

CASE STUDY



INVESTORS
IN PEOPLE | South
West

SEDGEMOOR DISTRICT COUNCIL

“Since achieving the Investors in People Standard in 2003, the organisation has undergone major change but we recognise that our greatest asset is our workforce. We are committed to their learning and development and this achievement is a credit to everyone in the Council. The Investors in People Silver recognition underlines the ethos of the Council which is built around a desire to provide excellent levels of customer service”

Caroline Derrick
Learning & Development Manager



Caroline Derrick

BACKGROUND

Size:	418 employees
Sector:	Local Government
Location:	Bridgwater, Somerset
Status:	Most recently recognised November 2009. First recognised in 2003. Recognised a total of 6 years to date. Achieved Silver level in 2009.

THE ORGANISATION

Sedgemoor District Council provides a wide range of services to the 106,000 people living in its borders, which take in seaside resorts, sea and river ports, hills, wetlands, the Somerset Levels and Cheddar Gorge. Its 418 staff work out of two main sites taking in two tourist information centres, and, being one of the few councils which is a Port Authority, a harbour master's office. It came into being in 1974 with the merger of Burnham-on-Sea Urban District Council, Bridgwater Rural District Council and Bridgwater Borough Council.

- **Investors in People provided that ‘extra pair of eyes’ and has become embedded in the organisation**
- **The human resources director decided that Investors in People would be the right way to put a proper training and professional management programme in place**
- **Complaints from customers are probably the best indicator of success, and there is nothing there to say we are going wrong.**
- **Staff were able to relate to Investors in People and embed the training they had received back into their work”.**

The Challenge

Sedgemoor, like all councils, is under constant pressure from central government and the local electorate to improve efficiency and deliver more 'customer-focused' services.

Despite the ongoing need for its staff to adapt to change, "There was no formal training programme going on and no monitoring," says Learning and Development Manager Caroline Derrick when she arrived in 2002.

"The human resources director decided that Investors in People would be the right way to put a proper training and professional management programme in place," Caroline says. It fell to her, with the support of the authority, to deliver it.

Part of the new training programme centred on ensuring staff met the required standard of literacy, language and numeracy skills. In 2009, Sedgemoor signed The Skills Pledge in which literacy, language and numeracy skills are firmly embedded.

During its most recent Investors in People Assessment in 2009, Sedgemoor decided to go beyond the Standard and concentrate on achieving extra recognition to improve the service it offers to its customers.

The strategy

Resources were tight, but Caroline had already had success in introducing Investors in People in the council. Before joining human resources in the council itself, she had spent ten years working in the 150-person leisure department where she had been part of a successful bid for Investors in People accreditation in 1999.

"In the beginning we managed to secure a small budget which we used to show executive members of the council that people were interested in Investors in People. Service-specific training took the lead, but we were suddenly overcome with quite justifiable training requests," says Caroline. The strategy has proved persuasive, The Executive Committee have continued to provide support for Learning and Development." "Everyone now gets invited to receive training," says Caroline, "The top priority at the moment is improving customer care, having added a call centre where we have introduced a NVQ programme. We have also carried out a lot of finance training." A Professional Certificate in Management Studies (PCMS) course is now in its fourth year, and has been completed by some managers. All staff are taking part in procurement training with additional tuition for budget holders. With

the help of funding through Train to Gain, 25 of our offices have undergone training at Levels 2 and 3 including Customer Care, Business Administration and Management Training. There is potential for further Train to Gain funding for an additional 10 – 20 staff to undergo Level 2 qualifications in street cleaning.

For newcomers the council has created a monthly induction, a mandatory series of sessions explaining the council's fundamentals. "It is very successful. It covers health and safety, data protection, equality and an overview of local government," she says.

Middle managers have a special development programme where they meet the Chief Executive, Kerry Rickards, every quarter. This takes the form of workshops where managers have the opportunity to take part in any changes that are taking place. The Chief Executive has also fostered dialogue with staff members at large, through an online and print publication and monthly staff drop-in sessions and quarterly meetings.

The council have achieved a level 2 in use of resources from the Audit Commission and 98% of staff have attended diversity training to date. To cement this level of achievement it is now providing training to help staff meet the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, which requires it to provide the same level of service to everyone regardless of disability. "This has been introduced to help staff feel more confident when dealing with disabled people," says Caroline. In preparation for new equality legislation, two specific areas of training for managers have also been introduced - 'Religion and Belief' and 'Sexual Orientation'.

"We started looking at literacy, language and numeracy in January 2005 with a presentation on the benefits to managers. Many did not see the advantage of participating for their own sake, but found the benefits it might bring to their family more compelling. "Think about your children,' we said, 'if you don't want to help yourself, then help your children.'" Also helping to destigmatise the assessment process was a corporate director who volunteered to do a numeracy test and admitted to "getting a sweat on". Thanks to this effort the council persuaded 150 people to go through the same assessment. "We did not ever believe we had the need. In many of our positions people are required to have four or five GCSEs." Nevertheless there was a group of people who were found to have literacy, language and numeracy needs at Level 2, the highest level covered. The necessary training was provided by Bridgwater College.

“We went to the college to celebrate the success of the people who took part in literacy, language and numeracy training,” says Caroline. Such reflection of success and celebration is important, she says, “I have a place in the training room with photographs on the wall.”

She is also keen for others to recognise the achievement of council staff, and so keeps the internal and external communications teams up-to-date with success stories, so fostering media interest. During a skills audit in 2009 6% of staff claimed to have no formal qualifications. This is being picked up with NVQ Level 2 qualifications in January 2010.

Sedgemoor worked really hard to consult with the public and, with the help of Investors in People, has improved its communications. Caroline felt that looking at its customer service made sense and Investors in People provided the opportunity for Sedgemoor to really work with its customers. Sedgemoor are trying to let the public decide how the Council should improve its service. Investors in People provided that ‘extra pair of eyes’ that is so often needed and their Assessor, Clive Tabiner, gave some very constructive feedback.

The Results

“It is difficult in a local authority to measure success. It’s not like sales or promotion,” says Caroline, adding that staff turnover and absenteeism were always low.

“Complaints from customers are probably the best indicator, and there is nothing there to say we are going wrong. And of those people who do decide to leave, most say that training and development was one of the best things about working for the organisation.” The council also managed to hit a 99% per cent rate in assessing its staff’s training needs in 2009.

The culture of literacy, language and numeracy and Investors in People has become embedded in the organisation. Caroline said “It is pleasing to note that staff interviewed during the assessment were able to relate to Investors in People and embed the training they had received back into their work”.

It is too early after the assessment to measure the success of the new customer service strategies, but Caroline is confident that the improvements to their customer service gained through their Investors in People Silver status, and the constructive feedback from the assessor, will help to increase the already good level of service Sedgemoor offers to its customers.