



## The HR Edit

### Series 2, Episode 1: The big issues facing local government right now

[Music]

0:00:05- **Helen**

Hello and welcome to the second season of the HR edit, the podcast from South East Employers, taking a look at those common and often tricky HR questions. This season is packed with information, including topics of parental leave, occupational health capability and lots more. To kick off the season, we have a very special guest joining us, Ruth Adams, South East Employers new Chief Executive. Welcome to the podcast Ruth.

**Ruth**

Thank you.

**Helen**

And also joining us today, we have our podcast favourite, Sarah Hi Sarah.

**Sarah**

Hello.

**Helen**

And Southeast Employers HR business partner, Chelsea Hi Chelsea.

**Chelsea**

Hello.

**Helen**

Thank you all for joining us today. Ruth, you started back with us in September. How has the last month and a half been?

0:00:44- **Ruth**

It's been really interesting and I'm trying to get around to see as many of the councils and the chief execs and the top teams as possible really to understand because the South East is a new region for me to understand what some of the challenges are that they're facing, some of the opportunities they've got and to really understand how South East Employers can work with the top teams of local authorities, their democratic services teams, their HR teams and especially their counsellors to support their work in what is quite a challenging financial and policy and employment environment at the minute. Coming out of Brexit, with some of the labour market restrictions, but also some of the COVID issues have increased service cost and delivery costs that are making it really difficult for partners in the public sector to deliver the sort of quality or scale of the services that their residents are demanding. So meeting the



chief execs has been fascinating and really insightful in terms of my sort of reflections on the future business plan for South East Employers and how we can better adjust that to support the elected politicians and top teams of those authorities.

0:02:02- **Chelsea**

So, Ruth, perhaps you could tell our listeners a little bit about your background.

0:02:07- **Ruth**

No problem. So I started working in local authority many, many moons ago, at the late 1980s, when I worked in the HR and training department of Essex County Council's Fire and Rescue Service, and that really was where I decided that training, organisational development was something that really motivated me and so, having kind of briefly flashed an ankle after that at working for the audit commission, I went straight back into training and development, working firstly in a college setting. I worked in an HE setting. I worked for a private training provider in London where I had clients including the Cabinet Office, the Princes Trust, local authorities, and did an awful lot of NVQ work assessment to look at workforce training on a scale. Alongside this, I am an absolute advocate about personal professional development. So after doing a degree in public sort of sector administration, I did an MBA. I became an NVQ assessor, I became an NVQ verifier and then subsequently later in my career, did my PhD and became a professional trained coach, leadership coach.

I moved from direct training delivery then into a more public policy role and worked for a training enterprise council and then morphed into a learning and skills council and my focus there was working with inward investors that councils and authorities were really trying to bring into South Yorkshire to regenerate a former Coalfield site and I sort of put the employment and skills packages together. What could we do to sort of really help them get up and running quite quickly? What was the right approach that the public sector could intervene with and did some transformational things with Job Centre Plus at the time and a College of FE where we recreated a call centre environment and because of that we're able to do lots of pre-recruitment training and development of the unemployed communities in this former Coalfield area and really get them ready for the interview. When major call centres like O2 and Ventura were coming into the area. I then moved to a regional development agency and did loads again of labour market policy and some real ground-breaking programs at scale to support business training. And following the election of the coalition I moved to a very corporate role to close that organisation down and so dealt with all the TUPE the sort of asset transfer, the information transfers of that.

My last substantive role was as deputy Chief Executive of the Mayoral Combined Authority in South Yorkshire and there's no combined authorities in the southeast but these clearly are a sort of new being where government have done devolution deals a scale bigger than local authority, and so in that time I grew the organisation, which was a very small organisation where we begged and borrowed secondees from local authorities and had a few direct employees, so probably about 10 people working just for the LEP and at the time I left.



10 years later we've just integrated the Mayoral Combined Authority with the passenger transport executive to create an organisation of circa 400, and in that time my responsibilities were all of the corporate services, the economic policy, but an awful lot of governance and HR work.

So I did quite a lot of work with the elected members, the elected mayor, the leaders of the South Yorkshire Authority on various things, particularly navigating some of the issues to do with devolution, but also supporting their scrutiny and audit responsibilities to make sure that the organisation operated transparently, prudently and fulfilled its best value obligations. Since leaving that a year ago, I've done some freelance work, and the bit that I've enjoyed in some ways in that freelance work is really against being able to go in and support local authorities, and particularly one in their improvement and recovery planning following government intervention, which really has shone a spotlight on some of the issues and problems there's been with member officer relationships and how that has created some sort of governance problems in how they've deployed their responsibilities. I'm an independent member on a local authority audit and governance committee and then from that I've joined South East Employers in with a hope, I suppose, in a new area, that I can bring some of that learning, some of that insight, to sort of support the local authorities in this region.

0:07:07- **Sarah**

Thanks for that, Ruth. It's obvious that you bring a massive amount of experience and a wealth of knowledge to SEE, which will be hugely beneficial not only for our clients but also for us as your colleagues. Can I ask, what attracted you to the role of Chief Executive at SEE?

0:07:24 - **Ruth**

So one of the things that attracted me to the role is that, first off, I suppose I wanted to be taken a little bit out of my comfort zone. So I'll start with the sort of personal motivations. Southeast is one region I've not worked in. I've worked in London, I've worked in the South West, I've worked in Essex, I've worked in the Midlands and I've worked in Yorkshire. Southeast I've not I've not worked in.

And the ability, I suppose, to extend your reach and to work with new councils, to work with a different dynamic in the South versus the North, was, was one of the attractions. The other I suppose attraction having done two really large, chunky pieces of employment where I served 10 years at an RDA and 10 years for the Mayoral Combined Authority was to work. And one of the things that I really wanted to do was to work where I could work with different authorities, different clients, different customers, different partners, develop new partnerships and sort of work with them, but equally, you know, support them in the work they did and then move on to perhaps another challenge or another opportunity. And there's a few ways you can do that. You can do that as an interim, you can do that as a consultant and I thought, when I saw the South East Employers role, that it afforded that, but in a context of an organisation that was wholly owned by its partners local authorities and was there to serve its partners and its members of local authorities and be politically governed, and so in some ways that was just the perfect sort of career option.



That sort of met my motivations, but also the fact that I do think organisations that are born out of the sector to support the sector are really strongly placed and best placed to be able to support them.

So that was the predominant attraction to the role, I think. The other thing, turning this on its head, I would never go into a role if I didn't think I could make an impact for the people that were there to serve, and I was, I suppose, hoping and certainly that with the background of the research I've done in terms of equality's work, the governance work I've done, working with councillors and supporting councillors in their role, whether it's on audit or scrutiny or, to be effective, working with top teams on change programs, which I've got in my armoury, and also working on behalf of employees of organisations in terms of staff survey and supporting them to get what they need out of their careers were all ingredients that hopefully I can bring to the member bodies in the southeast and that they will find really valuable in seeing me as their sort of trusted ally to bring them greater impact to what they're trying to achieve.

0:10:26- **Chelsea**

So, Ruth, what do you think are the biggest issues facing local government at the moment?

0:10:31- **Ruth**

I mean. One of the things that in my experience, is a really big issue, but equally that's been borne out by the meetings I've had with the chief executives in the southeast to date, is the issue of attraction and retention of staff. It's absolute competitive labour market post COVID. The labour market post COVID and post Brexit. The labour market is tighter.

People looking for roles are able to be more demanding of the type of packages, the type of offer, the type of employer they want to work for and you know, the public sector, against these sort of increased pressures of service delivery and cost, in some ways are trying to compete in a marketplace with one, one arm tied behind their back in terms of financial remuneration as a determining factor and therefore they've got to look at all of their strategies as an employer of choice as to what that offer can be so they can attract the sort of talent that they want.

And that's borne out of a really you know from a lot of bodies in the public sector saying this is one of their, their biggest challenges, because the resolution to some of these challenges either are to start to pay more incentives and inducements, and that sets one local authority then against the next one that can't afford those inducements, and so you see the sector passing employees around in a way that is a kind of creates spiralling costs.

Or the other thing is something that we've seen in the health services the use of agency, and where agency work and interim work becomes a sort of career of choice for a lot of people because they know that they can command higher day rates or the agencies can command higher fees, and again that just takes general cost out of the local authorities. So the ability to look at how we attract talent and how we look at entry careers and build reward and recognition packages around that, so that it's those sort of perhaps wider factors and



intangible factors that deal with that very real issue, is one of the things that I think is a really big challenge.

0:12:52- Sarah

We've seen a lot of that actually reflected in the work that we're being asked to do at the moment. We're doing a lot of pay data reports, doing a lot of job evaluation and all that kind of stuff as well, and that's obviously reflected in the equal pay, in the equal pay issues to that that we're seeing at the moment too.

0:13:25- Ruth

And it's one of the things that can quickly get out of hand, if in certain professions, because my work and I'm going to take a tangent at the minute, but my PhD work looked at women in the labour market.

While all of the thesis and dissertations have done have looked at women in male dominated professions or women in the labour market, and, without a shadow of doubt, whilst things in some sort of professions are improving, there are still some occupations that are very gendered by their nature. You know that. You can see it in apprenticeship data, where certain frameworks you know 95% of women or certain other frameworks where 95% men, and that that's still born out in professions. And one of the challenges is if, without a sort of cool, calm and very proper look at jobs, if authorities or any organisation start paying in inducement to a sector that's got that gender sort of differential imbalance, you can very quickly get into a whole range of extra costs and litigation and challenge and that and so the ability to pay inducements really does need looking at quite rigorously before you know those sort of things are just implemented because of the unforeseen consequences that they could bring. The other, I think, big challenge, I'd say for authorities and it comes to understanding their, their sort of staff is linked to hybrid work. You know the labour market is very, very now, as I say, people are demanding a flexible work. I think people love office work because they just really do like to be in office. Other people like the balance that it gives them work in two or three days from home, and people are different and a lot of organisations are wrestling with what the right, right thing to do is. So you've seen a lot of central governments say civil service need to get back to work. Need to get back to work. We're an office-based organisation and you've got to do that. And you know, and I think there will be some sort of correction found and balance found.

But certainly again in when I was working in North Yorkshire, I knew IT posts, comms and marketing posts, what people were looking for, what can I do? And if you said, well, for a full-time employee is three days in the office, you could guarantee the neighbouring author which said, well, we'll take you on to have three days at home. And people were making their judgements based on what the flexibility was in the employment offer, and I think there's a really big issue then for organisations to do quite a lot of staff survey work to understand what it is that matters to their employees, to really dig deep into what do you, what does employees want from their managers? What does that look like in terms of how they're supported? What do employees want in terms of career and development? Pass on options. What does a good working balance look like?

And this is not to say that any every employer needs to jump through every hoop to satisfy that, but understanding that intelligent and having that insight from your workforce helps senior leadership teams to reflect on that. So, just as an example, one of the things I did at the MCA was when we had a staff survey and people really talked about their differential experience of managers was to look at what the management offer should be for staff. What should consistency look like in that management offer in terms of face-to-face meetings versus remote meetings, team meetings, development sessions, what really were people looking at? And the inconsistency was more the problem than that, and that's something that was easy to address. So I think that insight from employees is really important in terms of thinking through some of these issues for management.

0:17:13- **Sarah**

Yeah, I have to agree on that. I think things fundamentally changed, didn't they, after the COVID pandemic and now we're still in this kind of period of adjustment, I suppose, even though it's been a couple of years now. We're in this period where hybrid working has, you know, it's benefiting a lot of people but, like you say, where is that balance, where is that kind of happy medium for the, you know, for the organisation, but also for the employees, who you know are the biggest asset in any organisation, because without them you can't do anything.

0:17:42- **Ruth**

Yeah, I think that's it, and some of the debates that have been played out nationally particularly with some of the politicians saying you're back in the office because that's the only way we can check you're being productive speak to a lack of awareness about how you sort of use and trust your staff.

But it does also, though, speak to a point about return on investment and productivity, and that is a very real sort of issue facing a lot of employers trying to work out how do you sort of drive productivity, drive quality improvements, drive efficiencies and effectiveness in against a sort of hybrid way of working where people are working more remotely and desperately and some of the softer bits softer, I suppose, is maybe not the right word, but those softer sort of bits of working where people collaborate together or innovate together, get squeezed out of jobs if they're fully remote, because it is far harder to collaborate, it is far harder to jump on the spontaneity of ideas and whatever that you saw before, and so there are some real serious issues to be worked through that need to lift the debate above.

Well, if I can't see, you're not productive, or equally the converse, is, I've boiled my job down into everything and I can do everything from home and then discounting that sort of innovation, productivity and the benefits of coming together as teams and cross teams, and one of the dangers of fully remote in some ways is siloed working and not seeing those connections. And organisations thrive and are successful because of the connections they make internally, but equally, in a political sphere, the connections that officers are able to make with politicians and how those relationships work to the benefit of residence.

0:19:32- **Chelsea**

And so you talked earlier about doing work with authorities around relationships between officers and politicians, so have you got any insights on that that you can share with us?

0:19:45- **Ruth**

Yeah, I mean, one of the challenges in that sometimes is raised in either LGA, peer reviews or certainly where government have gone in and said, right, there's an intervention here. In more cases than not, one of the factors has been that there's not the right relationships between elected members, councillors and the organisation. Now there's different ways, I think, of solutions to doing this. Some of this can come through, you know, supporting councillors with induction, with development, to really understand the role that they're taking, particularly new councillors, what that looks like, what that means, because more and more councillors are, perhaps have got a full-time occupation. They're not full-time councillors and therefore how did the square, you know, work in their profession alongside being a councillor and what that looks like, because it is different when you're a political representative than when you're an employee. So there's an awful lot can be done to help councillors develop their skills, to develop their awareness of what the role is, but equally understand some of the challenges they'll face, and there are lots of challenges. That is a difficult role being a councillor, particularly when you're getting loads of resident queries and helping councillors work through. How do you case work that, how do you manage that and how then do you sort of work within your political groups but also work back into the council administration to get answers to some of these queries and build your knowledge of that so you know you can deal with this forward-facing role you've got Equally for officers. You know the political astuteness sometimes can work in a little bit of a bubble and not have that political astuteness and not that awareness of the political challenges. And again, training and developing officers in that sort of way to work with politicians and astuteness is something that's really important as well. And seeing more and more demand, because it's not something that a lot of people do rub up against in their day-to-day work but equally is really important.

One of the I mean some of the things that I've seen or think can really work is one of the dangers and risks is people say, oh well, politicians that's clearly the monitoring officer or just the services team that do that but councillors don't really get asked a lot about governance. Particularly they might get asked about services, care services, you know, refuse services, regeneration of a particular town or place, and therefore it's how do we, how do authorities, create the right connections with the right teams? Now, one way of doing that is, if councils work on a sort of locality plan basis, but you know, if they've got a big area and they've got geographical, how do you then sort of matrix from where your office team so that the locality and the ward councillors are really kept involved about what's going on in their place? And what do those, those connections and those collaborative relationships between officers and councillors look? And how do you for want of a better term, key account manage those in a formal way? What are the connections at a group level? You know what's the connections around the leaders office or the leader of the opposition's office and how, how that that relationship works. And so it's very much a sort of tiered approach that's needed.



That's not just, you know, a one size fits all. And some of these things need working through to we to improve those connections and relationships. And there's different ways of doing it. Some of it can be really formally done through the sort of charter, working with employers on the sort of councillor charter about how they sort of become demanding of, you know, understand their role but become demanding of what officers do. But equally there's a range of sort of different ways of working and supporting those connections between, between councillors and officers. That I think is important for organisations like South East Employers to be sort of working and supporting that to be more effective.

0:23:55- **Sarah**

That's fantastic, Ruth, Thank you. A brilliant introduction to who you are and kind of what you specialise in. So, I think the final question then for today would be something along the lines of, you know, where do you see SEE as an organisation and the services we offer in a year's time or so? What are your plans?

0:24:20- **Ruth**

I mean the first thing I'd say, and I think I've touched on this earlier in a question, is I want SEE to absolutely be more open to the ideas of its member organisations and so that dialogue and that communication, that two-way communication so that we are agile as an organisation, we can adapt as an organisation, we can look at different solutions in whatever that might be, so that if our members say, right this is a new challenge we've got, we are able to be fleet of foot and very quickly respond and support that issue. So there's a little bit there about agility, flexibility but it all comes from the insight of how we work far more closely with our members to get that insight.

One of the big things I'd like to do, because this has come out in absolutely every meeting I've had so far is really major on the organisational intelligence toolkit that we've got currently. There's a lot more we can get from this and a lot more there that our member organisations can get from this in terms of insight into data, benchmarking, looking at some of the things I talked about in terms of rewards, inducements, golden hellos, golden handshakes, retention issues so that they have a wealth of data. We need to do a lot an awful lot more to get the raw data in and then how we create insight out of that, because there is nothing more dull than just data and just trying to work it through. But what we really need is that so that, we can support our members with the insight. What's this really telling us? What story is this telling us? What challenges is it highlighting? What spotlight is it highlighting that maybe we to put in place a five-year plan to deal with it. So really understanding and getting to grips with that is one of the things we need to do. Is crucial.

South East Jobs, I've talked about the turn-over, attraction, hard to feel vacancies. There's a tool there in South East jobs that could be a really cost-effective tool for our members. We could get more critical mass, we could get more use out of it but also we could also put more wrap-around offer and services into that. You know, how could South East Jobs support authorities with bulk-advertising, we could do pre-recruitment for occupations not just in the province of one authority but if we're seeing lots of demand for a particular, you know, IT, is there things we could do in terms of sector-wide advertising to generate a candidate pool.





And I think there's a lot service to do with recruitment that we could build on the South East jobs platform and look at.

And I'd like to pilot some sort of new approaches that are quite innovative. I was in session yesterday with a Fire Authority, a Fire Service talking about some of the stuck issues in terms of their recruitment and are there things we can sort of test where we look at what could be a three-year development career that the organisation gets an awful lot out of the individual in terms of the contribution they can make but equally the individual gets a different career path for three years if it's an entry level career and what are some of these pilot schemes that we could start to explore that work across sector in terms of some of those areas. I want to build on the really core services we've got, I think there are some definite enhancements to that and we could do in our product offer councillors and senior leadership teams, but also working a little bit differently with perhaps geographical locations to look at some of these economies of scale and issues that are common to all of them.

### Helen

Thank you so much for joining us today Ruth, and telling us a bit about yourself and your vision for SEE. If you are a member of SEE and have any questions or queries related to the issues facing local government that Ruth has raised, you can always contact us at [advice@seemp.co.uk](mailto:advice@seemp.co.uk) or for any other topics of HR advice. You can also visit the HR edit webpage at [www.seemp.co.uk/theHRedit](http://www.seemp.co.uk/theHRedit) for any resources related to any of our episodes. We have lots of great topics coming this season, including hybrid working which Ruth touched in today so be sure to subscribe to the podcast of Apple podcasts, Spotify or wherever you get your podcasts, and visit the South East Employers website at [www.seemp.co.uk](http://www.seemp.co.uk) for more information on how the SEE team can support you with anything HR related. Thank you for listening and see you next time.

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