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Name:	<b>Sedgemoor District Council</b>
Size:	501 - 1000
Sector:	Local Government
Location:	South West
Theme:	Literacy, Language and Numeracy Skills Development

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## The Organisation

Sedgemoor District Council provides a wide range of services to the 103,500 people living in its borders, which take in seaside resorts, sea and river ports, hills, wetlands, the Somerset Levels and Cheddar Gorge. Its 697 staff work out of one main office and four subsidiary ones, three tourist information centres, a museum, 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, Bridgewater Rural District Council and Bridgewater Borough Council. It has operated ever since as the middle tier in a traditional three-tier local authority structure. Above it is Somerset County Council and, below, 53 parish councils.

Economically the region is typical of Somerset as a whole, with business activity focused mainly on agriculture, although several business parks have recently sprung up along the M5 corridor.

## 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 about when she arrived in 2002 on a short term secondment.

"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.

## 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, "I bid for resources every year, and the Executive Committee have continued to provide training with a growth bid."

"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 are introducing an NVQ programme. We are also doing a lot of finance training." A career management skills (CMS) course is now in its second year, with 22 managers having taken it, of whom four have gone on to get a diploma. 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 the concept of 'best value' performance indicators," she says.

Middle managers have a special development programme where they meet the Chief Executive, Kerry Rickards, every quarter to be assigned with projects which will help develop their management skills. Among them have been ones on customer care, standards, IT programmes and using PRINCE2, a process-based approach for project management. The Chief Executive has also fostered dialogue with staff members at large, though an online and print publication and monthly staff drop-in sessions and quarterly meetings.

The council achieved a level 2 in the government's 'best value' indicator for equality and 60 per cent 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.

"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 de-stigmatise 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 were 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 Bridgewater College which has a centre in the shopping district where staff could drop-in in their work time.

"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.

## 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 100 per cent rate in assessing its staff's training needs in 2002, although

the number has slipped since because of reorganisation. "There was an understandable reluctance among managers to do appraisals on people they didn't know, which was the case with those who had been recently transferred from a different service area," Caroline explains, "It hasn't dropped below 86 per cent though, and it should be back to 100 per cent by the end of 2007."

Among those who were assessed for literacy, language and numeracy training, around 50 took up the offer and have attended courses. Now that the initial group of existing employees has been approached, skills assessment now features on the induction programme for newcomers.

The culture of literacy, language and numeracy and Investors in People has become embedded in the organisation. The housing service, which became a separate arm's length management organisation (ALMO) called 'Homes in Sedgemoor' in April 2007, took 50 of its staff through the literacy, language and numeracy assessment in the early part of the year. Of those who participated in the programme, 15 were identified as having skills gaps and have been encouraged to attend training to update their skills in the near future.