

Buckinghamshire Council – Local Authority

Reverse Mentoring Case Study – Programme delivery period 2022-2023

“The Listen Down reverse mentoring programme delivered by Conversation Space has been very insightful and has allowed us to reflect how a corporate approach to reverse mentoring would be of further benefit to us as an organisation. The programme was well structured and well supported, and the team at Conversation Space have collaborated well with our staff members. Their passion for engagement and power of conversation is clear and this has been a takeaway for us as an organisation.”

Natalie Donhou Morley – Buckinghamshire Council Senior Policy Officer and Programme Lead

Why

Buckinghamshire Council launched in April 2020, and we quickly identified that that we wanted to further embed equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) into our workplace culture. One of the main reasons for identifying reverse mentoring as a learning tool was its ability to increase connectivity between people of different seniority levels, generations, races, and genders, giving staff the opportunity to share their stories and to have their voices heard, which linked closely with our aspirations of being an employer of choice, where staff from all backgrounds want to grow and progress.

We realised early on that in order to deliver a pilot programme successfully, we would require external experts to support and deliver it as we did not have the required expertise or capacity in house. Having spoken to a number of suppliers, the [Listen Down](#) scheme from [Conversation Space](#) was identified as a leading, multi-award winning structured programme that was well suited to the outcomes we wanted to achieve. A train the trainer element was also build into the programme at our request in order to provide sustainability for potential future programmes and ensure efficient use of public funding.

We decided our programme should focus on race equality, with the view that reverse mentoring would provide opportunities for real change and meaningful transformation both personally and organisationally for all attendees. This meant that all of our mentors were recruited from black, Asian, and other ethnicity groups.

Working with Conversation Space, we developed the following purpose statements for the programme and the 2 cohorts of participants:

- Programme - “Ensure our staff are valued seen and heard.”
- Mentors - the opportunity to shape the working environment for the better, sharing your experiences, knowledge, and challenges.

- Mentees – receive real and honest insight into what is important to your colleagues from ethnic groups. This aims to boost understanding, confidence and decision making.

Conversation Space were supported to deliver the programme by two officers from Buckinghamshire Council, our senior policy officer (equalities specialist) and our head of occupational development. It should be noted that initially setting up the cohort was incredibly time intensive for the officers involved which should be a consideration for anyone seeking to start a programme.

What

The pilot was initially made up of 11 pairs. Mentors were identified following open applications, which were oversubscribed. Mentees were identified at senior manager level (grade 9 and above) including two members of our corporate management team (tier 2) and eight service directors (tier 3). A pairing exercise was then completed based on application information and phone interviews.

Baseline evaluation and training for both mentees and mentors took place at a launch event at the Gateway, the Buckinghamshire Council head office. Pairs were encouraged to meet every 4-6 weeks over a 9-month period, ideally for 90 minutes and in person where possible. Additional meetings took place to engage with the participants, to share experiences and to discuss progress towards the programme purpose at the following points:

- 3 months (Booster calls)
- 6 months (Reflect & Idea Generation session – in person)
- 9 months (Wrap up & Celebration event – in person)

Attendance across the programme was good in regard to 1:1 relationship meetings, however senior staff (mentee) struggled to commit to attending the lengthy, larger meetings which made it more difficult to address the power dynamics within the group, and establish consistency in feedback.

Impact

“I started the programme with a view that most people’s experiences of our work environment from an ethnicity and diversity perspective would be broadly similar to my own in that I have always felt that the organisation is fair, open and inclusive. What I have learnt is that lived experience, experiences at work and bias (conscious or unconscious) can really impact on people and affect them and how they feel at work and about the organisation. I am so much more aware of this and feel much more confident to acknowledge, consider and talk about this with others at all levels within the organisation than I was previously. I also think I look and challenge things through a wider lens”.

Mentee

We consider our pilot reverse mentoring programme at Buckinghamshire Council as having been a success, having delivered on the purposes that we set ahead of the launch. The programme allowed for staff, both mentees and mentors to be heard and for them to put forward views and ideas in a space of safety, with the protected time of the 1:1 sessions giving them space and time to listen, discuss and learn.

The cohort of mentors was very strong, challenging the mentees to reconsider preconceived ideas and sharing their experiences openly, and being comfortable with having uncomfortable conversations.

Mentors shared an increased feeling of personal confidence at the completion of the programme, as well as feeling more enabled to speak out within the organisation and finding a vocabulary to discuss race and ethnicity.

All participants committed to the programme on a personal level, with Conversation Space commenting on the level of open and honest conversations as 'gold standard', with pairs building strong relationships with people they may have otherwise not crossed paths with. Mentees have shared that they have implemented changes to how they work, such as considerations during recruitment and day-to-day management approach based on the experience of the programme.

"As a mentor on the programme I have realised that I really can achieve anything I put my mind to - including career progression to a much higher level than I originally thought"

Mentor

As an organisation, we have also identified a number of learning points to be incorporated across the organisation, as well as opportunities for further improvements which have been built into our EDI Action Plan. Mentees and mentors have since been engaged in a number of meetings and have been asked to input into our EDI work moving forwards to continue to capture their experience and perspectives.

"Some of the key benefits of the programme were the breaking down of barriers, learning by managers at a more senior level and recognising and appreciating the challenges faced by staff from diverse background."

Mentor

Promoting and embedding equality, diversity and inclusion is a key corporate priority for us as an organisation and we recognise that continual reflection, learning and improvement of practices is imperative to ensure we can fully realise our ambitions.

"I think that as a senior leader, the programme has really embedded learning that I will reflect on and take with me moving forward and which will influence my actions, decisions and leadership in a positive way. For me, building the relationship with my mentor has been great and I think the connections across all levels of the organisation are really beneficial too."

Mentee

Conversation Space

86-90 Paul Street
Shoreditch
London
EC2A 4NE

W: theconversationspace.com

T: +44 (0)203 700 6870

E: info@theconversationspace.com