton (2010). They stated that whilst employee-ownership can provide participating employees with governance rights as owners, for the most part it had not provided a vehicle for either a widespread or effective role in corporate governance. They found that in most cases, companies ‘market’ share plans to employees on the basis of financial reward rather than as a means of gaining control or indeed providing employees with a voice. This reflects a hard unitarist frame which regards employees as calculative and driven by financial reward; employee-ownership would provide

such a reward. However, the aforementioned study by Cathcart (2014), revealed a soft unitarist frame being used as a vehicle to promote employee-ownership.

Cathcart (ibid) noted how partners were implored by management to put the business first, set aside their personal preferences and ‘give that little bit extra’ in recognition of their status as owners. A similar sentiment is in the work of Kurtulus and Kruse (2017; cited in Brown et al 2019) who claim that employee-ownership can stimulate employees to work harder and more effectively thus creating a more harmonious workplaces through aligning incentives. Similarities were found in Vivo-Co in relation to both frames.

One of the Vivo-Co values related directly to going the extra mile which is synonymous with soft unitarism. Going the extra mile was something Piasna et al (2013) stated involves an employee exerting greater effort in their work and demonstrating ‘commitment’ to the organisation, also synonymous with the soft unitarist frame. Importantly, when it is invoked by a company, as it was in Vivo-Co, employees are expected to do more than has been contractually agreed. This is quite different to the idea of ‘gifting’ (Bolton and Wibberley 2014) that was discussed in chapter five.

Gifting was something a social care employee does of their own accord. The Vivo-Co value implies that social care employees give more of themselves on the basis that they care, the latter of which was also reflected in the personal characteristics. Further, there is an implication that they will do this because the company is employee-owned and, therefore they will ‘go the extra mile’ as invoked in the second value. In turn, going the extra mile becomes part of the expectation that employees will also ‘share responsibility’. Important here are the assumptions that are made about employees and as such, employee voice.

Both hard and soft unitarist frames are underpinned by particular philosophies that make assumptions about employee voice and determine what it ought to be; the overriding purpose of which is not employee equity, as in a collaborative pluralist frame, but rather business efficiency. In so doing, other assumptions and interpretations are closed down and alternative suggestions are not heard. The standardisation of the work and training provided to social care employees in Vivo-Co provided examples. The point being that the nature of social care work, i.e. part-time and fragmented, can restrict opportunities for employee voice (Breslin and Wood 2015; Carey 2015; Dundon et al 2017; Piasna et al 2013). In agreement with this point, that the nature of social care work restricts opportunities for employee voice, and taking it

further, by reducing opportunities for social care employees to meet collectively in Vivo-Co reduced further the opportunity for employee voice. However, despite such mitigating factors concerning opportunities to express their voice, when they were heard, social care employees in this study discussed various factors, such as a love of the job.

Social care employees predominantly discussed service users. Notably, they never discussed financial gain nor ever used the phrase 'going the extra mile', despite this being one of the company values. The literature concerning the social care sector, discussed in chapter five, stated that social care employees are motivated by the desire to make a difference, the relationships they have with service users (Unison 2016) and the usefulness and meaningfulness of the work they do (Borzaga and Depedri 2009; Pestoff and Vamstad 2014). Corresponding to this literature, for social care employees in Vivo-Co, the job was about providing care, evidenced during observations of social care employees at a team meeting and whilst coming into their office.

Of the six social care employees attending the team meeting, all stated that they worked at Vivo-Co because they wanted to make a difference to the service users. For them, social care is about the job they do, it is seeing the difference they make and where what they do, not the profit the company makes, matters. The observations of - approximately fifty - social care employees coming into their office bore similar findings. Alongside an opportunity to pick up supplies, coming into the office gave them the opportunity to meet with their colleagues and have discussions about service users. This was a rare and highly exploited opportunity for them to meet with one another and discuss their work.

This serves to highlight the point that, despite the challenges they faced in the fragmented nature of their work compounded by reducing opportunities to meet collectively, they still found space to meet with their colleagues. And, though not acknowledged by the senior executives, such opportunities could bear efficiencies through, for example, information-sharing. Indeed, a point which is not alluded to in the literature is that, despite an apparent aversion to profit by social care employees, this did not preclude their ability to identify efficiencies.

Several suggestions were made by the social care employees that would bring efficiencies to Vivo-Co. The example presented in chapter six which illustrates this point was of a social care employee who had made changes to her rota. For her, the changed rota was regarded as

the most efficient way of dealing with the job in hand. Simultaneously she combined this with a 'care logic', a concept used by Bolton and Wibberley (2014), which meant that Mrs Smith, one of the service users she was visiting, could stay a little longer in bed, which she liked to do. Yet, the suggestion went unheard by her manager at the team meeting where it was suggested. Another example of unheard voices despite efficiency suggestions is the list of concerns from the social care employees that was brought to a General Council meeting.

One of the representatives, Peter, brought a list of concerns to the meeting from the social care employees. This was discussed in the previous chapter (What can I talk about?). The senior executives regarded the items on the list as operational matters. However, they can be interpreted differently; they can be regarded as efficiency concerns that affect not only the social care employees but also the business. For example, one item on the list was an expressed desire for car parking permits. The social care employees chose to park outside of their office but in doing so they ran the risk of a fine, which, given their low wages, they could ill afford. However, they may be in the middle of visits to service users. Risking a fine meant they would be anxious. Arriving at a service users' home in a state of anxiety is not good for them nor the service user and risks impacting on the quality of care as perceived by both.

The important point is that not having access to a car parking permit impacted on how efficiently a social care employee could move from one service user to another and ultimately on the quality of care. Further, it risks being recorded as a 'no show' by the local authority and therefore jeopardises future contracts. What the social care employees were expressing was a collaborative pluralist concern for the efficiency of Vivo-Co whilst retaining high service quality. However, their voice was unheard in preference for the hard unitarist conceptualisation of efficiency by the Chief Executive Officer which focused on business 'growth' through being 'agile' and gaining 'competitive advantage' through 'commercial confidentiality' and avoiding 'hostile take-overs' and 'reputational damage'. A second and equally important aspect of the list was also overlooked.

The list provided a link, the first through the employee-ownership structure, between the General Council and the larger body of employee-owners, the social care employees. The social care employees were speaking to the General Council through the mechanism of employee-ownership via the list. Had the list been acknowledged and responded to, this could have begun the process of building a more permanent employee voice mechanism between

the General Council and the social care employees. This would have contributed to the circular motion of voice illustrated in figure 7.1 that is in contrast to a downward voice typical of conventional businesses. It would have enabled the beginning of a more collaborative relationship. Most importantly, it would have meant the voice of social care employees was heard. What happened however, was that the voice of social care employees was not heard.

The list was never acknowledged by the General Council other than representatives being told they were not to discuss matters included on the list. Further, the way social care employees were spoken about, and factors such as locked doors and having to make an appointment to speak to managers was not reflective of, indeed was counter-intuitive to, employee-ownership. Though, as noted earlier, the social care employees in Vivo-Co did enjoy better terms and conditions of employment - such as holiday and sickness entitlements - compared to their counterparts in other sectors, their voice through employee-ownership though reflecting that of collaborative pluralism was closed down by that of a voice which was hard unitarist in nature.

In the hard unitarist frame, employee voice has a transactional value and is related to the 'labour problem' of high turnover. Against this backdrop, employee-ownership was used to achieve what Cathcart (2014) referred to as 'employee compliance'. It suggests that social care employees' voice was not valued in the organisation. Other examples of Vivo-Co as an organisation, i.e. as opposed to an employee-owned organisation, support this argument. Two are discussed here, the way space was utilised in Vivo-Co and the inter-relationship of conventional mechanisms with employee-ownership.

- a. Social care employees did not have a dedicated space to meet with one another. Space was considered an important factor, particularly how it can be used to encourage communication and interaction (Spear and Thomas 2015). The way space was used in Vivo-Co was contrary to this. For example, it could have provided somewhere for social care employees to share information about service users and to interact and communicate with one another. Further, it could have aided communication and interaction between other levels of the organisation. Space is also important to an employee in having a sense of somewhere that they can regard as their place of work and developing a sense of ownership of the work-space, especially pertinent in an employee-owned enterprise. Indeed the (lack of) space provided for social care



employees reflected and reinforced a hierarchical separation between them and managers. This manifested in several ways such as the grand space occupied by the senior executives compared to the locked doors experienced by social care employees. The right to a voice and its embeddedness within the structure of employee-ownership lead to a further feature of the model: the governance processes.

- b. One of the conventional voice systems used in Vivo-Co was newsletters which are a common mechanism in social care organisations (ekosgen 2013). The newsletter did appear to provide a means of communication between social care employees as well as including information about the General Council and names and contact details of its representatives. Co-ordination of this with other systems could have provided further opportunities to link voice across many levels of the organisation, particularly that of social care employees, as well as linking organisational factors to that of employee-ownership; the traffic light system providing an example. The traffic light system could have been an important mechanism for sharing information about the business aspects of Vivo-Co yet it was never updated nor was key information communicated in any meaningful way.

The suggestion schemes also provided an interesting example. It asked for 'good ideas' which were determined by the branch manager and/or the Chief Executive Officer. By implication, they were also determining what bad suggestions were; it was their version of voice rather than that of social care employees. Further, given the pre-determination of 'good' suggestions it is questionable whether such a scheme would confer a sense of ownership, or encourage individuals to act like owners or to express their voice. The document implies that 'workers' through 'having a say' (via 'good suggestions') would act like 'owners'.

For the most part, the conventional voice mechanisms in Vivo-Co seemed to be operating in isolation of one another and were not operating particularly effectively. Of greater concern was that some of these mechanisms seemed antithetical to employee-ownership. Indeed, employee-ownership was marketed to social care employees in relation to its financial benefits and used as a form of compliance to implore them to go the extra mile. Similarly, employee representatives had to be compliant regarding specific topics that could be discussed whilst those the representatives wanted to discuss were 'designed-out' of agendas (Donaghey et al 2011<sup>a</sup>). Yet, when they were heard, social care employees and employee

representatives did speak about factors that could be regarded as efficiencies, albeit framed differently to those of the Chief Executive Officer.

### ***7.6.2 Employee-ownership and organisational hierarchy***

The second theme for discussion highlighted concerned employee-ownership and ‘organisational hierarchy’ (Atzeni 2012). The necessity for hierarchy in an employee-owned enterprise was, Pendleton (2001) argued, underpinned by a fear that employee-owners would act like workers and put short-term gain ahead of the longer-term sustainability of the enterprise. This view again resonates with the hard unitarist frame and corresponds with the view also in this frame that employees are calculative and driven by financial reward as well as the belief that hierarchies are necessary.

The nature of work within a capitalist system such as that of the UK, Atzeni (2012) argued, is regarded by many social science disciplines as something workers need to be encouraged to do. He refers to labour economics that has described work over the last thirty years as something that has to be done and emphasised monetary rewards as a way of encouraging workers to work. The need to motivate employees is something which underpins the HRM narrative and, again, bears similarities to hard unitarism in terms of hierarchy. As such, organising work hierarchically is so deeply embedded in the UK that alternatives are not considered (Atzeni 2012; Markey et al 2010). Yet, employee-ownership does provide an alternative to the conventional organisation though, paradoxically, it would seem hierarchies are still necessary.

One of the key features of employee-ownership, according to Oakeshott (1990), was the ability to incorporate it into a conventional hierarchical management structure. The image this presents is one of employee-ownership sitting comfortably alongside a hierarchical configuration. However, the literature review also highlighted that hierarchies can bring rigidity (Pateman 1970), disrupt voice and create professional pecking orders (Wilkinson et al 2015). Rothschild (2000) argued that flatter, non-hierarchical organisations have the potential for balancing market concerns with issues of ownership and control bridging the gap between those who manage and those who are managed. Furthermore, Bernstein (1976) suggested that employee-ownership means employees, in their role as owners, are able to challenge without reprisal. The evidence from Vivo-Co however was more consistent with the view of Atzeni (2012) relating to a perceived need for hierarchy.

Consistent with a hard unitarist frame, and bearing similarities to the Traditional form of unitarism discussed by Cullinane and Dundon (2014), there was an emphasis in Vivo-Co on hierarchy and standardisation whereby ‘direction and control’ was through a ‘unified chain of command’ and ‘close supervision’. An example was provided in the section above through the separation of space between ‘workers’ and ‘management’. This separation was regarded as something positive by the Director of Quality and Compliance yet seems to contradict the idea of ‘employee’ ownership, placing the hierarchical configuration over ownership. Significantly, organisational hierarchy often took priority over the governance structure of employee-ownership which affected the expression of employee voice. This was particularly evidenced in the examples of employee representatives trying to fulfil their role of representing social care employees, their attempts reflecting a collaborative pluralist frame.

From their perspective, the purpose of their role as employee representatives and the purpose of employee-ownership was to enable a voice for ‘all’ employee-owners; they each had a ‘right to a voice’ and the legitimacy to express their voice. To achieve this purpose, they described their key role as being to facilitate and maintain relationships with the constituencies of the General Council. They showed respect for the other General Council constituents such as the senior executives and the non-executives and displayed evidence of characteristics of collaborative pluralism conceived by Bray et al (2015), by recognising their ‘common interests’ and ‘mutual goals’. This frame is also evident in the statement made by Tom, one of the employee representatives who stated they were one team working towards something that was important and fulfilling. This perspective was in contrast to some of the senior executives.

The Director of Quality and Compliance questioned the role of representatives. He saw it as his right to question the role and indeed the capability of representatives but in so doing, he was also questioning the legitimacy of the employee representative role. As noted above, the employee representatives did have a right to carry out the role, endorsed as it was by the Articles of Association, however, in practice, it was made difficult by the senior executives. There were a number of examples of the Chief Executive Officer closing down some voices, employee representatives, whilst allowing others, the senior executives, to be heard. This suggests a superiority regarding the senior executive and specifically the Chief Executive Officer, endorsed by the hierarchical structure of Vivo-Co, which presented challenges to employee representatives given their role was to represent the concerns of social care employees.

In their own words, the role of an employee representative was ‘to be the voice of the social care employees’, and this was unreservedly how they interpreted their role. To this end, they continuously made suggestions to improve current practice as well as suggesting innovation. For instance, Susan suggested at a General Council meeting that all of the representatives visit one another’s branches. The purpose of this was to learn how employee-ownership was being implemented, learn about the processes that were being used in the other branches and to look at possibilities for introducing those processes in their own branch. In other words it was about learning and sharing good practice. If something was working in one branch it could be replicated in another meaning less time spent on creating something new. This innovation was not acknowledged by senior executives at the meeting.

As another example, at two of the branches the representatives were hosting charity events which served several functions. Firstly, they raised awareness of Vivo-Co within its local community, providing positive publicity about the organisation and a valuable marketing opportunity. Secondly, they provided an opportunity to involve social care employees in collaborating on discreet projects of which they had ownership and which they were able to plan and organise. Importantly, this provided the opportunity for them to work together, something which was rare given the fragmented and part-time nature of their work. Thirdly, it provided a vital and rare opportunity for employee representatives to communicate with social care employees about employee-ownership. As such, through the process of organising events, employee representatives uncovered a way of contributing to the efficiency of Vivo-Co. However, these examples of efficiency improvement were not recognised as such by the senior executives. As with social care employees, the voice of employee representatives in making efficiency suggestions went unheard. Moreover, their interpretation of the purpose of employee-ownership were challenged by the senior executives.

To senior executives, the concerns of employee representatives centred on equity. Yet, as with social care employees, closer analysis of discussions amongst employee representatives reveals that as well as having equity concerns vis-à-vis social care employees – and therefore emulating the role of a ‘shop steward’ according to one of the representatives - there were innovations that they suggested which erred as much towards efficiency as they did equity. Significantly, the senior executives used the organisational hierarchy to challenge and disempower employee representatives.

Whereas the voice of the senior executives was legitimised through the organisational hierarchy, the voice of representatives was legitimised through the Articles meaning they did have the right to a voice at General Council meetings. However, the extent to which the representatives' voice was heard was questionable. The example of appointing non-executive directors to the General Council was provided in the previous chapter. Despite suggestions from representatives for the positions, none were followed through nor was there an explanation of why they were not. Suggestions that were heard were those put forward by the chair, Chief Executive Officer and one of the founder members. In other words the most senior people in the organisation decided who the non-executive directors ought to be whilst the voice of employee representatives was not heard. Subsequently, one of the employee representatives did join the panel thus providing a partial counter-balance to the power of the senior representatives in terms of that particular decision-making process. A further challenge related to the hostility displayed by some of the senior executives.

Employee representatives were often met with hostility from the senior executives such as asking what the company was getting from the role as well as the comments that they were acting like 'shop stewards'; notable because of the derogatory manner in which these comments were made. Another example relates to the list of concerns raised by social care employees that was brought to a General Council meeting by a representative as noted above. Corresponding to the literature (Bryson and Freeman 2007; Freeman et al 2007; The Smith Institute 2016; Wilkinson et al 2015), some of the issues in the list were of an operational nature. What was important, was that they were what employees wanted to talk about. Also important, was that this was an instance of employees, employee-owners in this case, expressing their voice on matters of concern to them. However, such issues were treated in a derogatory manner by senior executives. Interestingly, it is a view which is mirrored in some of the academic literature.

A number of scholars refer to these as 'tea and toilet' issues (e.g. Purcell and Hall 2012). In other words they are important to employees though ostensibly not so academically. In a similar vein, Gollan et al (2015) pose a 'what if?'; asking what if all companies were required by corporate governance law to include one or more employee representatives on the executive board. They correctly suggest that such a policy would bring more balance and greater accountability. However, they then argue that in so doing, employees would be given a voice at the top of the organisation, where, they suggest, it matters. An alternative approach

to this is a preparedness to discuss issues of importance to employees regardless of their perceived importance to others.

Rather than viewing them disparagingly, Rathkey (1983) refers to such issues as 'grass-roots' and Budd (2004) 'workplace level concerns'. Similarly, Wilkinson et al (2015) note the array of issues at workplace level that voice can include such as canteen food through to more strategic concerns such as financial planning. Yet, such issues were not allowed to be discussed within Vivo-Co and therefore contradicted the notion of 'meaningful voice' conceived by Budd (2004). Moreover, through closing down these conversations, the actual voice of social care employees in Vivo-Co, and ideas they suggested, went unheard.

Through their employee representatives, social care employees were told that it was not the role of the General Council to discuss operational issues. In this way, voice was confined by senior executives to certain subjects. They had a clear view of the subjects that could be discussed. Attempts by employee representatives to represent social care employees was prevented and the voice of social care employees was not acknowledged, no response was given to the representative regarding the points made, the voice of the social care employees and the representative was stifled. Implicit in this example is a superiority that what the senior executives discussed was more important than what social care employees wanted to discuss. Other examples provide further evidence of such superiority reflected in the subordinated voice of employee representatives.

In an analogy by Tom, about his role as an employee representative, he describes it as being like 'little fishes' which he then compared to the 'powerful people' on the General Council, who were regarded by Kevin, another employee representative as 'an elite group' and therefore, according to Susan, a third employee representative, employee representatives were 'privileged to be part of it'. All of which suggests the representatives were subordinating themselves to the Chief Executive Officer and other senior executives.

In contrast, the governance processes of employee-ownership in Vivo-Co suggest some degree of parity amongst all of the 'fish' which is not reflected in the analogy given by the employee representative. However, given the primacy of the organisational hierarchy, it is not surprising that there was such a conflict between employee representatives assuming a right to express their voice, particularly when it was under constant question from the senior executives. Indeed, the primacy of the organisational hierarchy was acting as a barrier to

employee voice. Nevertheless, to suggest that employee representatives lacked agency in their role would present an inaccurate picture.

There were instances where the Chief Executive Officer did concede his voice. Examples include the representatives voting to make a change to the Articles, being named on the Title Deeds and the representative arguing for social care employees from his branch to remain on weekly pay; the mechanism of employee-ownership had afforded such opportunities. Another example were the attempts to devise a system of ensuring the voice of social care employees into, within and outwith the General Council – it was a topic discussed at every meeting, though a system was not in place during the course of the fieldwork. Importantly employee representatives were given responsibility for devising the system, with the help of one of the non-executive directors. The reasons for this were not clear, however, it enabled the representatives to take some ownership of the process. It would also mean the opportunity to discuss appropriate systems with social care employees ensuring a system that was fair and which reflected their concerns. In so doing, the employee representatives, through their role, were afforded some degree of voice, the legitimacy of which was yielded by the mechanism.

Nevertheless, more common were examples of voice suppression. More often than not, the Chief Executive Officer overrode voice manifested through employee-ownership, his hierarchical position allowing this. This brought challenges to employee representatives in being able to express and effect their voice highlighting a contradiction between the organisational hierarchy and the governance structure of employee-ownership in Vivo-Co. Whereas Oakeshott (1990) suggested that combining employee-ownership with a pre-existing organisational structure was straightforward, it presented challenges in Vivo-Co that negatively affected employee voice.

Given the many examples of voice suppression, and following Wilkinson et al (2015), the organisational hierarchy in Vivo-Co acted as an impediment to the mechanism, of employee-ownership, by disrupting the flow of voice. In addition, not all voices in Vivo-Co were equal. Following the observation by Heery et al (2008), Wilkinson and Fay (2011) and Wilkinson et al (2015), legitimacy was afforded to particular voices and not others. It is argued here that this is an outcome, not of employee-ownership – theoretically, all voices in Vivo-Co were legitimate, but of some voices being valued more than others, a point which helps to highlight the third of the key themes regarding management resistance.

### ***7.6.3 Employee-ownership and management resistance***

The third theme for discussion which was highlighted in the literature relates to ‘management resistance’ of employee-ownership. Such resistance, McCarthy and Palcic (2012) argued, can stem from an unwillingness to empower employees and a belief that it can over-complicate decision-making. Similarly, findings from Pendleton’s (2001) case studies of employee-ownership revealed the overriding goal of management was to retain ‘conventional’ structures of management and avoid what they saw as the ‘threats’ to efficiency and a belief employees could not act as ‘responsible’ entrepreneurs. These factors were evident in Vivo-Co as employee-ownership evolved, manifested as distrust and fear by the Chief Executive Officer as well as other senior executives such as criticising employee representatives for not having their eye on the ‘bigger picture’. A further example of this was evidenced during a discussion about having employee representatives’ names on the Trust Deed.

During the discussion the Chief Executive Officer asked, in relation to the employee representatives: ‘what if they stole money?’ whereas his nominations presumably would not do anything that he considered to be ‘awkward for the business’; in other words the people suggested by him could be trusted. Similarly, the Director of Quality and Compliance demonstrated distrust when he suggested that employee representatives were only representing the social care employees whereas his argument was that they should represent all employees. Each time an issue was raised in a General Council meeting by a representative he wanted to know which representative was bringing the issue and how many people were affected by it. There are several potentially contentious issues with these comments, space limitations mean that only three are discussed here.

Firstly, the comments bring into question the trustworthiness of the representatives to relay issues raised by social care employees. Secondly it raises issues of confidentiality: social care employees are more likely to raise concerns and representatives are more likely to represent those concerns if they think they will be dealt with in confidence. A third issue is that, according to this view, the role of employee representatives should include the views of senior executives and management as well as those of social care employees. However, this is contradictory to the Articles.

The Articles have categories of representatives which reflect each hierarchical layer in Vivo-Co. As such, employee representatives represent the social care employees. If they were to represent all employees then the role becomes redundant. Moreover, the employee



representative is there to represent the views of social care employees regardless of how many of them raise that issue. The representative in this sense is merely bringing the issue/s forward for discussion on behalf of the social care employees. It is not for any one person to determine how many of them need to raise the same issue in order for it to be discussed nor is it for any one person to determine the validity of the concern. As employee-owners, the social care employees have a right to express their view to the General Council and employee representatives provided a means of doing so. The view expressed above challenges the nature of such representation.

Similarly, fear was expressed by the Chief Executive Officer regarding the hard unitarist concern with breaches of 'commercial confidentiality'. This was something Bernstein (1976) argued could weaken participation in an employee-owned enterprise when management reserved the right to commercial confidentiality as it would create an imbalance of power. This was shown to be the case in Vivo-Co through the absence of employee representatives on the operating board as illustrated in figure 7.1 above. This created an imbalance of power between the two bodies and was contrary to the close relationship espoused by the Articles.

Whilst the senior executives and non-executive directors were privy to the General Council none of the employee representatives of Vivo-Co sat on the company's operating board. This decision was taken by the Chief Executive Officer, it was not discussed at the General Council despite attempts from employee representatives. The Chief Executive Officer gave two reasons for his decision, one being that the operating board might be discussing disciplinary issues affecting an employee representative and the second that there was a risk of a representative breaching commercial confidentiality. The derogatory opinion of employee representatives notwithstanding, not having an employee representative on the operating board created an imbalanced governance structure.

This imbalance however was peculiar to Vivo-Co rather than necessarily to the model, as noted above by the employee-ownership experts. There was nothing in the Articles to suggest that employee representatives either could or could not be on the operating board, rather, it was a matter of choice by senior executives. This meant a balance of power favouring the operating board as they had access to the General Council and the topics discussed but the same access was not afforded to the General Council, thus limiting the flow of communication as highlighted in figure 7.1 in the previous section. As with the other

examples, this resonates with a hard unitarist frame, which also manifested in animosity towards, and distrust of, the employee representatives. And, there was evidence that the senior executives prioritised the efficiency aspects of Vivo-Co. An example of this relates to questions being asked by senior executives concerning what the company was getting out of the role of employee representatives.

Given their seniority, it might have been expected that senior executives would know what the company would get in return from the representatives. As it was, they displayed a lack of awareness of employee-ownership, this despite, or perhaps because of, their senior positions. Overwhelmingly the senior executives invoked the primacy of efficiency synonymous with Budd's (2004) observation of the 'rhetorical power of efficiency'. Furthermore, was their concern that the efficiency of Vivo-Co should not be hampered by the governance structure. On occasions, employee-ownership was an inconvenience that manifested in a lack of interest in, and knowledge of, it by the senior executives. Of more concern was the often adversarial way in which they challenged employee representatives and the derisory manner in which they spoke about the employee representatives and the social care employees.

This was reflected in the language used by the Director of Engagement. Discussing recruitment, he stated how he wanted to attract 'better quality' social care employees and that Vivo-Co would have to act quickly or risk losing the 'hot ones' to competitors. The implication in the first part of the statement is that the current cohort of social care employees was not of sufficient quality which is then reinforced in the second part of the statement by raising the threat of losing the 'hot ones'. Notably, the preferred arrangement referred to by the managers relied heavily on the existing networks of employees, a practice highlighted in chapter five that is common in social care (Hebson et al 2015). Nevertheless, the hard unitarist tone of employee-ownership had been set by the Chief Executive Officer and was then reflected by the other senior executives, such as in the language used by the Director of Engagement. There was also observed to be anxiety of the senior executives about challenges to their status such as was evidenced with the list brought to a General Council meeting by one of the representatives discussed earlier.

The list presented a challenge to management's authority due to the legitimacy vested in the social care employees, i.e. as employee-owners. Similarly, there was concern from the Director of Finance regarding the value brought to the company through the role; a concern similarly expressed by a manager to Susan, one of the employee representatives. Resistance

also manifested in the lack of gravitas afforded to the employee representatives by their managers. This point was powerfully made by some of the employee representatives who reported a lack of support for the role from managers. Some managers were reported to be openly opposed to the General Council though others were less explicit. These concerns were similar to the managers of Pendleton's (2001) cases who saw 'threats to efficiency' or thought employees would not act like 'responsible entrepreneurs'. The evidence contradicted these concerns. Similarly, employees demonstrated the capacity for innovation in the study by Brown et al (2019) and, as highlighted in earlier examples, employee representatives and social care employees in Vivo-Co were found to be capable of suggesting efficiencies and of being responsible entrepreneurs through their innovations. Yet, paradoxically, the suggested efficiencies in Vivo-Co went unheard.

### **7.7 Unheard voices**

The contemporary debate concerning 'unheard' voice was discussed in chapter two. In contrast to some of the employee-owners in the research carried out by Brown et al (2019) whose voices were heard, the concept of unheard voice is provided through the work of Gunawardana (2014). In this study, though the organisation was not employee-owned, there were an abundance of mechanisms, which included a workers' council and management encouraging upward communication. Nevertheless, the study concluded that employee voice often went unheard. Whilst part of the reason for this is attributed to cultural norms requiring respect for elders and those in senior positions, a point noted by Gunawardana (ibid), relates to the format of workers' council meetings.

The workers' council meetings were operated for management to communicate to workers whilst workers had the opportunity to raise concerns at the end of the meeting. This meant workers were only able to speak when the meeting was coming to a close and those attending would more than likely have been wanting to leave to attend to other matters. This, it was noted in chapter two, bears similarities to the notion of 'designing out' some voices through processes such as agenda-setting described by Donaghey et al (2011<sup>a</sup>).

Agenda-setting was noted to involve managers purposely including on the agenda items they wished to discuss whilst ensuring items which they knew employees wished to discuss being excluded. In other words whether it is the agenda or the format, it is managers who are controlling the meeting. The concept has more recently been developed by Wilkinson et al (2018) who conceived five types of unheard voice. Of the five types discussed in chapter two,

it is the fourth which Vivo-Co resembled. Characteristic of voice in this type of organisation was that, whilst there were voice structures in place, there was a climate of perpetual silence which had been created through ‘agenda-setting and institutional structures’ (Donaghey et al 2011<sup>a</sup>) and employees not speaking up as they knew ‘the rules of the game’ (Kalfa et al 2017; cited in Wilkinson et al 2018). In other words a more conspiratorial environment that ensures the voice of employees is closed down whereas managers are able to express their voice.

Efficiency concerns were how the senior executive voices in Vivo-Co were expressed. They regarded voice expressed in this way as valuable, i.e. the value it brought to Vivo-Co. Their main concern was profit via the mechanism of employee-ownership. An unremitting theme in Vivo-Co was the narrative of efficiency with employee-ownership used as an incentive to achieve greater efficiency and therefore higher profits achieved through employees going the extra mile. This corresponds to Cathcart’s (2014) findings whereby the John Lewis Partnership used co-ownership to legitimise an emphasis on profit and to stress that although decisions may not be in the interest of individuals, they were in the interests of owners, and as owners of the business, partners needed to agree. All of which presupposes that employees are not already committed to the organisation and are not already going the extra mile which suggests a particular view of employees.

It also, condescendingly, suggests efficiency concerns in Vivo-Co were the preserve of the senior executives and not those of employee representatives or social care employees, the latter being a ‘tough audience’ according to the Director of Quality and Compliance. This has been shown not to be the case. Certainly there were challenges to the mechanism through hierarchy, compliance and resistance which meant employee voice often went unheard or was closed down. However, it is argued in the next section that this was not an outcome of the mechanism but the way employee-ownership was framed; whether it was part of the organisational fabric or merely a fabrication.

### **7.8 Employee-ownership: fabric or fabrication?**

The themes of ‘fabric’ and ‘fabrication’ have emerged from the study of Vivo-Co. Some examples of voice forming part of the organisation’s fabric have been provided from the research findings whereby the voice of social care employees and their representatives were enabled through the mechanism of employee-ownership. Through employee-ownership they were, in theory at least, provided with the right to a voice and on occasions were able to exercise that right. The idea of voice being part of the fabric was also brought through the

embeddedness of the mechanism and its sophisticated voice processes. However, despite this, the voice of employee-owners in Vivo-Co often went unheard. In particular, voice was unheard when the subject was efficiency.

The senior executives within the case had a specific understanding of efficiency. However, the way in which the concept of efficiency was understood by the senior executives provided one interpretation. The way it was conceived by other organisational actors was different, though, it is argued here, no less valid. Importantly, these different interpretations were weighted differently as they were not all afforded the same value. It was the interpretation of efficiency by the senior executives that took precedence. The suggestions and ideas from other organisational actors, i.e. social care employees and employee representatives, were either not afforded the same value or were simply not heard. This suggests employee voice was a fabrication. With the frames of reference providing the evaluative framework, these themes of fabric and fabrication are explored further in the next two sections.

**7.8.1 Collaborative pluralism and the fabric of employee voice**

The theme of voice as part of an organisation’s fabric reflects the frame of collaborative pluralism. The key aspects of collaborative pluralism were voice as a right and voice that is co-operative (Bray et al 2015). This frame is reflected in comments made by employee representatives. The figure below highlights the key points from this frame and words and phrases used by employee representatives.

<b>Collaborative pluralism</b>	<b>Employee representatives</b>
Efficiency and equity focused; managers, employees and their representatives are legitimate parties to co-operative relationships with sometimes separate and sometimes shared goals; based on values of mutual respect, loyalty, trust and equity; employee voice is a moral imperative (Budd 2004) and regarded as the ‘right to be heard’ (Gollan 2013).	Efficiency and equity focused; senior executives, social care employees and representatives are legitimate parties to co-operative relationships; based on values of mutual respect, loyalty and trust; employee voice is a moral imperative; voice is the right to be heard.

**Figure 7.2 Similarities to collaborative pluralism in Vivo-Co**

Employee representatives provided several examples, noted above, that reflected efficiency and equity concerns. They also showed ‘respect’ for their colleagues as well as for senior executives and non-executive directors, they regarded them all as ‘legitimate parties’ to

employee-ownership. They often expressed values of ‘mutual respect’, such as wanting to learn from one another, as well as loyalty and trust. Moreover, their urgency to be the voice of social care employees was suggestive of a ‘moral imperative’ to be able to express voice alongside their ‘right to be heard’ (Budd 2004). However, this was often challenged by the senior executives, an approach which can be attributed to the way employee-ownership evolved in Vivo-Co rather than being peculiar to the model, such as the John Lewis Partnership.

For example, though also being indifferent to trade unions, the configuration of employee-ownership in the Partnership did enable partners to discuss any matters of concern at whatever level within the organisation through an array of different mechanisms (Salaman and Storey 2016). Partners were able to express their voice whether in relation to equity, efficiency or work-related concerns. In contrast, equity concerns were interpreted by the Chief Executive Officer and other senior executives as operational concerns and therefore, in their view, not the domain of the General Council.

Whenever anyone tried to raise equity concerns at General Council meetings, such as the list of issues by social care employees which was brought by one of the representatives, they were either ignored or told such matters could not be discussed. As part of the organisational fabric, the mechanism of employee-ownership had enabled the representative to bring the list of concerns to the meeting. However, the list was not discussed given the weight of voice of the senior executives which was predicated on a different philosophy.

### ***7.8.2 Hard unitarism and the fabrication of employee voice***

The philosophy of the senior executives reflected the frame of hard unitarism. An emphasis on efficiency is a fundamental aspect of the hard unitarist frame. The use of the term efficiency by the Chief Executive, and its related subjects, was synonymous with this philosophy. Key terms used frequently by the CEO are summarised in figure 7.3 below which reflect many of the key aspects of hard unitarism.

Hard unitarist features	Vivo-Co features
Efficiency focused; resource-based; outcomes oriented; gaining competitive advantage; regards employees as calculative and driven by financial reward; emphasis on hierarchy and standardisation; direction and control is via a unified chain of command, close supervision and based on rewards; ‘enforced compliance’ (Bray et al 2015); employee voice has a transactional value and relates to the ‘labour problem’ of absenteeism and turnover; key voice mechanisms are incentivisation and ‘exit’ and trade unions are unnecessary.	Efficiency through growth, agility and leanness; gaining competitive advantage through commercial confidentiality and avoiding hostile take-overs and reputational damage; regarding employees as driven by financial reward; an emphasis on hierarchy and standardisation; direction and control is via a unified chain of command, close supervision and based on rewards and ‘employee compliance (Cathcart 2014); employee voice relates to the labour problem of staff turnover; key voice mechanisms are incentivisation and avoiding trade unions.

**Figure 7.3 Similarities to the hard unitarist frame in Vivo-Co**

Reflecting elements of a hard unitarist philosophy, efficiency and productivity were paramount to the Chief Executive Officer. His ‘solution’ to the ‘labour problem’ of employee turnover was ‘business focused’ (Kaufman 2015). To him, social care employees were regarded as a ‘resource’ that incur a ‘cost’ which precludes seeing them in another way. Furthermore, alternative strategies of reducing costs, such as reducing the layers of hierarchy, were not considered either.

The need for the hierarchical organisation of work practices, again, reflected hard unitarism. An alternative is to regard social care employees, employee-owners as they were in Vivo-Co, as equal and legitimate actors within the organisation. In agreement with Bray et al (2015), this hard unitarist philosophy is predicated on what is regarded as the superior knowledge and expertise of managers and, important to this frame, that ‘employee compliance’ (Cathcart 2014) is key.

Employee-ownership, through a financial incentive, would, it was assumed in Vivo-Co, mean employee compliance. In relation to social care employees, this was akin to ‘ensured compliance’, ensured through, for example, the better terms and conditions of employment. In relation to employee representatives, compliance was akin to the ‘enforced compliance’ conceived by Bray et al (2015). Employee representatives in Vivo-Co had prescribed to them what could and could not be discussed in General Council meetings. By contrast, senior executives were always granted the space and time to speak, moreover, they were always

heard. Their voice was of value. The legitimacy of the senior executives' voice was borne out of the hierarchical configuration of Vivo-Co and reinforced through employee-ownership ensuring the compliance of social care employees and their representatives. The importance of compliance to hard unitarism was evidenced further in the organisation's stance toward trade unions.

Hard unitarism does not recognise trade unions and so it is no surprise that employee-ownership is typical in sectors where unions and 'countervailing employee power' are both weak according to Croucher et al (2010 p.852). In Vivo-Co, this manifested in a view of trade unions as unnecessary by the senior executives and in hostility by the Chief Executive Officer suggestive of hard unitarism. However, this was in contrast to the view expressed by one of the founder members which reflected the soft unitarism frame.

In this frame, trade unions are also unnecessary (Cullinane and Dundon 2014). Where they are present suggests there is a failing of Human Relations policies. The founder member stated that he found social care employees wanting to join a trade union 'upsetting' because it meant employee-ownership was not working. He considered it a failure of the model. Yet, paradoxically, despite this animosity towards trade unions, Vivo-Co senior executives commissioned the services of a consultancy to provide the organisation with protection against potential employment disputes. This seemed peculiar for two reasons.

Firstly that it was acceptable for the senior executives to involve a third party though not for employees. This implies a disparity between the two groups despite having equal status via employee-ownership. Secondly, that the social care employees and senior executives are all owners of the company. Yet, the senior executives could use finance from the company to challenge the social care employees. Whether the latter were aware of this anomaly was questionable. The paradox that this created in Vivo-Co is that, on the one hand, employee-ownership entitled every employee-owner the right to a voice whilst, on the other, it was apparent that some voices were more valued than others.

More specifically, the voice of employee representatives and social care employees was subordinated, conceived as 'voice without muscle' (Kaufman and Taras 2010). This was in contrast to the senior executives whose voice, channelled through the organisational hierarchy, carried weight and therefore had value. The view of the senior executives was that in Vivo-Co, there would be no need for trade unions as employees would be owners. Though



predominantly hard unitarist, a soft unitarist philosophy was also at times evidenced by the Chief Executive Officer.

Soft unitarism was apparent in the Chief Executive Officer's aim to secure 'greater employee commitment' from social care employees as well as their 'identification with the organisation' (Ackers 2011) and imploring them as employee-owners to 'go the extra mile' (Legge 2005; Piasna et al 2013). It was also evidenced in the example above of the founder member being disappointed that some social care employees wanted to join trade unions and in the language of Tom, one of the employee representatives who spoke about everyone being part of 'one team' reflecting the soft unitarist assumption of a 'commonality of interests' highlighted in table 7.1. However, as noted in the discussion above, more typical of employee representatives were comments that could be considered collaborative pluralism. Yet, despite the evidence of different frames at play, it was the hard unitarist frame which dominated and framed employee-ownership in a particular way. A different philosophy however may have yielded a different result. This point was first recognised through what was referred to as a grey area of employee-ownership in chapter two (Varieties of Voice).

A grey area was highlighted regarding the different conceptualisations of employee-ownership which was also noted earlier in this chapter (The Philosophy of Employee-ownership). Through the escalator metaphor (Marchington et al 1992) and voice continuum (Gollan et al 2015), voice was conceived as yielding higher levels of strength in an employee-owned enterprise compared to conventional businesses. This also revealed a disparity between the two with the escalator conceiving it higher than the continuum. Similarly, through using the frames of reference, employee-ownership in Vivo-Co reflected a mostly hard unitarist frame. However, it could also provide a mechanism which reflects the key aspects of collaborative pluralism. It could have been focused on efficiency and equity; it could have regarded managers, social care employees and employee representatives as legitimate parties to co-operative relationships; it could have been based on values of mutual respect, loyalty and trust. However, against a hard unitarist backdrop of the senior executives, the possibility of expressing equity concerns were not encouraging.

It was the Chief Executive Officer and senior executives who set the parameters on what could be talked about and this was reinforced by some of the non-executive directors. This presented a paradox in Vivo-Co. The paradox being that employee representatives and senior executives alike were owners and as such the former had the right to challenge any decisions

made by the latter. However, the senior executives continued to assume the prerogative afforded to them in their organisational role and representatives did not challenge this status quo. Decisions made by senior executives could have been challenged by the representatives. That they did not serves to highlight a lack of confidence.

The lack of confidence does not relate to employee representatives, rather, the senior executives. As expressed by Peter, an employee representative, to facilitate the full expression of voice takes 'confidence'. Attempts to enable voice highlighted vulnerabilities, if not a fear, of voice amongst senior executives in Vivo-Co which seemed to be contradictory to their role as leaders. Further, closing down voices once again challenges the notion of meaningful voice which, as argued by Budd (2004), is achieved through free speech and the opportunity to challenge without any reprisal. Indeed, combined, the three themes of employee compliance, organisational hierarchy and management resistance suggested that, far from becoming part of the fabric of Vivo-Co, employee voice was a fabrication. This raises a more fundamental issue concerning the way in which voice is valued in an employee-owned enterprise.

### ***7.8.3 Fabric, fabrication and the value of employee voice***

This final part of the analysis argues that, though employee-ownership was part of the fabric in Vivo-Co through the governance structure, employee voice was a fabrication given the triple challenges of compliance, hierarchy and resistance. More fundamentally, given the pervasive hard unitarist philosophy of senior executives, employee voice was of no value.

As noted in chapter two, employee-ownership can provide the opportunity for employee voice to become part of the organisational fabric. This is because of the governance processes which are an integral feature of such organisations. For example, the mechanism of an Annual General Meeting would enable employees to influence key decisions about the organisation. However, in Vivo-Co an Annual General Meeting had not been organised nor was it planned for the foreseeable future. Similarly, through the mechanism of the General Council, employee voice has the potential of being heard via the employee representatives who bring the thoughts, ideas and concerns of employee-owners to meetings for discussion. However, the capacity of employee representatives to represent the voice of social care employees was either restricted to certain subjects or, on several occasions, simply closed down. Employee voice, through the mechanism of employee-ownership, was determined by senior executives based on their own hard unitarist philosophy and was therefore a fabrication.

The fabrication of employee voice was evidenced in several ways and particularly through the words and actions of the Chief Executive Officer. Affected by the external pressures brought by a challenging social care environment, and shaped by his own beliefs which reflected a hard unitarist philosophy, the Chief Executive Officer argued the organisation needed to be 'efficient' and 'agile'. Along with other senior executives, he determined the meaning of efficiency which informed what was regarded as the purpose of employee-ownership.

The purpose of employee-ownership, from their perspective, was to incentivise social care employees. This would, and reflecting soft unitarism, garner their commitment, encourage them to take responsibility and implore them to go the extra mile. It would be achieved through the employee representatives. Against this backdrop, it is perhaps unsurprising that employee representatives were constrained in what they could discuss and frequently had their voices either suppressed or simply not heard. Yet, herein lay a paradox. Social care employees and employee representatives all made efficiency suggestions that went unheard. By not hearing the employee-owners, the senior management did not hear suggestions that may have brought efficiencies to the organisation.

The argument here is that the suggestions made by employee-owners did not fit the narrow hard unitarist definition of efficiency, and therefore employee-ownership, as conceived by the senior executives. This is perhaps not a surprise given that employee-ownership was the result of a decision made by management, it was a management choice that did not consider the voice preferences of employee-owners. It was then deployed as a management tool to ensure employee compliance which was reinforced through the organisational hierarchy and resulted in the resistance of the voice of social care employees and employee representatives by senior executives. Employee-ownership did provide a mechanism that gave some opportunities for employee voice. However, it could have gone further had it been influenced by a collaborative pluralist frame which was reflected in the words of the social care employees and employee representatives rather than reflecting the hard unitarist philosophy of the senior executives. Moreover, it did provide the opportunity for social care employees to express their voice where, for them, their voice matters, the job that they do and the difference they make to the lives of service users. Unfortunately, in the studied case, no-one was listening, their voices were not heard. The reason for this is that employee voice was not valued.

To conclude thus far, the evidence from Vivo-Co has suggested that employee voice is not something that will spontaneously appear through employee-ownership because of the right to

a voice, or the embeddedness of the mechanism or the sophisticated voice processes. Indeed, though these characteristics of employee-ownership can help to create the potential for voice to form part of an organisation's fabric, it is also dependent on the philosophy of those who choose and implement it. As such, this thesis argues employee voice is a philosophy concerning the value placed on the right to be heard. It is this philosophy which will influence whether employee voice becomes part of the fabric or is merely a fabrication. This leads to the contribution of this thesis; the difference in employee voice is created not because of a mechanism, but because of the way in which it is valued.

## **7.9 Summary**

This chapter has provided an evaluation of the research findings from the case presented in chapter six. It began by evaluating the context of employee voice in Vivo-Co. Vivo-Co was faced with pressures caused by reducing budgets and staff recruitment and retention which prevented it achieving its goal of efficiency. To address this, employee-ownership was introduced as it was assumed by senior executives that it would incentivise employees. This assumption was consistent with some of the employee-ownership literature which is underpinned by a hard unitarist philosophy that regards employees as calculative and motivated by financial gain. The evidence from this study has challenged this assumption. Social care employees were not motivated by financial gain but rather a love of the job. Moreover, the point was made that asking employees about their motivations and voice preferences are rarely alluded to in the literature. This thesis argues that by asking employees these questions, the choice of mechanism could be affected.

It then evaluated how employee-ownership affects employee voice. Some of the literature suggested it can provide more sophisticated voice mechanisms compared to conventional businesses. This was because of factors such as conferring rights, embedding voice in the governance structure and voice expressed through sophisticated governance processes. The evidence here is consistent with this literature inasmuch as employee-ownership did provide the potential for voice to be heard. Employee representatives were able to express their voice on behalf of social care employees and to share ideas about working together co-operatively. Voice as a right and co-operative were noted to be akin to collaborative pluralism. This highlighted a grey area in the literature regarding the influence yielded by the mechanism. The argument here, drawn from the evidence, was that the degree of influence given to voice is yielded not because of the mechanism but rather the philosophy of those introducing it.

This was followed by an evaluation of the outcomes of employee voice through employee-ownership. The employee-ownership literature suggested various factors that could impact negatively on employee voice. These being that it is used as a means of ensuring employee compliance, that the hierarchical configuration can be an impediment to it and that there could be resistance from management. These challenges were in evidence in Vivo-Co. Consistent with the hard unitarist philosophy of its senior executives, employee-ownership in the organisation was regarded as a management tool that would achieve the objective of efficiency. A key finding here, the focus of the penultimate section, has been that, even when voice reflected an efficiency objective, it was often counteracted and weakened by senior management meaning it often still went unheard.

The final section discussed two themes which have recurred throughout this thesis regarding employee voice as either forming part of an organisation's fabric or merely a fabrication. It was argued that, based on evidence from this study, it was a fabrication. However, it was also argued that such fabrication was not an outcome of the mechanism but rather the philosophy underpinning it. The chapter concluded that employee voice is not something that will spontaneously appear through employee-ownership because it yields the right to a voice, or because of the embeddedness of the mechanism or its sophisticated voice processes. Rather, employee voice is a philosophy concerning the value placed on the right to be heard. This leads to the contribution of this thesis; the difference in employee voice is created not because of a mechanism, but because of the way in which it is valued.

## **Chapter Eight: Conclusion**

### **8.1 Introduction**

This chapter presents the conclusions of this thesis. It begins by summarising the key points which were discussed in the preceding chapters. It then considers the limitation in the extant literature which provided the motivation for this study and informed the research questions; which was the lack of evidence of alternative voice mechanisms. This is followed by a discussion of how the limitation was addressed by this study through exploring employee voice in an employee-owned enterprise. It then presents the main findings and conclusions of this study based on evidence presented in chapter six and the discussion in chapter seven.

The evidence suggested that there were some opportunities for employee voice yielded through employee-ownership, such as being able to influence governance processes and the potential of it being part of the fabric of employee-ownership. However, there was also evidence that the pressures on, and dominance of, senior executives counteracted and weakened voice suggesting it was a fabrication. Employee-ownership was regarded as a tool to achieve the objective of efficiency through employee compliance, the organisational hierarchy and management resistance. A key finding was that even when employee voice reflected this objective it often still went unheard. The chapter then presents the final conclusion of this study: employee voice is not something that will spontaneously appear through employee-ownership because of the right to a voice, its embeddedness or because of sophisticated governance processes. Rather, employee voice is a philosophy concerning the value placed on the right to be heard. This leads to a discussion of the contribution to knowledge of this study: the difference in employee voice is created not because of a mechanism, but because of the way in which it is valued.

### **8.2 Key points from preceding chapters**

Chapter one provided an introduction to, and overview of, the study. The overarching aim of the thesis was set out in that chapter: to explore whether employee voice in an employee-owned enterprise is different compared to that of conventional businesses. This emerged because of a limitation in the employee voice literature which revealed our knowledge of it is drawn from conventional businesses which tend to use low-level voice mechanisms, affording

employees only limited opportunities to express their voice and be heard, whereas less is known about alternative voice mechanisms.

Chapter two reviewed the literature on employee voice. It highlighted two academic disciplines dominate the study of employee voice: Employment Relations and HRM. It provided an overview of the traditional voice mechanism associated with the Employment Relations discipline - trade unions, and contemporary mechanisms which tend to be associated with HRM. This revealed that, whilst Employment Relations scholars tend to focus on equity concerns of employees, HRM scholars tend to focus on efficiency concerns of employers. HRM draws empirical evidence from conventional business where the purpose of employee voice is to contribute to efficiency, reflects 'management choice' and is expressed through 'low-level' mechanisms meaning some voices go unheard. This highlighted a limitation in the literature regarding alternative mechanisms that might enable voice to be heard. As an alternative, employee-ownership was discussed in this chapter which included identifying three strengths vis-à-vis employee voice: the 'right' to a voice, the 'embeddedness' of voice and 'sophisticated' governance processes suggesting it could be part of the fabric of an organisation. However, challenges were also revealed: employee 'compliance', 'organisational hierarchy' and 'management resistance' suggesting what might be little more than a fabrication.

Chapter three discussed the theoretical framework which was used to evaluate employee voice in the studied case; the frames of reference. It began by highlighting the main characteristics of the three frames conceived by Fox (1966; 1974); unitarism, pluralism and radical. It then discussed developments to the unitarist frame (Storey 1989) and the pluralist frame (Bray et al 2015). This discussion revealed that HRM, which as noted in chapter two tends to influence much of the contemporary employee voice literature, is underpinned by what Storey (1989) conceived as 'hard' and 'soft' unitarism. Within these two frames the purpose of voice is to contribute to the efficiency of conventional businesses which is reflected in the choices of managers for low-level mechanisms. In contrast, the recent development to the frames; collaborative pluralism (Bray et al 2015), offered a different way to conceive employee voice. Whilst acknowledging the necessity of efficiency concerns, it re-introduced equity concerns into the employee voice debate by conceiving it as a 'right' and 'co-operative'. These three frames were used to compare and contrast employee voice in the studied case.

Chapter four outlined how the methodological approach of this study would address the limitation in the employee voice literature. With the frames of reference as its theoretical framework, it would generate rich and in-depth data to evaluate the difference in employee voice through employee-ownership compared to conventional businesses. It had a subjectivist ontology, interpretivist epistemology and qualitative methodology through a single case study that was exploratory and explanatory. It emphasised the importance of understanding the context in which a case operated and therefore introduced the Context, Mechanism and Outcomes (CMO) configuration conceived by Pawson and Tilley (1997) that was used to organise data collection and analysis. It outlined the research process which included selecting and accessing the studied case, methods of data collection and data analysis. Finally, some of the limitations of the research process were considered.

Chapter five, discussed the social care sector in which the studied case operates. Given the intention of providing a rich and in-depth evaluation, an understanding of the context in which the case operates was considered necessary. It would help to evaluate the factors affecting decisions which were made and the outcomes for organisational actors. The chapter referenced a key policy turn, the 1990 National Health Services and Community Care Act, which led to the marketization of social care which increased the prevalence of for-profit social care organisations. It then considered the employee voice mechanisms used by for-profit social care organisations; typically mechanisms which are chosen by management and tend to be regarded as low-level. It examined the outcomes of employee voice in social care which can lead to problems with recruitment and retention and poor employment conditions. Finally, it highlighted a paradox which was that despite the high numbers leaving their employing organisation, social care employees express a love of the job.

Chapter six presented the findings of the case study, Vivo-Co, an employee-owned social care organisation. It provided a company profile and organisational detail, such as how space was occupied. It then discussed the contextual factors in which employee-ownership emerged in Vivo-Co. These were decreasing local authority funds, increasing company efficiency and the 'problem' of employee recruitment and retention. The solution was based on an assumption about how social care employees are 'incentivised', through financial rewards. It then discussed the mechanism, employee-ownership and the ways in which it enables employee voice that is different to voice in conventional businesses. In particular, differences are yielded through the various governance processes which provide opportunities for employee voice to be part of the organisational fabric. The outcomes of employee-ownership vis-à-vis



employee voice were then discussed which revealed that whilst there were some positive outcomes, there were also challenges: compliance, hierarchy and resistance. These challenges often counteracted or weakened voice because employee-ownership was regarded by senior executives as a management tool that would achieve the objective of efficiency. A key finding was that even when employee reflected this objective it still went unheard.

Chapter seven evaluated the findings from the case by comparing and contrasting these with the literature. It began by considering the contextual factors in which employee-ownership emerged. This revealed a contradiction between the empirical evidence and the academic literature. It was assumed in the studied case that social care employees would be incentivised by employee-ownership. This assumption was consistent with some of the employee-ownership literature which is underpinned by a philosophy that regards employees as calculative and motivated by financial gain. The findings of this study challenge this assumption. Social care employees in Vivo-Co were motivated by such things as a love of the job. This served to highlight a key finding which is that employees are rarely asked questions about their motivation or their preferences for voice mechanisms. It then evaluated the mechanism, employee-ownership.

Some of the employee-ownership literature suggests it is a more sophisticated way of providing voice compared to conventional mechanisms. Consistent with this literature, this study found employee-ownership did confer the right to a voice, embedded voice in the organisational structure and enabled voice through its governance processes suggesting it was part of the fabric in Vivo-Co. Additionally, this study found that the governance processes enabled employee representatives to work together co-operatively which reflected a different philosophy compared to that of senior executives. This difference helped to explain a grey area in the employee voice literature regarding employee-ownership relating to the degree of voice yielded through employee-ownership. The argument here, drawn from the evidence in Vivo-Co, is the difference is not yielded because of the mechanism but rather the philosophy of those introducing it. As such, the findings here are consistent with the literature inasmuch as employee-ownership provided the means for voice to be heard, however, this is dependent on the philosophy which underpins it. It then evaluated the outcomes.

Again, consistent with the employee ownership literature, challenges to employee voice were revealed through 'compliance', 'hierarchy' and 'resistance'. Consistent with the employee voice literature, employee-ownership was used as a management tool that would achieve the

objective of efficiency. However, a key finding of this research is that even when it reflected this objective, it often still went unheard. The pressures on, and dominance of the senior executives counteracted and weakened voice suggesting it was little more than a fabrication. Nevertheless, this was argued not to be an outcome of the mechanism but the way it was valued. Employee voice is a philosophy relating to the value we place on the right to be heard. The chapter concluded that the difference in employee voice is created, not because of a mechanism, but because of the way in which it is valued.

### **8.3 Limitation in the employee voice literature**

A review of the literature on employee voice revealed that there are two principal academic disciplines which study employee voice: Employment Relations and HRM. It also revealed differences in the way both disciplines conceive employee voice. The study of employee voice by Employment Relations scholars has tended to be in relation to equity concerns and through the mechanism of trade unions. This was the case for much of the twentieth century.

The focus of study for Employment Relations scholars was on whether employee voice mechanisms were achieving equity in the relationship between employees and employers. Within the discipline the employment relationship was regarded as skewed in favour of the employer. Trade unions were considered to provide a counter-balance to the power of employers. However, the literature review also revealed a change in employee voice influenced by two key factors. First, was a change in the political environment during the 1980s and second the introduction of HRM to the UK. Through these two factors, employee voice changed. This change in employee voice helped to highlight the limitation in the literature.

The limitation relates to the point that the study of contemporary employee voice has tended to be dominated by HRM which draws empirical evidence from conventional businesses. Characteristics of conventional businesses would include for example maximising shareholder value and, importantly, emphasising the primacy of efficiency. Employee voice in conventional businesses, and therefore HRM, is of value only inasmuch as it contributes to the business objective of efficiency. However, this means employees may have only limited opportunities to express their voice and when they do, it is through mechanisms which have been chosen by management that are considered to be low-level and over a restricted range of subjects. Moreover, this means employee voice is limited in its conception through an economic lens. A growing body of literature from Employment Relations scholars suggests a

consequence of the contemporary landscape is that employee voice can go unheard. It is against this backdrop that the limitation was revealed; less is known about employee voice through alternative mechanisms.

This limitation in the literature formed the motivation for this study. To address the limitation, employee voice was explored in this study through an alternative mechanism, employee-ownership. Employee-ownership was regarded as a potentially fruitful way to study employee voice as it offers the potential of an alternative to the low-level mechanisms typical of conventional businesses and the potential for employee voice to be heard rather than being restricted to specific topics.

#### **8.4 Addressing the limitation in the literature**

To address the limitation, this thesis focused on studying employee voice in an employee-owned enterprise. The aim was to explore whether it differed to that in conventional businesses. The rationale was that there might be greater potential for voice to be heard through employee-ownership compared to conventional businesses. To further understand this, the 'escalator metaphor' (Marchington et al 1992) and the 'voice continuum' (Gollan et al 2015) helped to provide a comparison between employee-ownership as a mechanism of employee voice and other conventional voice mechanisms.

The escalator conceived employee voice to be at a higher level in an employee-owned enterprise, a position conferred through its governance processes. These processes might include an Annual General Meeting and representatives who represent employees. In contrast to the escalator however, the Gollan et al's (ibid) continuum placed employee-ownership at a lower level. The reason for this is that employee-owned enterprises lack voice that is independent from management. As such, the continuum placed employee-ownership lower than the escalator though still higher than conventional mechanisms. In so doing, the escalator and continuum revealed a disparity in how each regarded employee voice yielded through employee-ownership. To explore this disparity, the strengths and weaknesses of employee-ownership were considered by drawing on the employee-ownership literature.

Three positive characteristics of employee-ownership vis-à-vis employee voice were identified. The first was that voice is a right as it is enshrined in the organisation's governing document. This is unusual given there is no legal requirement for companies to have employee voice mechanisms and provides weight in terms of how it is regarded by employees

compared to conventional mechanisms. This leads to the second which is that voice is embedded, again this is via the governing document. The reason this is a positive factor is that it means employee voice cannot easily be taken away. This is a key difference between employee-ownership and voice mechanisms in conventional businesses which gives the former a greater sense of permanence. The third factor is that voice is channelled through an array of sophisticated governance processes. As noted above, these can include Annual General Meetings and employee representatives which again give further strength to employee voice as it is enabled through these processes. However, concerns were also raised in the employee-ownership literature that could negatively impact on voice.

The first concern related to employee compliance whereby employee-ownership is used as a means of incentivising and motivating employees in order that they comply with the key company goals. The second related to organisational hierarchy which preferences the voice of senior managers even though the governance structure of employee-ownership suggests a more equitable voice. A particular concern was when the organisational hierarchy and governance structure worked against one another. The third related to management resistance to employee-ownership and hence the effect on employee voice. This could be through such factors as managers' concern about the time involved when decisions are made collectively. Combined, these three factors suggested employee voice in an employee-owned enterprise might be more akin to conventional voice mechanisms and little more than a fabrication.

This study evaluated these strengths and challenges in terms of addressing whether employee voice in an employee-owned enterprise is different compared to that of conventional businesses. In so doing, the study also addressed the way in which employee voice has been conceptualised.

As discussed above, contemporary employee voice is mostly influenced by HRM. By drawing on the frames of reference (Fox 1966, 1974; Storey 1989), revealed that HRM is underpinned by 'hard' and 'soft' unitarist frames. Hard unitarism views employees as 'resources' who are calculative and driven by financial gain. Reflecting this, voice mechanisms such as share-ownership schemes are used as well as the option for employees of the 'exit' route. Soft unitarism, regards employees as 'assets' with psychological needs that can be satisfied through their employment. Reflecting this, employee voice mechanisms focus on 'engagement' and 'involvement'. The important point being that, regardless of whether hard or soft unitarism, employee voice is predicated on an efficiency argument. This means that

much of the extant literature on employee voice is limited in its conception of it through an economic lens. This study introduced a recent addition to the frames, a collaborative pluralist frame.

Collaborative pluralism has been conceived by Employment Relations scholars Bray et al (2015) as a development on the original pluralist frame and an alternative to the hard and soft unitarist frames. Retaining some of the original pluralist characteristics, key aspects of this re-conceptualised frame were that employee voice is a right and it is co-operative. By viewing employees as equals, collaborative pluralism (Bray et al 2015) offered a different way of conceiving employee voice whereby it is about efficiency and equity through the right to a voice and voice is expressed as both conflict and co-operation. The rationale of this particular thesis was to evaluate employee voice in an employee-owned enterprise using the three frames as its theoretical framework.

## **8.5 Main findings and conclusions**

The conclusions of this study are drawn from the empirical findings of the case which were compared and contrasted to the academic literature. In so doing, they address the aim of the research and the research questions which were presented in chapter one. The findings and conclusion are organised around the context, mechanism and outcome configuration (Pawson and Tilley 1997).

### ***8.5.1 The context of employee voice***

The first research question was concerned with the contextual factors which influenced the choice of mechanism in the studied case. Various pressures were discussed concerning the environment in which Vivo-Co operated and how this impacted on the choice of mechanism, one of which was funding from local authorities. However, the key issue that drove the decision to implement employee-ownership was low staff retention.

Low staff retention was a key concern for organisations in the social care sector. The challenges faced by the sector regarding the recruitment and retention of employees was highlighted by several academics (e.g. Hussein et al 2016). Similarly, Vivo-Co was facing considerable challenges of recruitment and retention, it was, according to the Chief Executive Officer, what kept him awake at night. These pressures shaped and influenced the decision to implement employee-ownership. The assumption was that it would act as a financial incentive to social care employees to stay with the organisation. This decision was influenced by the

philosophy of some of the senior executives, a philosophy which was also apparent in some of the employee-ownership literature.

Based on a hard unitarist philosophy, employees are regarded as calculative and incentivised by financial gain. Through being financially incentivised, social care employees would remain with the organisation rather than leaving, thereby reducing 'costs' for Vivo-Co. The voice of social care employees in Vivo-Co regarding the choice of mechanism was never sought. Had it been, the Chief Executive Officer would have known that financial gain was not their motivation. A key finding from Vivo-Co was that social care employees are incentivised by a love of the job and wanting to make a difference to the lives of service users. This point is further borne out by the evidence from the social care literature that approximately one-third of social care employees remain in the social care sector once they have left their employing organisation.

To conclude, the issue of retention and recruitment within the social care sector was a key reason for the decision to implement employee-ownership in Vivo-Co. Consistent with conventional businesses, the choice was made by senior figures within the organisation without including the voice of employees. Moreover, asking employees what does motivate them and what their voice preferences might be is rarely alluded to in the literature (Marchington 2007). This thesis argues that by asking employees these questions the choice of mechanism could be influenced.

### ***8.5.2 The mechanism of employee voice***

The second research question asked whether employee-ownership differed as an employee voice mechanism compared to those more typical of conventional businesses, including those in the social care sector. Some Employment Relations scholars argue that voice mechanisms in conventional businesses tend to be low-level affording employees limited opportunities to express their voice. Some also argue that, in contrast, employee voice through employee-ownership was considered to be at a higher level given that voice is a right, it is embedded within the organisation and there are sophisticated governance processes.

In Vivo-Co, the right to a voice was enshrined in the Articles of Association. This meant social care employees did have a right to express their voice, something which is not afforded to employees in conventional businesses. Similarly the Articles of Association meant that employee voice was embedded in the organisation. The Articles could not be easily removed

as is the case with some mechanisms in conventional businesses. Such embeddedness was also achieved through the related governance processes. In Vivo-Co these were an Annual General Meeting and the General Council.

An Annual General Meeting would have provided an important opportunity for social care employees to express their voice. Such a meeting did not happen and therefore there was no opportunity for employee voice to be heard.

The General Council meetings did provide a means for the voice of social care employees to be heard. This was achieved through employee representatives. Such a mechanism is untypical of conventional businesses. There were also opportunities for employee representatives to influence decision-making within the General Council as well as to broaden their knowledge of the organisation and develop skills they said they would otherwise not have developed. Moreover, employee representatives expressed a desire to co-operate with one another, for example, to explore ways of ensuring employee-ownership was accessible to social care employees. This reflected a different philosophy compared to that of senior executives. Exploring this difference as it concerned Vivo-Co, which related to the degree of voice influence yielded through employee-ownership, helped to explain a grey area in the employee voice literature regarding employee-ownership and led to a second conclusion.

This conclusion is that employee-ownership did provide the potential for employee voice to be heard. This potential was created through the governance processes which suggests that employee voice could be part of the organisational fabric of employee-ownership. The empirical evidence from Vivo-Co suggested this potential was often not realised, voice was unheard. A key conclusion drawn from this study is consistent with the literature inasmuch as employee-ownership provided the means for voice to be heard, however, this is dependent on the philosophy which underpins it.

### ***8.5.3 Outcomes of employee voice***

The third research question was concerned with how employee voice operated through the mechanism and the consequences of this for key organisational actors. The findings were mixed, with some positive outcomes regarding employee voice resulting from employee-ownership alongside, and outweighed by, a number of challenges.

The positive outcomes related to social care employees and employee representatives. An example of the former was Kevin requesting that the wages for employees in his branch be retained as weekly rather than monthly payments. Employee-ownership had provided the mechanism to address this issue in the meeting. An example of the latter was the representatives pointing to the skills they would develop through being a representative which could help them in their future career. They also saw it as an advantage to be part of what they described as an 'elite' group. It also led to some degree of influence of employee representatives at General Council meetings, such as changing the names on the Trust Deed. Examples such as this highlight that social care employees and their employee representatives were able to exercise their voice. However, there were also several challenges to it.

Several factors were referred to in the employee-ownership literature which could have a negative effect on employee voice: employee compliance, organisational hierarchy and management resistance. These challenges were in evidence in Vivo-Co. Consistent with the hard unitarist philosophy of the senior executives, employee-ownership was regarded as a management tool that was used to ensure the efficiency objective was achieved through ensuring employee compliance through the primacy of the hierarchical configuration and through management resistance. The voice of employee representatives was often closed down in preference for the voice of senior executives and non-executive directors. An example of this was being told by senior executives and non-executive directors they could not discuss operational issues, or being told by the Chief Executive Officer they were not to act like shop stewards, or senior executives being derogatory about the role and questioning the capability of employee representatives. In so doing, the value, or rather lack of, afforded to employee voice was highlighted as an issue. Indeed, a key finding is that even when employee voice did reflect an efficiency objective, it still went unheard.

Social care employees and employee representatives made several suggestions of efficiency innovations, such as improving and increasing communications between representatives outside of General Council meetings. However, the conceptualisation of efficiency by the senior executives was confined to a hard unitarist definition regarding 'cost' and 'profit'. Because the suggestions made by the social care employees and employee representatives did not fit this definition they were not heard. Further, the pressures on senior executives, such as reduced local authority funding, often counteracted and weakened voice which suggested it was little more than a fabrication. On balance, the challenges the employee representatives faced outweighed opportunities that had been provided by the mechanism.



To conclude, there were a number of opportunities for employees voice to be expressed which were yielded through employee-ownership. However, the challenges facing social care employees and employee representatives in expressing their voice suggested it was a fabrication. However, it is argued in this thesis that this was not an outcome of the mechanism but the way in which employee voice was valued.

### **8.6 The fabric and fabrication of employee voice through employee-ownership**

Key features of employee-ownership discussed in the literature were employees having the right to a voice and the potential to embed employee voice within an organisation through the unconventional governance mechanism. The possibility existed for employee voice to be part of the fabric of Vivo-Co which would make it more difficult to discard in the future. The employee-ownership model did provide a mechanism in Vivo-Co through which voice could be expressed. However, several notable factors have been highlighted by this study that mitigated against employee voice and suggested it was merely a fabrication.

The challenges to employee voice included the significance of management philosophy and organisational context in shaping decisions and the choice of voice mechanism and how these impacted on the outcomes of voice. The voices of employee-owners in this organisation were suppressed on several occasions. This study has also revealed that senior executives often used the organisational hierarchy, or their positions within that hierarchy, to close down voice. In so doing, the study highlights the challenges brought about by superimposing an unconventional governance structure, employee-ownership, onto a conventional, hierarchical, structure. However, it has also highlighted how the philosophy of key senior figures influences the choice of mechanism and the way in which the mechanism evolves. The philosophy in Vivo-Co was such that employee voice was a fabrication despite it being valued by the employee representatives.

Significantly, the study has found that employees do value the opportunity to have a voice at work and revealed that when expressed, employees erred toward a collaborative and co-operative voice. Through studying voice yielded as a right, a different dimension to voice has been uncovered that adds to the current literature. Employee voice studied through employee-ownership has helped to reveal that by not valuing voice its true potential is not realised with the, perhaps paradoxical, consequence of being detrimental to efficiency. In so doing, this thesis advances debates by presenting a more nuanced view of employee voice in an

unconventional organisation that highlights its value in and of itself as well as its potential for adding value to the organisation.

If employees are given a voice, there is a good chance they will speak. However, as noted by Peter, an employee representative, it takes confidence and trust to have those conversations. Employees' voices need to be heard and need to be valued. Employee voice is not something that will spontaneously appear through employee-ownership because of the right to a voice, or the embeddedness of the mechanism or the sophisticated voice processes, rather, it is a philosophy concerning the value we place on the right to be heard. All of which leads to the contribution to knowledge of this thesis which concerns the way that employee voice is valued.

### **8.7 Contribution to knowledge: the value of voice**

This thesis has challenged the literature which assumes employee-ownership will result in voice being heard through being part of the organisational fabric. Far from it being part of the fabric, employee-ownership in Vivo-Co served only to constrain and coerce employee voice through the incentive of financial gain. Senior management did not value the voice of employee-owners whether social care employees or employee representatives. Despite there being opportunities afforded by employee-ownership these were outweighed by the prevailing unitarist environment that shaped and influenced the way in which employee voice evolved in the studied case and the outcomes it had on its key organisational actors, employee representatives and social care employees, meaning their voice often went unheard.

Given the often hard unitarist philosophy of senior executives, unheard employee voice is perhaps unsurprising. However, by introducing a collaborative pluralist frame of reference, there was the potential that this could be altered, and the potential for voice to be heard realised. As it was in Vivo-Co, when such a voice surfaced it was frequently closed down or not heard. Thus this thesis complements the growing body of literature regarding 'unheard' employee voice (Gunawardana 2014; Wilkinson et al 2018). However, the key theoretical contribution made by this thesis is that employee voice is created not because of a mechanism, but as a result of the way in which it is valued. Employee voice in Vivo-Co was not heard because it was not valued. This is a significant addition to the current employee voice debate. The thesis also makes important empirical and methodological contributions.

Empirically, the frames of reference enabled insights into the studied case which may not have been possible if other approaches had been used. Though employee-ownership has been studied previously (e.g. Cathcart 2009, 2014; Salaman and Storey 2016), it has not been studied in relation to employee voice nor have the frames of reference been used in such a context. By using the frames, the researcher was able to evaluate use of different frames across organisational actors in Vivo-Co as well as amongst them. This served to highlight the nuances and overlaps between frames as evidenced by different organisational actors. As noted by Heery (2016):

‘Frames of reference are broad perspectives on work and employment that overlap at their edges and individual researchers may move between them or locate themselves at the intersection of any two frames’ (p.257).

Methodologically, the approach to this study was qualitative using a single case. By using this approach, richness and depth have been added to the concept of employee voice that is typically studied using quantitative methods. It has also provided an insight into how voice evolves in an employee-owned enterprise and in so doing, highlights how this differs to voice in a conventional business. However, the approach also helped to identify similarities.

As with conventional businesses, it was senior management who determined who was allowed to speak and what could be discussed and, following a unitarist tradition, implored employee-owners to ‘take responsibility’ and ‘go the extra mile’. Significantly, a fear of hearing voice by senior executives was revealed that stifled its potential. Though employee-owners spoke their voices were unheard or closed down. As such, voice in an employee-owned enterprise, as with conventional enterprises, is dependent on management philosophy; their rationale and motivation for its introduction as well as the choice of processes used, and as a result, the way in which voice is evolved. The methodological approach enabled the differences *and* the similarities to be observed. Of course there are other ways that the research may have developed and areas for future research have been identified.

### **8.8 Areas for future research**

During the course of this research, three areas for possible future research have been identified. The first relates to the subject of employee voice and its exploration in different organisational settings. As noted several times during this study, much of what we know about employee voice is drawn from conventional businesses. Further research into mechanisms in other settings would be useful, for example in public sector organisations and

third sector organisations. A possibility for a larger project would be to draw comparisons of voice mechanisms across different sectors.

A second possible area of future research relates to greater use of the frames of reference as a theoretical framework. In this thesis, the frames were thought to provide the most suitable lens as they offered a more intricate and nuanced view of employee voice, particularly from the perspective of employees. This thesis has used the frames of reference to consider an alternative voice mechanism to enable employees to have a voice in the workplace. More research in this area, which puts employees back at the centre of employee voice research, could address the issue of it being regarded not as a means to an end, rather, as an end in itself.

A third and related area for potential future research concerns the issue of the movement of social care employees between organisations as discussed in chapter five. Exploring this issue further would provide important evidence for future policy on social care and explore in greater detail the vehicles which are used to deliver social care. For example, a future question might be what is the rationale and motivation for providing social care through private for-profit organisations given that the differences between those organisations are minimal? Finally, future research could explore further the thesis presented here, which is, in order to be heard, employee voice needs to be valued.

## **Appendix One: Access process**

The process of gaining access to Vivo-Co was protracted and full of trepidation. The request to the researcher's contact was made in January 2015. He passed the request to the organisation's Chief Executive Officer (CEO) who was also known to the researcher. A first access meeting between the researcher and the CEO was subsequently arranged for February 2015.

### **Access meeting one**

At this meeting an overall summary of the research was provided. This included the scope and purpose of the research, a rationale for approaching this organisation, the role of the researcher, the research methods, which people the researcher would like to speak to and the anticipated disturbance to the organisation. Specifically, the meeting was arranged to ensure the CEO:

- a) Understood the nature and implications of the research.
- b) Understood what the research would not do.

Several other topics were discussed at this meeting. The researcher stressed that the research would be confidential and anonymous and she would be mindful of commercial sensitivities. Furthermore, she would adhere at all times to her university's research ethics code of practice. In addition, she reassured the CEO that whilst she would carry out all of the research herself, she was being supported by an experienced and knowledgeable team at the university. The CEO used the meeting as an opportunity to provide an outline of the organisation.

This outline included: there was no Human Resource Management (HRM) department, rather the organisation contracted out HRM functions to an HRM consultancy; there were no external shareholders; there were approximately 800 staff who constituted a disparate group; staff retention was an issue in the organisation and so they had developed an Engagement Strategy to deal with this; and, the majority of staff worked off-site. He then made two specific requests at this initial meeting.

Firstly, that a subsequent meeting was held between the researcher and the senior executive team (SET) made up of the CEO and three Directors: Finance, Quality and Compliance and

Operations. In preparation for this meeting the CEO requested a research brief from the researcher that could be shared with the SET. The second request was that the researcher gave some assistance to the organisation in developing a social impact framework they were developing on behalf of one of their funders. The CEO was aware that the researcher had previous experience of developing social impact frameworks; hence the request.

### **Access meeting two**

Following the first meeting, a research brief was prepared as well as a letter to the CEO formally requesting a meeting with the SET. This led to the second access meeting which was held during April 2015 with all of the SET in attendance. After introductions, the researcher covered the following points: role of the researcher, nature and purpose of the research, confidentiality and anonymity, access as a continuously negotiated process, the level of access required and an anticipated research timescale. The SET, raised the following concerns:

1. What's in it for us? The SET were keen to know what the organisation would get from the research. The researcher stressed that given the research was academic, the findings would make a contribution to existing knowledge in relation to the issues being researched. However, more pragmatically, the researcher informed the meeting that she had agreed with the CEO to contribute to an area of work the organisation were undertaking relating to a social impact framework.
2. Why focus on one branch? The researcher explained that though the whole organisation was part of the research there would be a focus on one of the six branches. The rationale was due to two reasons. Firstly, resources: the branches are spread geographically and one researcher would not have the time or financial capacity to cover the six branches. Secondly, and related, the researcher wanted to explore in great depth how voice manifested. This would be more achievable by focussing the available resources on one branch.
3. What if we don't like the results? The researcher explained that the purpose of the research was to learn about how voice unfolded in the organisation. There were no assumptions about a right or wrong way for this to happen, the aim was simply to study the process. Further, though the priority was to contribute to academic knowledge, there were perhaps some lessons the participating organisation could learn from the process that would, possibly, lead to improvements in terms of how it was managed in the organisation.
4. How much time will you spend with us? The researcher explained this would be difficult to predict but no more than perhaps once a week over a period of approximately six months. However, this would be dependent on the amount of access given and to what activities.

At the end of this meeting the SET agreed they would consider the request and let the researcher know. However, some weeks went by without any further contact.

Eventually the researcher contacted the CEO by telephone. He informed the researcher that the SET had decided they would permit access but with a number of caveats. Firstly, they requested copies of all documents relating to the ethics of the research that the researcher would be adhering to. Secondly, and given their concerns about commercial confidentiality and reputational damage, they would not allow access to meetings of the operating board; where key decisions about business and financial matters were discussed. Thirdly, the organisation could veto access at any time if they wished. The researcher suggested a meeting with the CEO to discuss these caveats in further detail. This meeting took place during May 2015 and was attended by the CEO and the researcher.

### **Access meeting three**

The purpose of this third access meeting was to discuss the concerns of the SET and hopefully provide some reassurances. At this meeting the researcher agreed that she would send the CEO a number of documents relating to ethical practices and guidelines to which she would adhere. Furthermore, having taken advice from the university in advance of this meeting, the researcher suggested putting in place a Non-Disclosure Agreement (NDA) between herself and Vivo-Co. The CEO agreed to this. As such, it was agreed the researcher would send electronic copies of all ethical procedures and a draft NDA. It was agreed by both parties that access would be an on-going process during the period of the research. In addition, the researcher agreed to share key concepts that emerged from the research. Finally, it was requested that the researcher carry out an 'Engagement Survey' of all branch staff.

Though the researcher agreed to do this, using her own time and resources, the results would not form part of the findings of this research. From the outset, this research purposely used a qualitative design. Agreement was on the basis that the survey acted as a gesture of appreciation for allowing access. In the meantime a further meeting would be arranged to discuss the aforementioned. Additionally, the CEO agreed to co-ordinate access on behalf of the researcher to speak to the branch manager and attend one of the organisation's General Council, the main governing body of the organisation. This meeting was held during June 2015.

### **Access meeting four**

The fourth access meeting with the CEO was held towards the end of July 2015. In other words, the research had begun. The previous month the researcher had attended the first meeting of the General Council whilst access had still not been fully agreed. Though predominantly focused on access, this meeting also began the process of interviewing the CEO. In advance of this meeting the researcher had sent the following to the CEO for discussion at the meeting:

- Consent form
- Draft non-disclosure agreement
- Code of good practice
- Policy and procedure ethics

At this meeting the NDA was discussed and several points were discussed in relation to accessing other organisational actors, familiarisation with the organisation and the next steps.

### **Access meeting five**

A fifth meeting was held during August 2015 when the NDA was finally signed off by the CEO. In total, the access process had taken six months and was still not fully guaranteed, it could have been revoked at any time during the research process. As it was, this did not happen.



## Appendix Two: Six-S configuration

Sovereignty	Employee voice conceived at the level of governance enshrined within the governing document. The governing document provides a framework for the organisation: firstly, in terms of the technicalities and regulations of an employee-owned organisation; secondly in terms of its aspirations and its purpose; and thirdly in terms of setting the parameters of what the organisation and its various bodies could and could not do: its organisational powers.
Structure	Employee voice was conceived at the level of structure manifesting in relation to the organisational configuration. Vivo-Co has a traditional hierarchical structure with a CEO at the top, supported by an executive management group, branch managers, managers, co-ordinators, line managers, office staff and support workers.
Strategy	Employee voice conceived at a strategic level incorporated several elements. The two main elements covered by this research discussed at the General Council meetings were a business plan and an engagement strategy.
Systems	There were multiple systems in place in Vivo-Co potentially providing opportunities for employee voice, some of which were borne out of the organisation being an employee-owned enterprise, others borne out of the CEO's desire for greater engagement.
Shape	The sixth organisational level is conceived as the 'shape' and refers to the size of the organisation, such as numbers of employees but also the physical space it occupies and its physical surroundings.
Spirit	Spirit refers to the organisational climate, how it felt to be in the offices of Vivo-Co, how welcoming and open the organisation was.

### **Appendix Three: Schedule for observations**

What activity is being observed, e.g. meeting, training?

How much notice of the activity was given to its participants?

How are people notified?

How frequently does the activity occur?

Where is the observation taking place?

Are there any spatial considerations, e.g. seating plans?

What format is being used in terms of the activity?

Who has given permission to observe the activity?

Who is being observed, including demographics?

Why are they being observed?

Are any refreshments being provided?

Have participants the relevant materials to take part in the activity, e.g. minutes of meetings?

Are some people more engaged in the activity than others, why is this?

What is covered by the activity?

Who has decided what is covered by the activity?

Is there anything that is not covered that possibly should be?

How long is the activity?

Are there action points from the activity, if so, do they need to be communicated to others and how and when will this be done?

Could the information have been gathered using a different research method?

## **Appendix Four: Interview schedule**

### **Preamble**

Researcher introduction: name, role and institution

Thank participant for giving their time to be interviewed

Purpose of the interview: some people feel *involved* with the organisation they work; they feel they are a *part* of it; they feel like they *belong*. When people feel like that it can mean their time at work is more positive. I'm interested in finding out what helps someone feel that way or may stop them feeling that way. To find out, I'd like to ask you some questions about:

- a) Other places you have worked and what it was like at those other places
- b) Your job here and what it involves
- c) What it is like working in this organisation
- d) What it is like working in this organisation compared to other places you have worked
- e) Ways of working in this organisation to encourage people to feel they belong

Format of the interview: give an estimated length of interview; assure participant they can skip questions if they wish and the interview can be stopped at any time.

### **Research ethics**

Provide assurance in terms of confidentiality and anonymity; ask for permission to record the interview; and ask participant to complete consent form.

### **Demographic data**

Age, gender, training

#### **a. Your work history**

To begin, I'm interested to know the type of work you did before you came to work here and what led you to coming to work here.

Did you work at other places before you came here, if so, what kind of work did you do?

How did you come to work here?

How long have you worked here?

## **b. Your job**

For the next set of questions I'd like to ask you are about your job.

I'd like to know about your job as a support worker, can you take me through a typical day?

What does having a 'good day at work' mean for you?

What would a 'bad day at work' mean?

Can you tell me what you like most about your job?

Can you tell me what you least like about your job?

## **About working here**

Now I'd like to move on from talking about your job to asking you some questions about what it is like to work in this organisation. If you were talking to a friend about this organisation:

- What would you say to them?
- What would you tell them are the 'good things' about working here: why/examples?
- Are there things you would say are not so good: what/why/examples?

## **Comparing this organisation to your previous organisation/s**

Now I'd like to talk about any differences or similarities between the organisations you talked about earlier and this organisation. This will help me understand what is important to you.

Was there anything particularly good about the previous employer/s that is not so good here?

Was anything not so good about the previous employer/s that you have not come across here?

Thinking about your previous employer/s, then thinking about here, what are the differences?

Thinking about those previous employer/s and this organisation, what are the similarities?

### **Workplace engagement**

The last set of questions are more specific in terms of your experience of this organisation.

How would you describe relationships with: other employees/co-ordinators/managers?

If something was bothering you at work, what would you do?

Do you feel you 'have a say' in this organisation: why; would you like more/less say; on what?

Do you think your opinions and ideas are listened to/acted upon?

Do you feel involved in this organisation: how/why/can you give me an example?

Do you think social care employees should be involved in decisions about the organisation: how?

What do you think prevents social care employees being involved?

Are there ways social care employees can be involved in decisions that are made: how/what?

This organisation has introduced some practices in recent months; I'll go through them one at a time and ask whether you have heard of them and about your experience of each of them: newsletter, staff survey, employee ownership, engagement forum, General Council, ideas box and traffic lights.

### **Summary**

So, just to sum up: before working here you worked at...you have been here...you particularly like...you are not so keen on..., overall you seem to be...have I heard you correctly?

Is there anything you would like to include that I've not asked?

You have my contact details if there is anything you think of later.

If there is anything I think of is it alright to contact you again?

The next steps are...Thank you so much again for giving your time to this piece of research.

## Appendix Five: Informed Consent Form

I, the undersigned, confirm that (please tick box as appropriate):

1.	I have read and understood the information about the project, as provided in the Information Sheet dated _____.	<input type="checkbox"/>
2.	I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the project and my participation.	<input type="checkbox"/>
3.	I voluntarily agree to participate in the project.	<input type="checkbox"/>
4.	I understand I can withdraw at any time without giving reasons and that I will not be penalised for withdrawing nor will I be questioned on why I have withdrawn.	<input type="checkbox"/>
5.	The procedures regarding confidentiality have been clearly explained (e.g. use of names, pseudonyms, anonymisation of data, etc.) to me.	<input type="checkbox"/>
6.	If applicable, separate terms of consent for interviews, audio, video or other forms of data collection have been explained and provided to me.	<input type="checkbox"/>
7.	The use of the data in research, publications, sharing and archiving has been explained to me.	<input type="checkbox"/>
8.	I understand that other researchers will have access to this data only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the data and if they agree to the terms I have specified in this form.	<input type="checkbox"/>
9.	Select only <b>one</b> of the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I would like my name used and understand what I have said or written as part of this study will be used in reports, publications and other research outputs so that anything I have contributed to this project can be recognised.</li> <li>• I do not want my name used in this project.</li> </ul>	<input type="checkbox"/>
		<input type="checkbox"/>
10.	I, along with the Researcher, agree to sign and date this informed consent form.	<input type="checkbox"/>

**Participant:**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**Researcher:**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Researcher

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

### Appendix Six: Analysis process

Frame of reference	Example themes (frames)	Example themes (literature & in-vivo)	Example codes
Hard unitarist	Efficiency Hierarchy Incentivisation Management control Trade union avoidance	<b>Fabrication of voice</b>  Compliance Hierarchy Resistance	Calculative      Anti-union Profit              Suspicious Resistance        Responsibility Fear                 Unheard Hostile Tension
Soft unitarist	Efficiency Harmony Unity Going the extra mile Individual Trade unions unnecessary		<b>Fabric of voice</b>  Right to a voice Embedded voice Sophisticated voice processes
Collaborative pluralism	Equity & efficiency Fairness Right Collaborative Legitimacy Moral imperative		

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