

# Aspiring to strengthen strategic HR in the public sector

## Background

West Midlands Employers (WME) supports its public sector client base on a raft of HR and organisational development initiatives. Around five years ago it emerged that a lack of strategic HR partnering capability in the public sector was an issue that needed to be addressed.

Employers in the region were struggling to fill senior HR roles due to a shortage of candidates with business partnering skills. Consequently, WME decided it had to do something to help people step up into these important strategic HR positions.

‘Because we hadn’t got a strength for business partnering in our region, we found we were having a lot of vacancies at Head of HR level,’ says WME Chief Executive Rebecca Davis. ‘That was a concern we wanted to address by creating a talent pipeline.’

The aim was to provide HR practitioners with the strategic focus and skills in negotiation and influencing behaviour required to operate at a senior level. WME quickly concluded that for maximum effectiveness it would need to develop a programme in tandem with a high-calibre partner.

**If WME was going to partner with anyone there was really only one option for us: the CIPD. There is no one more credible in the space than the CIPD and we were keen to have them work alongside WME as the regional employers’ organisation.**

## About WME

The regional employers’ organisation West Midlands Employers (WME) offers a range of services aimed at local councils and the wider public sector. It provides ‘people and leadership solutions’ to support performance improvement at both an individual and organisational level with a view to creating a strong public sector workforce.



**Rebecca Davis,**  
CEO, West Midlands  
Employers



## Solution

In 2014, WME, the CIPD and the Local Government Association (LGA) partnered to launch the **Aspire Strategic HR and OD Business Partner Programme**. It got off to a flying start.

**At least six or seven of the participants in that cohort are now directors or heads of HR across the country in different organisations. Now we can directly correlate that people who went on this programme as HR professionals have progressed to the top jobs.**

The programme is designed to help participants develop a better understanding of the business context in which they operate and learn from collaborative situations and organisational analysis. It features five core modules, including 'digital technologies in HR/OD' and 'workforce strategies – doing it well.'

The programme includes project work where participants are confronted with a big HR challenge, often linked to the CIPD Profession Map and analysing pieces of CIPD research and proposing how findings might be adapted to be applied in different sectors. Project reports are presented at a celebration event at the end of the programme where conclusions are challenged by experienced heads of HR.

## Outcome

Over 200 people have completed this programme since launch, and Aspire has evolved from an embryonic learning initiative into a highly credible and well-established programme with a strong brand name. The formula proved so successful that WME franchises the Aspire programme across the country to other regional employers' organisations.

A new version of the programme, **Aspire 2.0**, has launched to reflect the 'constant evolution' of the modules and a refreshed approach to delivery. 'After every cohort we review feedback and take stock as to what else we can build into it,' explains Rebecca.

The benefits of taking part continue long after the programme reaches its conclusion. WME has established a network of Aspire Alumni to continue to bring participants together, share thinking and explore new opportunities.

**What we have tried to bring in to Aspire is real networking with purpose. Aspire doesn't just give you a programme. You become Aspire alumni, with the support and the network of contacts of both the CIPD and the employers' organisation.**

## Inspire OD

In response to feedback from public sector clients that they face major challenges revolving around how well organisational development is understood, WME and the CIPD have jointly developed a sister workshop to Aspire called **Inspire OD**. This is designed to provide HR business partners with an enhanced 'toolkit' for dealing with the challenges of change and transformation specific to public sector organisations.

The first pilot cohort runs 24-25 September 2019 with a review day on 5 November. The LGA has committed to subsidising 100 places nationally on Inspire OD as it is convinced HR practitioners should be a crucial part of any OD conversation.

**'If people aren't part of that OD conversation, if the people arc is missing, it becomes all about systems and process delivered by transformation teams. What we need to see is a mustering of HR professionals to start moving into that space. Because if you lose the people in OD you really have got a problem. HR then just becomes about policies and process – and it becomes weaker for it.'**

**Rebecca Davis,**  
CEO, West Midlands Employers