

Playing a Programme Manager – six months in the East

In September 2008 I was lucky enough to be offered a part time secondment to Improvement East. After three years at the Improvement and Development Agency, I'd been involved in a lot of projects across councils and services – but was looking for a chance to really get into an organisation, and intrigued by the new regional working – how would it work?

After three months working two days per week, my secondment was extended for three months, full time. Beyond my original three pieces of work, this meant I could play a fuller role, representing the RIEP and getting involved in some of the other programmes.

I've really enjoyed my time at Improvement East. Not everything was smooth and simple – establishing a new agency and, for me, playing a new role will never be easy, and the RIEP can't reach its high ambitions without some flexibility. But the secondment gave me a number of real opportunities:

Getting out and delivering

From day one I had to be out and about – getting to know the East, getting programmes delivered. One of my key projects was 'learning from reorganisation' – making sure the region captures the experience and learning of Bedfordshire as five authorities were reorganised to three. The regional structure helps – you can draw on resources and people who have engaged, and soon I had a team of peers ready to work with authorities. Many of the members and officers at the authorities gave their time and energy to sharing their experiences, and we had a great one day event at Bedfordshire County Council – probing what it meant to split authority functions across two new unitaries.

Making connections

The RIEP had committed to support reorganisation in Bedfordshire, with over £400k available to sponsor programmes and projects. Exemplifying sector-led improvement, we asked the authorities to express what they needed – what the money would be best spent on. I programme managed the support, a great opportunity to develop my skills – it was tough to keep track of what was happening, but again through good working with officers and members involved, we delivered a wide range of support, taking learning and legacy products away.

The secondment was also great for developing relationships and interacting with different people and agencies. Shadowing events in the new Central Bedfordshire, I saw meetings of the biggest shadow council in the country. Attending the Central Beds Implementation Team, I worked with senior officers and partners of the new authority – police, fire and rescue, health, and many more. And through the Government Office-led LGR roundtable, I was able to work with GO East, CLG, the Audit Commission and IDeA.

Planning and innovating

RIEPs are in a great position to think and act differently – combining resources and capacity across authorities and public services over a whole region. Improvement East is really committed to helping authorities innovate and find new solutions to old problems – so my work included research, looking for good practice, and thinking about how we diagnose and resolve issues.

Some of this research was delivered to individual authorities, or groups of councils – and meant working with officers and members there. Other work was at regional level: for example, writing a paper on what a

regional awards scheme would look like. The unique position of Improvement East means you can think much more openly, and test out new ideas and approaches.

Seeing the bigger picture

As I moved into full time work at Improvement East, I got involved in a wide range of activity. At the RIEP you can work across a range of subject and geographical areas – for example, one day I would be helping support the Leadership Centre for Local Government, who we sponsored to deliver really interesting leadership development in Norfolk and Suffolk. LCLG brought leaders together across public services, then engaged communities to discuss the area's needs – so I was interacting with a massive range of people. But the next day, I'd be out representing the RIEP at a climate change event, or a workshop on EU legislation affecting business locally. It's stimulating and challenging – you have to be really flexible and keep thinking on your feet!

Overall, a secondment gives you a real view into another organisation – real experience of how different teams and organisations tick. It can be tough to move between roles – it took me ages to really get into the programme manager role, but was a great moment when I realised I had! You learn a lot, and quickly – and being a part of two organisations, you'd be surprised at how many connections you start to see. Challenge yourself!