

## How mediation helps Camden council reduce grievances

Sue Rice explains why the borough has developed an in-house mediation service for its staff

**Sue Rice**

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Mediation has been used in Camden to address a range of different issues including relationship breakdowns, personality clashes, communication problems and allegations of bullying and harassment. This has been a challenging time across the public sector and I am pleased that we are able to continue to offer this service to our employees despite budget cuts across the council.

We launched our own internal mediation service last summer. We were already successfully using external mediators on an ad hoc basis and we were keen to develop capacity in-house to offer our employees an alternative to using formal channels. We hoped that mediation would reduce the reliance on grievance procedures, which can have a long-term negative effect on all parties involved. Through setting up an in-house scheme, we wanted to encourage individuals to work through their difficult situations together and to provide a more streamlined approach to resolving disputes.

To develop our mediation scheme we used Consensio, a specialist workplace mediation provider. Consensio assisted us throughout the difference stages of developing our service, including training our mediators on an accredited mediation course. The council employs approximately 4,900 staff (excluding schools) and we wanted the service to reflect our diverse employee base and to be accessible to all.

We used multiple channels to raise awareness of mediation, both in the recruitment of the mediators and in the subsequent launching of the service. After advertising for mediators on our intranet, we had a huge response. It was great to see the wide range of skills from applicants and after an extensive selection process, 12 mediators were selected for training in May last year.

The accredited course took place over six days and was highly experiential, challenging and fun. There was a real focus on developing practical techniques through group discussions, activities and practice. Each role play was tailor-made to reflect conflict situations that we were likely to face once we started mediating within Camden. The trainers on the course, who were all experienced mediators, gave us a lot of detailed feedback on our mediation practice. The training equipped us with the tools to go out and mediate, and we were all excited (and somewhat nervous) about mediating in real life.

Our mediation service is free to Camden employees and can be accessed directly at the request of a manager or may be recommended by a member of HR who is involved in a case. Mediation forms part of our grievance policy and we have also developed a range of documentation to provide all parties with relevant information before agreeing to go ahead with mediation.

As a trained mediator and mediation coordinator, I oversee the whole service. I work in human resources and, at times, it has been hard to juggle my day job with the mediation co-ordination role. However, the mediators have been great at helping out and taking the initiative once a mediation case is referred to them.

We have established an internal mediation network to support our mediators and facilitate the sharing of learning and experiences while ensuring confidentiality around specific cases. This has also been important to help keep skills active as some of our newly-qualified mediators don't have the opportunity to apply and practice their mediation skills on a regular basis. However, we all find that the skills we learned on the course are transferable and therefore useful to us in our day jobs as well as at home!

As I reflect on the first year of the scheme, I am proud of what we have achieved so far. The service has been used across our directorates, and it has received wide support throughout the council, including from senior management and staff. We will continue to evaluate our mediation service, and we are confident that the costs of running the service are far outweighed by the costs of unresolved conflict. I have really enjoyed working with different people across the council and we have had some real success stories. Although not every case can be resolved through mediation, when mediation parties and managers feed back to me that mediation has made a real difference to them it makes my job worthwhile.

*Sue Rice is the mediation coordinator for Camden council*