

**INVESTOR IN PEOPLE  
CASE STUDY:  
The Department for Environment, Food and Rural  
Affairs (DEFRA)**

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**INVESTING IN PEOPLE TO DELIVER QUALITY RECRUITMENT**

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| Size:     | 8,500 people  |
| Sector:   | Public sector   |
| Location: | London and 170 sites across the UK  |
| Status:   | First achieved Investors in People Standard as Ministry of Agriculture in 2000 / Investors in People Strategy Manager Sandra Casey became an Ambassador in 2005 |



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

### **Overall impact**

“Investors in People has helped us move from an old-fashioned department to an outward-looking, modern, vibrant organisation. Having the Standard as a basis for external assessment has been a driver for that change.”

### **The organisation**

Sustainable development drives everything that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) does. As the Department itself puts it, it’s all about building ‘a better quality of life for everyone, now and for generations to come’.

Defra employs 8,500 people at around 170 locations across the country, from 3,000 in its London office to a lone badger catcher in Devon. The Department’s long list of objectives includes protecting and improving the urban, marine, rural and global environment, promoting economic prosperity through sustainable farming, fishing, food, water and other industries, and encouraging thriving economies and communities in rural areas.

The Department was formed in 2001 when the responsibilities of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAFF) and the environment arm of the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR) were combined. The aim was to create an organisation whose remit weaved together economic, social and environmental concerns.

As the Ministry of Agriculture, the organisation first pursued Investors in People in 1998 because it was a Cabinet Office requirement, but soon recognised the broader business benefits. It now uses Internal Review to assess its performance against the Standard and is using the Work Life Balance Model criteria as part of its smart working initiative.

## **The challenge**

Defra is on the brink of major organisational change. A number of separate bodies are being created from the core Department, including agencies and Non-Departmental Public Bodies (NDPBs) such as the State Veterinary Service Agency, the Marine Agency and the Rural Development Service.

These new organisations will take responsibility for delivering services currently undertaken within the Department itself. Meanwhile Defra will concentrate on policy and strategy development alongside other core functions.

The Lyons Review, that recommended 20,000 civil servant posts be relocated from Whitehall, means further change for Defra as people are transferred from London to elsewhere in the country. Already some functions of the organisation, such as finance, are moving to York and the creation of the State Veterinary Service means some staff are now based in Worcester.

Although there are unlikely to be massive job cuts, the result is that Defra's headcount will be halved by 2008, to approximately 4,500. As a consequence some people will be required to move to new roles requiring different skills.

## **The strategy**

"The Department has been involved with Investors in People since 1998 and in 2000 we first achieved recognition," says Sandra Casey, who goes under the title of Investors in People Strategy Manager for Defra.

"At the time it was felt that the organisation already met about 60% of the criteria of the Standard, but was keen to identify the gaps and plug them."

Since working with Investors in People, one of the major changes has been to the role of the Human Resources department.

"The HR function has changed from being all-encompassing and delivering everything that people asked for, to setting the policy and providing the tools for people to get on with it," says Sandra. "So it's a much more modern approach than before."

One of the effects is that the onus is now much more on individuals to achieve their own development objectives: "The appraisal system is dependent on individual ownership. Although work objectives are decided collectively with line managers, it is up to the people concerned to realign them according to their requirements and make sure training needs are met. The results are then reviewed regularly during the year and again at the end of the year."

Defra places a strong emphasis on feedback. It conducts a full staff survey every eighteen months to assess staff understanding of the direction of organisation and overall satisfaction levels. A further quarterly survey is conducted among 20 per cent of staff to provide a benchmark.

A regular staff conference has also been staged with 3-500 people in attendance. "It's an interactive event where staff get a chance to pose questions to Ministers and the management team," explains Sandra. "The discussion tends to cover policy issues, but we complement that with a series of lunchtime seminars on more specific issues such as marine life or sustainable development."

Defra also recognises individual achievements through a team award scheme. Independently judged, the awards culminate in a ceremony attended by Ministers. Only in its second year, according to Sandra the scheme appears to be uniting the organisation: "The awards have attracted a wider range of entries from outside the core London Department, and it has been good to see everyone recognised."

## **Results**

Sandra, who recently became an Investors in People Ambassador and now regularly attends events and conferences to talk about Defra's experience, is convinced the Standard has played a major part in helping the organisation through a period of intense change.

"It has kept us focused on where we need to go," she explains. "Throughout the move to Defra and the subsequent direction the Department chose to take, it has helped support the change programme."

Defra's policy of open communication has ensured that people have been regularly informed of developments and, as a result, have generally accepted them.

"Before the changes were announced we determined that the best approach would be to be very upfront about the changes and communicate well," says Sandra. "Investors in People has provided a benchmark for handling that change and has ensured that people were involved throughout."

"We undertook an internal healthcheck among our financial service after people moved to York for example. The outcome was extremely positive. I believe we have an example of best practice in how to best manage the relocation of a major part of an organisation."

"The whole process has shown that, even though there will be pockets of resistance to change, if the process is managed well and you engage people, the end result can be good."

And of the overall impact on the organisation, Sandra adds: "Investors in People has helped us move from an old-fashioned department to an outward-looking, modern, vibrant organisation. Having the Standard as a basis for external assessment has been a driver for that change."