



# South East Councillor Mentoring Programme helps to support Councillor development

## Summary

The South East Councillor Mentoring Programme has been very successful in providing councils with access to an invaluable development tool. This additional resource has been used in a variety of different scenarios, thus helping a number of councillors to achieve the aspirations of the South East Elected Members Charter.

The programme is the result of a partnership between South East Employers (SEE), the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA) and Improvement and Efficiency South East (IESE) themselves, who are providing the funding.

In April 2007 Communities and Local Government (CLG) offered the opportunity for Regional Improvement Programmes to draw down capacity building funding for a number of national programmes. IESE secured funding for the provision of councillor mentoring under the National Councillor Mentoring Programme.

The funding was provided to give support to those councils signed up to the South East Charter for Elected Member Development or for those councils

with a poor or weak CPA rating. A further allocation was made to support the South East Fire Improvement Partnership (SEFIP) Regional Management Board (RMB) in their work on equality and diversity.

## Background

The South East region encompasses 19 county and unitary authorities and 55 districts, stretching in an arc around London, from Thanet in the south east to the New Forest in the south west and to Aylesbury Vale and Milton Keynes in the north west.

While it is without a single dominant urban centre, the region is home to two cities with populations of around 250,000 (Medway and Brighton and Hove) and five cities with populations greater than 100,000.



The south east is home to over eight million people in some three million households.

The major south coast ports, including Dover, Southampton and Portsmouth, as well as the Channel Tunnel, make the south east the natural access point to continental Europe. The presence of Gatwick airport, the UK's second busiest airport, and Heathrow immediately adjacent to the regional boundary, also place it at the hub of the UK's international travel links.

The region makes a major contribution to the UK economy, accounting for 15.6 per cent of total UK Gross Value Added (GVA) in 2003. Employment rates for working age people in the region are high - 84.2% for men and 73.6% for women. The south east economy provides around four million jobs, as well as making a significant contribution to the labour market in London. Unemployment at 3.6 per cent is below the national average.

The general picture disguises considerable variation within the region. Indices of Deprivation 2004 show that areas of Kent and the South Coast fare particularly poorly, with Hastings, Brighton and Hove, Southampton and Medway all featuring amongst the more deprived districts in England on a range of measures.

### Key issues/problems

Any local authority dedicated to meeting the needs of its community must also be committed to developing its elected members. Many had some form of support in place although the approach, levels of commitment, effectiveness and progress were variable.

The programme was designed to address councillor development needs by:

- supporting the development of good leadership skills;
- helping to build the confidence of new councillors;
- providing a sounding board and a safe environment to discuss challenges and issues being tackled by individuals and groups of councillors;
- supporting the personal development of councillors;
- assisting the improvement of political groups and how they operate;
- supporting councillors in new roles;
- assisting councillors in developing their community leadership role.

Experienced and accredited IDeA councillor peers were sourced to provide a range of mentoring support to projects that fell under this range of development needs.

### What you did

Under this scheme IESE made funding available to provide up to eight days of free councillor mentoring support, which has taken the form of either group or one to one sessions in each of the eligible organisations.

### Key outcomes

- Up to this point there are IESE funded mentoring projects in place at thirteen out of the twenty-three councils committed to the Charter.
- There are also another four projects either under way or in discussion in weak or fair councils who were not already engaged with IDeA on mentoring.
- In addition a specialist peer, experienced in equalities and diversities issues, was chosen by South East Fire Improvement Partnership (SEFIP) to provide support to the nine members of their Regional Management Board.

At the end of the programme each of the councils who received mentoring will provide feedback assessments on the usefulness of their mentoring support and this will help to inform the future choice of peers and give an idea of the impact of the programme in terms of development benefits.

Whichever type of mentoring was chosen the mentor peers are working alongside their colleagues in order to support their development needs and this open, honest and professional approach assures the continuing success of both the programme and the Charter.

One of our mentees under the programme said: "It really benefited our group to have an experienced and objective pair of eyes look at how we work and to hear about alternative ways of doing things. Mentoring has been a positive thing for us".

### Resources

The total funding for the programme from Sept 07 to date stands at £100,000

The programme is due to be completed by 31st March 09, however, due to the inexact nature of some of these arrangements and the staged implementation, some of these may move over into 09/10.

### Who was involved?

The project overview and funding came from IESE, whilst IDeA and SEE promote the SE Charter for Member Development and managed the implementation on the ground.

Regular monthly reporting on progress was made by IDeA to SEE who then liaised with IESE and ensured peer and project payments using Tandridge Council as the 'registered body' for this purpose. This has now developed into a real-time reporting directly from IDeA to IESE using a standardised impact and progress reporting database.



### Barriers and how were they overcome

Sometimes people believed that the concept of peer mentoring was only for weak and failing organisations. However, once the benefits of the variety of mentoring approached were explained it became clear that this was a development tool that could be put to a number of uses. By using personal marketing and explanation it was taken up by a whole range of councils including good and excellent. For example support for a Leader during times of change or when dealing with particular issues, or sometimes it was found useful just to have a 'sounding board'.

### Critical success factors

The impressive take-up of the programme is due to a number of factors:

- ➔ The reputation, skills and experience of the accredited IDeA peers and partner organisations.
- ➔ The variety of useful skills and input from an established partnership within the region.
- ➔ Sustained personal marketing to appropriate council contacts to explain the benefits of the peer mentoring process.

Councillor Alan Kendall, Executive Member for Education and Leisure at Bracknell Forest was mentored under the scheme following his appointment to the Executive.

*"I found my sessions very useful, not so much because I had specific advice about how to do my job on the Executive, but how to work with my colleagues on the Executive. I also very much appreciated the opportunity to speak frankly and openly, and in return received good and frank observations as to how I might be more effective, organise my time better, and establish priorities in a better way."*



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