



ADSO Conference 2023 – Facilitated Discussion notes

- 1. Working in a Political Environment** with Mark Towers, ADSO Company Secretary (pg 1-2)
- 2. ‘Ask the Experts’** Facilitated Discussion with James McLaughlin, Sandwell MBC; Karen Widdowson, Charnwood Borough Council and Vicky Wemyss-Cooke, LB Camden (pg 2-3)
- 3. Professional Development for Senior DSOs** with Susan Biddle, ADSO Director of Training; Exemplar – Michelle Beaumont, ADSO Qualifications Manager; Scribe – Katherine Harclerode, ADSO NE Regional Rep (pg 3-6)
- 4. How to attract good staff and keep them** with Tommy Shaw, Derbyshire Dales and Learner of the Year 2022 and Fiona Rae, Lambeth Council and ADSO London Regional Representative (pg 6-8)
- 5. Steps into Management** with Peter Sass, ADSO Vice Chair, Scribe – Charlie Sinclair ADSO Sponsor Manager and SE Regional Rep (pg 8-9)

1. Working in a Political Environment

Opening Questions – what is more important – the right skills or right experience?

- Skills are important – can be applied in different situations.
- Experience – ability to apply past experience to enable you to successfully negotiate.
- Personal attributes are also key – need to be the right person to be confident to apply tact and diplomacy when working with Members.
- Not just knowledge of the role, but also knowledge of the Members you are dealing with – building relationships so you know how best to support them and to build trust with Members so that they will be comfortable in taking your advice.
- Important to understand the political context you are working in.
- Also, important to understand the processes and procedures you must follow and to support others in following them – increasing organisational capability.
- Resilience is increasingly important skill for Democratic Services – often find yourself in the firing line.
- Democratic Services should be seen as a frontline service, not a support service. We often have the most contact with and provide advice to Members as well as members of the public and Chief Officers.
- Heard several examples of senior democratic services managers who moved across from other sectors, with applicable skills.

Hybrid working

- Has made Democratic Services more accessible – not just tucked away in an office which people may not have visited.

- Councillors have higher expectations of seeing people physically in the office, although some Councils since Covid have focussed on messaging to make Members aware that Democratic Services are still available to them if they are not physically in the office.

Training

- Many councils are offering a mix of in-person and hybrid training for Members.
- Discussion about providing training where there has been a change in lead/opposition parties and this driving a change in training needs.
- Operating in these more politicised environments has also driven a need for more training for officers, to assist them in working in a political environment and receiving increased challenge and scrutiny.

Committee System/Leader and Cabinet/Mayoral Model

- Committee system can also increase scrutiny of officers, and a change in model will drive training need to support officers to treat appropriate challenge positively.
- Significant level of training for Members to enable them to be able to adapt to the changes within a Committee Model.
- Important for the Chairman in a Committee System to understand their role and remit of their powers.
- Discussed if decision making takes longer in committee vs cabinet systems – felt decision making takes longer in a committee system due to the need to brief the Chair and Committee Members as there is no longer an executive lead.
- Officer delegation scheme may need to be revisited if there is any change to the model.

Relationships / Code of Conduct

- Should always be confident to challenge inappropriate or unhelpful behaviour from Councillors. Be strong and authoritative when you feel Members are overstepping.
- Officers should be friendly with Members but not their friends.
- Importance for Dem Services to have a seat on the senior management team – to provide governance support, champion the importance of scrutiny etc.

Working in a council with no-overall control

- Additional work may be required to arrange briefings for each group.

2. 'Ask the Experts'

The group discussed the following issues:

- **What, if anything, are authorities doing for the 50th anniversary of the commencement of the Local Government Act 1972?**
In some places there was some tension between officers, who wanted to keep the occasion low key, and Members who were keen to stage civic events with 'bells & whistles'. Responses varied from not doing at all anything to mark to occasion, to having a long-standing Member write a memoir, to staging a civic event. There was some nervousness around being seen to spend money on such things during a cost-of-living crisis, and a feeling that some of the areas created by the Act are not necessarily recognised by local people as cohesive communities, making the

authorities themselves unpopular. One delegate commented that officers should still take time to mark the occasion, even if civic events were limited.

- **Had anyone recently carried out a review of its Constitution?**

Some authorities carry out a regular annual review, consulting Members and officers and then taking it through the relevant committee. In others, it is done every couple of years. ADSO is currently undertaking reviews for 5 authorities and external support is key if a full review is needed. Delegates remarked that the purpose of the Constitution, and of the review, needs to be clear, as does the fact that the Constitution is not an extension of the corporate plan. Member ownership is key and Members need to understand their role in the process and what they can and cannot change. It was recognised that some authorities were now moving away from the model Constitution and getting rid of elements like the Articles. It was also noted that it could sometimes be too easy when things went wrong to blame the authority's Constitution.

- **What were authorities doing about raising their Members' allowances in the light of the Cost of Living crisis?**

Again, approaches varied, with some authorities taking the view that an increase could not be justified at the current time and others taking the view that it was more important than ever for allowances to rise. There was also a view that it was important for allowances to be pitched at a level that would not be a deterrent to people who might be thinking of standing for election. In some authorities that had approved increases, individual Members had declined their uplift or were donating it to charity.

- **Whilst most authorities have a dependent carers allowance for Members who have caring responsibilities, there don't seem to be many that provide help to Members who need to support in order to carry out their role. Is anyone aware of any?**

One delegate had used 'Access to Work' funding to provide support for a Member. Another advised looking at the practice in Welsh councils as there was more support available there for people needing support in order to stand for election. One authority took the 'reasonable adjustments' approach to supporting councillors to carry out their roles.

- **Had any councils experienced issues relating to the ongoing situation in Israel and Palestine?**

One London borough was experiencing issues with Members submitting unsuitable Council motions on this issue. The monitoring officer was currently holding the line on ruling these out of order, assisted by a useful catch all clause in their Constitution about unsuitable motions. There had been a protest outside another authority's Council meeting and the Council had held a minute's silence. In another London borough, Members had been very anxious about their safety at the Council meeting and extra security measures had been put in place but the meeting had gone without incident.

3. Professional Development for Senior DSOs

Who is this session for:

Senior DSOs and Governance Professionals who are currently managing people and considering their next career move.

Objective:

To explore aspirations and routes to career and professional development for Senior DSOs, identify options, needs and perceptions of senior management and to consider the component parts to a path to success. To use this to identify how ADSO as an organisation might assist.

Discussion areas and outputs

1. Where do you see your career going? – What's your aim?

Those attending were initially asked to identify the direction of travel of their career – they placed themselves in one of the following categories:

- a. Into a more senior role within governance and Dem services
- b. Into a governance role outside local government
- c. Into a more senior role outside governance and Dem Services – into broader local government

The group divided fairly equally between the above categories, and we discussed the extent to which the aims of senior DSOs varied depending on their situation, personal circumstances, degree of ambition and areas of interest. Michelle Beaumont, our exemplar, talked about her own journey, aspirations, the circumstances that shaped her ambitions and aims and what she does to craft her own development. The group contributed the following thoughts:

- Many of us are interested in progressing within the Democratic Services field or within the local government and public service sector or an adjacent sector.
- Some of us are returning to or joining local government from another sector, i.e. aircraft engineer, public relations, news journalism, armed forces, NHS.
- About half of us in attendance are already managing people, whilst the other half are not yet managing.
- Many of us would like to be responsible for a portfolio of broader functions.
- Some of us would consider a role where we do not work with councillors but would replicate these skills.

This reinforced the importance of doing your own work to identify what you wanted and how to get there.

So you want to be a Head of Service?

We talked around the topic to reveal the differences within the group. Areas of interest, some of which might provide a focus for ADSO development:

- How to handle and prioritise staffing issues.
- Leadership – as opposed to management.
- ILM accreditation.
- Learning from others and spaces to talk.
- Either quick & dirty virtual trainings or face to face training days may offer maximum benefit.

2. The skills and qualities required for senior management/leadership:

Next, we explored what the group felt the skills and qualities for their next career move might be, areas identified were extensive and included:

Patience

Generosity
Trustworthiness
Honesty
Integrity

- Confidence (not just appearances of it)
- Initiative taking
- Willingness to receive healthy challenge.
- Willingness to challenge
- Willingness to protect/defend decisions or team resources.
- Resilience
- Tolerant of uncertainty

Analytical skills:

People management skills:

- Ability to inspire.
- Ability to delegate
- Recognition of value added by others,
- Developer skills to identify budding strengths and nurture the potential within others.
- Conflict resolution and relationship repair
- Negotiation
- Inference and emotional intelligence/empathy

3. Ways of supporting ourselves: What have you done to prepare for your future role/position.

We talked about the options outside the traditional 'training course/qualification' route and all the ways senior DSOs can help themselves.

- Networking
- Training
- Ask to become a mentor or assessor.
- Demonstrate your own knowledge through mentoring.
- Maximise all opportunities that are available to you – projects and project teams, secondments, job swaps,
- When faced with circumstances of being “unpromotable” due to high specialism/high value:
 - find out if there is scope to review the job specification and do a job re-evaluation.
 - Consider whether you are open to taking a new role to avoid “dead person’s shoes”.
 - Develop confidence by knowing the value you bring – sometimes a job is not flexible to “grow with us.”
- Ensure you are visible and pursue involvement in activities and processes.
- Capitalise on transferrable skills and experience - being willing to look outside the immediate opportunities within your organisation.
- Sometimes it's about moving sideways or down shifting – routes are not always linear and upward.
- Considering voluntary capacity as well to hone skills in coaching, management and feeding back.

- Be aware of the beguiling nature of titles which do not match responsibilities – breadth versus depth.
- Consider using qualifications to level up.
- Be aware of your own passions, interests, and priorities – these are your career drivers.

4. Ways of securing career progression for our teams:

Some of those attending were keen to know how to succession plan within their team for their own exit. We agreed on the following:

- If you are already managing people, look for ways to develop the people you've got.
- Upskilling.
- Consider what would be the next level certificate or equivalent.
- Ensure team members are included in processes and activities that they would otherwise never see – the anti-silo approach.

5. Asked to summarise the main things they were taking away from the discussion, the attendees said:

- We all follow unexpected paths to success which are often not linear.
- Knowing how transferrable skills add value to our employer is key.
- Priorities can shift in your life and in the world around us; prepare for these shifts by practicing skills ahead of having the responsibilities (in a low-stakes environment without stress)
- Never mark time – always look for ways to grow and take steps to stretch.
- Have a loose plan but embrace the unexpected.
- Maximise regional networks and training and new work opportunities.
- Take personal responsibility for growth and development as well as seeking training opportunities.

4. How to attract good staff and keep them

From participants' personal experiences, there were a number of things that assisted with staff retention:

- A key subject was opportunities for development – ensuring that all staff had opportunities such as learning new things, shadowing, attending training, career progression – and people were especially likely to stay in a role if managers were supportive and creative in facilitating this.
- Flexible working – accommodating team members' commitments and work/ life balance was essential for keeping staff.
- Pay – the level of pay was an important factor and often reflected how much the organisation valued Democratic Services/ governance.
- Providing good support for staff – the default position being to stand with your staff ('have their back') rather than assuming fault and, if necessary, to turn a mistake into a learning opportunity.
- Managing the working relationship between councillors and Democratic Services Officers, ensuring that councillors are aware of the limits of their role.

- Trust – many people expressed the importance of feeling trusted. This was usually obvious in the team's delegation structure (i.e. people were trusted to undertake tasks) and in the communications from managers (empowering v restrictive).
- Challenge – many participants raised the importance of being able to question practices or procedures with curiosity and being able to have respectful discussions.
- Feeling valued – this was hugely important for staff retention but it was a challenge to articulate how this could be achieved. The best examples were environments that had 'no silly questions', where teams could discuss work-related issues with excitement (as problem solving), and when managers made time to discuss issues with staff, even when they were noticeably busy.
- Acknowledging the difficulty of Democratic Services roles – genuine thanks and recognition was welcomed.

There were also some small but important actions that could be taken corporately or in teams to improve the workplace:

- Having in person team days once per month.
- Bring your dog to work day!
- A corporate 'wellness hour' where staff are encouraged to use a normal working hour a week to focus on their wellbeing – e.g. going for a walk, reading, or visiting a (council) leisure centre.
- Ensuring that the IT offering was suitable and flexible (and noting this during recruitment).

There were also some things that could disincentivise team members and negatively impact staff retention:

- Inconsistency – unpredictable approaches and decisions, rules being applied differently for different people, good mood v bad mood approaches.
- Declining requests, such as leave or training opportunities, without providing reasons.
- Delays in decision-making/ failure to take decisions/ poor communication – these issues could leave staff in limbo and unable to act or feeling forced to act whilst they are unsure if they are doing the right thing.
- Blame culture which could also lead to unnecessary bureaucracy and fractious team culture.
- Undertaking initiatives on paper but without resourcing or follow up action (tick box exercises).

In relation to attracting good staff, the following ideas were shared:

- Keeping an open mind about applicants with different experience.
- Offering a variety of employment opportunities, including apprenticeships, career graded posts, and trainee posts.
- Choosing the wording of job descriptions carefully – this is the only communication you will have with prospective applicants! Many hiring managers had seen success with including a statement that specifically welcomed applications from ethnic minorities, women, care leavers, and applicants looking for job shares or part-time work.
- Advertising the key benefits of the role honestly to attract the right people and maximise retention. For example: the postholder may be able to take part in ongoing projects, small teams may have excellent development opportunities, and junior posts may have progression options.
- Workplace and organisational culture were now more important to candidates.
- Carefully managing applicants during the hiring process and ensuring that HR passed on information quickly/ accurately, especially as it was increasingly common to use second-choice candidates in the current job market.
- Be conscious of your pre-conceptions as an interviewer: if you find yourself making assumptions, challenge yourself.

- Hiring managers should focus on candidates' key skills and, if there is a good candidate who lacks experience, they should be willing to teach them relevant, job-specific information.
- Remembering the importance of 'customer service' at and after interviews (we had some horror stories about candidates being left in reception or waiting 1-2 weeks with no communications after an interview).
- There was broad agreement that written tests at interview were vital – Democratic Services roles were largely based around administration and written communication and traditional interviews were not considered to be the best test of these essential skills.

5. Steps into Management – Facilitated discussion

PS welcomed everyone to the session and started by asking who was there and with what experience. There was a mix of those who were already in management positions and others which were hoping to be in that position.

The group discussed being 'management ready' and what this looked like. Points included:

- Do you take an interest in what your manager does?
- Do you currently supervise a more junior member of staff? Are you a tech or other lead for the team?
- Are you confident deputising for your manager and/or speaking to senior officers/Members on behalf of your manager when they are away?
- Do you take an interest in what the Council is doing corporately? Do you have good political sensitivity?
- Do you look at other managers and think, 'I can do that...'? How do you feel about managing some of your existing peers?

The group discussed the tasks a DS Manager may do, as well as other non-DS Tasks and how getting involved in these tasks as a DSO can gain exposure with other directorates. It was noted that depending on the size of the authority could impact on the different opportunities and exposure to tasks.

This included:

- Full Council,
- Cabinet,
- Chief Officer appointments panels,
- Corporate Management Team,
- Ethical standards complaints,
- Council company boards,
- Constitution review work,
- Proportionality calculations
- M.O or Deputy M.O?
- Staff recruitment,
- Business planning,
- Budget management,
- Line management and appraisals,
- Running team meetings,
- Responding to FOIs and complaints,
- Health and safety, risk management,
- Election work,
- Offering training on decision making,
- Mentoring junior staff,
- Sit on corporate panels, and
- Training and introductions for new starters.

What Knowledge/style/approach does a good manager have:

- Excellent technical knowledge,
- Calm and assured,
- Good with Members and senior officers,
- Safe pair of hands,
- Challenging constructively when needed,
- Maintaining a good network,
- Being able to read people and situations, and
- Being fair and managing people in different ways.

Further discussion took place on the skill sets required. Many of the skills were already there as senior DSOs, however there were some concerns raised about managing peers and target /appraisal setting. Another concern raised was with Council's budgets getting tighter and teams were amalgamated, those in different sectors or teams being favoured over DSO's as they may already have management experience.

- Discussion around management experience – just because you have managerial experience doesn't mean you're a good manager.
- "Tapping into management,"
- Traits of a manager – those who can motivate,
- Mentoring schemes
- Coaching and encouraging junior members of staff,
- Interview feedback
- Bring people together, motivate and dynamic to tackle matters as a team,
- Dem Services - a unique area of work including managing relationships, skill set of complexity and problem solving.

The group discussed what can ADSO do to support DSOs in this area?

- Interview prep – using everyday examples of management and how to sell that in interviews,
- CV prep,
- Steps into Management course,
- Mentoring/peer support with ADSO's support – how to work through 'sticky' issues,
- Importance of soft skills, and technical skills,
- Workshop in person rather than remotely,
- Webinars to cover interviews, CV preparation, appraisals, being politically aware.