

CIPFA Research

Future Focused Finance: Evaluation of Yorkshire and Humber Secondment Pilot

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1. Introduction

The Yorkshire and Humber Pilot is being set up to assist talented individuals in enhancing their experience to improve their opportunities for successful career advancement.

Andrew Cheesman, Finance Manager, Financial Strategy at NHS England, 2015

In October 2014, the **Great Place to Work** stream of **Future Focused Finance** invited Yorkshire and Humber chief financial officers to participate in a secondment pilot¹. Secondments were arranged across the following organisations:

- Department of Health
 - Consolidated Accounts Group
- NHS England – North (Yorkshire and Humber)
 - Developing CCG Assurance Systems
 - Co-commissioning of Primary Care with CCGs
 - CCG Assurance
- North East Lincolnshire CCG
 - Healthy Lives Healthy Futures Project

The releasing organisations, ie the secondees' original organisations, were:

- Bradford District CCG
- Leeds Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust
- NHS England – North
- Sheffield Health and Social Care NHS Foundation Trust

A steering group was created to facilitate the secondments and to provide a point of contact should any secondee or their line manager have any concerns.

In March 2016 CIPFA was contracted to undertake an independent evaluation of the secondment pilot.

This evaluation was intended to build on initial findings from the pilot and identify:

- organisational and individual benefits and drawbacks
- whether intended outcomes have been met
- lessons learned
- messages to support and encourage a national rollout of the secondment opportunities for essential career development.

¹ <http://www.futurefocusedfinance.nhs.uk/blog/yorkshire-humber-secondment-pilot-ready-get-set-go>

2. Executive Summary

Conversations with the secondees and their line managers suggested that the pilot has been successful and the secondments have proved to be positive experiences. At the time of interview, all the secondees were pleased with their decision to undertake a secondment. Although most had a considerable length of time to go, they felt settled into their roles and working environments, and were enjoying the challenges involved with the move.

The key benefits for undertaking a secondment were described by the secondees, line managers and steering group as:

- career progression and aspirations
- experiencing a new perspective of the NHS
- improving their understanding of the NHS and the roles involved
- undertaking new challenges/leaving their comfort zones
- learning new financial skills, systems and processes
- applying existing skills in different contexts.

Recommendations were provided for future secondments. These included the following:

- Ensure that contact is maintained between the secondee and their substantial organisation, which in turn will ensure the following:
 - staff are kept informed of organisational developments
 - line managers are kept informed of progress (the new skills and experience gained)
 - any staff issues can be detected and resolved quickly.
- Ensure that participating organisations are aware of the necessary processes involved, so that secondees can be released from their substantial organisations as quickly as possible.
- Ensure that secondees will have suitable opportunities to apply their skills and experience when they return to their substantial organisations.
- The support of directors of finance is vital for making the secondments possible, and to help promote available opportunities.

3. Methodology

The CIPFA evaluation comprised the following:

- desk research to explore:
 - the secondment process, including the application stage and how progress has been monitored
 - the original statements to participate, including expectations and objectives
- telephone interviews with secondees, their department heads and the Yorkshire and Humber Secondment Pilot Steering Group.

The conversations focused on the interviewees' views of the benefits, drawbacks and lessons learned from the process. The interviews also sought feedback on the ways in which the secondment process could be improved.

4. Secondee Feedback

The conversations with the pilot secondees revealed that the secondments have been positive experiences.

4.1 Benefits

The secondees highlighted several benefits of undertaking a secondment, which included the following:

- provision of new challenges and the chance to leave 'comfort zones':

This was a push... I needed to do something different, hopefully it will kickstart me again.

- improved knowledge of the NHS – in particular, the wider finance function:

Increasing my awareness of the commissioning culture, commissioning practices – it was completely new ground and it looked like the type of project that was about change and transformation. It really looked like what I was looking for.

If I was to go back into the [...] role I would have a far better understanding of what's happening in the wider context.

- gaining of new perspectives and appreciation of the activities of other departments:

CCGs are only a small element of the whole department, whereas now you're looking at the overall picture, which gives you a better understanding of how everything fits in and how they're reporting... Sometimes you ask yourself the question, 'Why are we doing this?' but coming here you understand why! It gives you an appreciation of how things are done at a higher level.

It was just seeing if I could learn new skills or how I could adapt what I was already doing into a different context really. And because I have come to an organisation that is well informed and well supported I think that made it much easier.

- networking and development/improvement of working relationships:

Meeting quite a lot of new people and networking opportunities at fairly senior level within CCGs and NHS England [...] that's been a huge positive. Certainly the wider strategic involvement that I was looking for, that's been a huge positive.

I think one of the key benefits is the addition of many more meaningful contacts and networking opportunities that I can assist or seek assistance from. It may open up further opportunities for me across a wider NHS spectrum and is definitely making me a more informed and understanding person.

- development of new/existing skills that can help provide new career opportunities:

The secondment will benefit my career, as gaining experience from a commissioner perspective, as well as that of my substantive role, will allow me to apply for roles and be confident that I have the experience required.

It's been a really positive experience and it's opened my eyes to all sorts of opportunities that might become available.

More detailed feedback from the secondees is included in Appendix 2.

4.2 Suggestions for improvement

Although the secondees were all enjoying their roles at the time of interview, there were some suggestions about what staff should be made aware of before undertaking a secondment. **It should be noted that the remit of the steering group was only to facilitate the secondments.**

Suggestion: Organising the secondments

In one instance the secondment took a lot longer to organise than was anticipated. The secondee's department had not managed a secondment before so they were unaware of the processes involved. Initially, it was difficult to understand how the secondment role would be filled (particularly in such a short space of time). Finding an agency worker to replace them was not a viable option due to high costs. This caused a delay to the start of the secondment, as the secondee was unable to start the role until their permanent post had been filled.

There needs to be a clear structure to how secondments are applied for, and once the candidate has been accepted by an organisation there needs to be a central process or funding in order to move the process quickly. This was one of the delays I faced in my secondment: once I was offered the secondment I had to wait until my organisation found a replacement for me and then the other organisation finding [the] replacement for their organisation. It was a chain effect which took almost four months from initial offer.

Ultimately, the delay to the secondment caused by a lack of clarity could mean it is no longer feasible. There were concerns that a lengthy process would result in potential secondments failing to materialise. It could also deter staff and their organisations from taking part in the first place. Therefore, it is important that resources are made available for a smooth transition completed in a timely manner, as secondments are often time-bound.

Providing more clarity about the requirements for each organisation, including details of HR policies and contract clauses, can help staff be released from their substantial roles. Adding more information about what the secondment will entail will also provide reassurance to both staff and their organisations. Finally, providing incentives to organisations to release their staff could speed up the process.²

Suggestion: Role adjustment

In terms of adjusting to new roles, there was feedback on two fronts. Firstly, some respondents felt that they could have benefitted from a review process whereby they could discuss the secondments with their line manager or the pilot project manager. Although the secondees had encountered few issues once the secondments had commenced, it was suggested that other secondees might not be as fortunate, and there

² It was suggested by a line manager that one of the biggest barriers to the secondment process is a reluctance to release an important member of staff.

were no formal processes to discuss any issues or concerns. Additionally, it was noted that some people might not be as forthright about expressing concerns, so a follow-up phone call or progress meeting could provide reassurance.

The second concern was from the perspective of the incoming replacement. It may be the case that the secondee's replacement will be several grades below that of the secondee, so they may require some time to adjust to the role. It would be useful if there was a process in place to ensure a suitable handover period.

Suggestion: Utilising skills and experience

Further suggestions concerned when the secondee returns to their old role. It might be the case that they have enjoyed their secondment and the additional responsibilities and are reluctant to return³. It is therefore important that returning staff have the opportunity to utilise the skills and experience that they have gained from their secondments. Secondees should also be kept informed about changes to their substantial organisations where appropriate, so that they are prepared prior to returning to their role.

³ Please note that none of the interviewees indicated that they were unhappy or unwilling to return to their old roles.

5. Line Managers' Feedback

The line managers for the secondees' permanent roles were interviewed to provide feedback on the process, and to discuss the benefits that the secondments brought to their organisations.

5.1 Benefits

Staff benefits

- Some of the secondees had been in their organisations for a number of years, so it was seen as an opportunity for staff to experience a new culture, new skills and new ways of working that could be brought back to their organisation.
- Secondees can add to their CVs, therefore assisting with future job applications.
- Other staff are presented with the opportunity to experience the vacant position.
- Staff can be motivated and reinvigorated if new opportunities are available to them.
- Staff are provided with a level of security, ie they have a protected role to return to. This can reduce concerns about taking up a new position.

The secondee had been at the trust for a number of years, so it provided an opportunity to try something else. It's a really good development opportunity for staff to see what it's like in other organisations, to understand different systems and to see different ways of doing things because there is no right answer. I think the situation that you are in will be a mixture of all of them. And I think the more you can see things in other trusts, other NHS organisations, the more it broadens your horizons really; [and] the better it is for the service that we provide.

Organisational benefits

- Secondments are good opportunities to mix up the team and bring in fresh ideas and perspectives.
- From an organisational viewpoint, secondments are seen as a useful way to deal with the issues caused by low staff turnover.
- The secondee could bring a different perspective on financial processes back to the organisation.
- As the secondment is internal, organisations will be replacing staff with other NHS employees. This means that the member of staff will have a level of understanding and experience of the organisation, which will reduce the transitional period.
- Uncertainty caused by organisational restructures means that some job positions will only be made available on a temporary basis. Secondments can be an efficient way to fill these temporary positions.

I would be very keen on doing any more [secondments] that we could do in the future... There has been a tendency to stay here for a number of years; it is really good for the staff to go and see what it's like somewhere else.

I think because the NHS is constantly being restructured [...] sometimes people can't give out permanent jobs because they don't know what's going to happen in

the long term. And I see secondments as another way [to] fill those gaps really because there are things that still need to be done.

5.2 Suggestions for improvement

The managers outlined some suggestions for staff when organising a secondment process, which are outlined below:

- Organisations should agree appropriate points at which information should be shared; in one instance the secondee was unaware of certain requirements until quite late on in the process.
- It is important to manage the secondee's expectations for when they return to their substantial role, and ensure that there are appropriate opportunities for them to utilise their new skills and experience.

Although these were outside the scope of the pilot, the managers offered some suggestions about how the secondment process could be improved:

- Provide a bank of people that are interested in secondments, and can be contacted if a position opens – this would help speed up the process.
- Provide clear guidance on how to proceed with secondments. This guidance should include timeframes for organisations to operate within.
- Encourage the support and input of directors of finance to help sanction the release of staff members.

6. Steering Group Feedback

Below is a summary of the feedback from the following members of the Secondment Pilot Steering Group:

- **Cathy Kennedy** (Chair) Deputy Chief Executive/Chief Financial Officer, North East Lincolnshire CCG
- **Mark Songhurst** (Project Manager) Internal Auditor/FFF Value Maker, Leeds Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust
- **Nigel Booth** Finance Skills Development Manager, Yorkshire and Humber

Feedback related to the role of the steering group during the pilot process.

6.1 Composition and process

Steering group

The steering group consisted of a project manager and an informal group of volunteers whose objective was to try and make the secondment pilot happen.

- The role of the steering group was to:
 - facilitate the pilot process
 - compile and disseminate secondment opportunities
 - develop the framework.
- The role of the project manager was to:
 - ensure that secondment processes were able to commence
 - act as the mediator between those offering a role and those expressing an interest
 - monitor people during their secondments, which included contacting secondees in their first month to check that they were being adequately supported
 - provide guidance and a key point of contact if the secondees or organisations had any issues with the process.

Facilitation and expectations

The steering group introduced processes to help promote and facilitate the secondment positions.

- A pro forma was developed for organisations if they had a position opening, and for secondees if they were interested in taking part.
- If positions were not available at the point of enquiry, interested staff would fill in a form outlining their interests, in case a future opportunity arose.
- Opportunities were disseminated through the Finance Skills Development (FSD) network.
- The forms outlined the expectations of the organisations, including the provision of a point of contact.
- Organisations were expected to mentor the secondees as part of the agreement.

Training

A training event was organised for the secondees by the FSD network, called How to Get the Best from Your Secondment. It was suggested that secondments are not always planned in terms of what participants would like to achieve, what their expectations are, or how they can get the best out of the experience. For the training exercise, participants discussed the development of a 'personal brand' and how staff can manage their careers over the long term. This included a discussion around career goals and the skills and experience needed to achieve those goals.

During secondments there is also a chance that secondees will feel isolated; although this can be the case with anyone starting a new job, secondees are more at risk in that they are only in a role temporarily. Consequently, during training, secondees were encouraged to stay in contact with each other to share their experiences and provide support.

6.2 Challenges

The two main challenges of the pilots were:

- the communication processes, and
- the ability of organisations to release members of staff for secondments.

Communication processes

It was important that the steering group were reaching the appropriate people with their communications. These communications, which were generally sent via email, initially went to directors of finance. It was considered vital to have the support of the finance directors, to raise awareness and demonstrate leadership buy-in. However, in practice their busy work schedules made it impractical to promote secondments this way. In this regard, it was helpful that the group were able to utilise the FSD network and their communication channels, as the FSD network includes a contact for every organisation.

The next step in the process was to find staff who wanted to take part in a secondment and find out their preferred organisations, role types and geographical locations. Although this developed some interest, the steering group felt that the idea of a secondment was not necessarily in the mind-set of employees. It was thought that advertising a specific role as opposed to a generic secondment opportunity might create additional interest. The solution proposed was to send enquiries to organisations about whether they had any suitable secondment roles. These were then promoted as opportunities and received a stronger level of response. A greater number of people responded to defined opportunities than to general enquiries.

Releasing staff

It was suggested that the single biggest barrier to releasing people was where teams had small staff numbers. It was suggested that the fragmented nature of the NHS has meant that team sizes have reduced, particularly in commissioning teams. Secondments outside of the pilot have generally been on a 'job swap' basis because it was important for these organisations not to have a gap in staffing. With small leadership teams, it was hard to find replacements for roles; releasing a director or deputy director proved almost

impossible. It was felt that if secondment opportunities were pitched at too senior a level, it became too difficult for the organisation to approve the change. There are also more general disruptions caused by having to cover a vacancy. A possible message to promote in the future is that those interested in secondment should try to undertake one in the earlier stages of their careers.

Anyone that declared an interest in an opportunity had to gain sign-off from their line manager. There was one instance where sign-off was unable to occur, but it demonstrated the importance of clarity right at the start of the process, minimising the chance that expectations might not be met. The forms ensured that secondees weren't left to 'sink or swim', and were designed to provide details about supervision, making sure that they were comfortable in their roles and ensuring that support was available.

There is a difficult tension between developing an individual and organisational stability.

It was felt that sometimes the importance of team stability can be overstated, and it should be emphasised that it is also important to encourage some change.

6.3 Benefits

Secondee benefits

One of the most important objectives of the pilot was to create mobility between different types of organisations. All of the secondees were working in a different setting to their substantive role. There is a clear view at national level that if people stay in the same environments for extended periods, it can become a disadvantage. Moving to other organisations can help demonstrate that the member of staff has done a variety of work. Moreover, when staff reach more senior levels and have to work across organisations, they will be able to understand other parts of the system and operate more effectively.

Other suggested benefits included:

- helping staff expand their knowledge and try out new skills
- allowing staff to improve existing skills, including those that they are unable to utilise in their current roles
- providing networking opportunities
- helping staff gain confidence in their own abilities
- allowing staff to change sector without the perceived risk attached of moving permanently
- helping staff to determine whether they need to re-evaluate their own career objectives or expectations.

For the individual, it's about being able to try something new and different that stretches them and shows their potential, and allow them to see what it feels like in a different type of organisation... They also have insight into their personal abilities, a CV that looks different, and some personal learning about what they do and don't enjoy.

Finding out that you don't want to work somewhere can be as important as finding out where you do want to work!

Organisational benefits

These included the following:

- The secondment process can be helpful for organisations that are going through a transitional period and are trying to recruit for positions that might be more difficult to fill in a traditional market.
- Putting out temporary contracts does not always attract suitable people from the outside, but creating secondment opportunities can attract people who are career-oriented and professional, allowing them to attract a different calibre of person.
- Secondment also allows organisations to trial new employees and roles, and helps them to complete temporary projects (cost benefits).
- Organisations will not have to issue short-term or longer-term contracts.
- New staff can bring in different ways of thinking from different organisations, helping to share knowledge and information.

For the organisation that is letting someone go, you will hopefully get someone back that has new ideas, new ways of thinking, new ways of working, and new perspectives.

Go for it and try to make it happen. Don't be frightened by the 'what-ifs' in life. While there needs to be a leap of faith, going on secondment you do have the assurance that you will be going back somewhere.

6.4 Suggestions for improvement

The key suggestions to improve the process concerned the transition of the member of staff returning to their permanent role. It was felt that the releasing organisation must consider how the secondment will impact on the member of staff when they return. There is a possibility that the member of staff is ready for a next step that isn't available internally. It is important that suitable opportunities are created for the member of staff on their return, to allow them to utilise their skills. The steering group could help facilitate this process; one possibility is to produce a document that guides people through the reintroduction into the workplace and helps structure the learning from the secondment to agree next steps. This document could include feedback on the following:

- what the member of staff has been doing
- what the member of staff has learned and what skills they have gained, and how this will help both themselves and the organisation
- what the member of staff enjoyed doing.

It is also important that staff are informed of significant organisational changes that occur while they are on secondment, to prevent any issues on their return. It was suggested that a process could be established to ensure that such changes are appropriately communicated.

Finally, it was suggested that any future communications should encourage staff to apply for secondments at earlier stages of their careers, as it can be difficult to arrange secondments for staff with higher levels of responsibility.

Appendix 1: Previous Secondments

Before the pilots took place, several secondments had been completed across the Yorkshire and Humber region. The secondments brought several benefits for both the employee and organisation, which included the following:

- career progression, ie creating new connections, learning new skills and experiencing a role “different from the numbers game”⁴
- providing a “broader insight into NHS finance”⁵
- allowing “risk averse” participants to trial a role before committing to a new career⁶
- providing an opportunity for staff to get involved and make “positive contributions” to health services
- understanding the challenges involved in different environments, including both the role itself and the work–life balance.

For more information, please visit <http://www.futurefocusedfinance.nhs.uk/blog/stories-yorkshire-and-humber-secondment-pilot>.

⁴ <http://www.futurefocusedfinance.nhs.uk/sites/default/files/blog-files/Nigel%20Booth.pdf>

⁵ <http://www.futurefocusedfinance.nhs.uk/sites/default/files/blog-files/Tracy%20Wyatt.pdf>

⁶ <http://www.futurefocusedfinance.nhs.uk/sites/default/files/blog-files/Kim%20Gay.pdf>

Appendix 2: Case Studies

This section contains a summary of the secondees' experiences⁷, including how their secondment roles differ from their substantial duties.

Jane Price

Substantive role: Costing Accountant, Leeds Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust (LTHT)

Secondment role: Project Accountant, Healthy Lives Healthy Futures

Jane had spent several years in financial management, and was eager to pursue a more challenging role. Six months previously she had moved into a costing role at LTHT as she wanted experiences outside of her comfort zone. When a colleague forwarded her details about this secondment role she felt that it would give her a real chance to 'jump in at the deep end':

The new role was a chance to work with five different organisations. In a big place like Leeds you're often a long distance from the interface with other organisations, so that really caught my attention. And just increasing my awareness of the commissioning culture, commissioning practices – it was completely new ground and it looked like the type of project that was about change and transformation. It really looked like what I was looking for.

Part of her secondment role is to support the directors of finance of several different organisations. The directors report the financial position of the entire health community, which is comprised of commissioners and three providers (an acute trust, a mental health trust and a community trust). Her objectives include helping to consolidate an agreed financial position for the health community, forecasting that to year end and setting future plans for the whole financial community.

Getting to grips

Jane described the early stages of her secondment as:

... having to forge new relationships and form understanding of several organisations and their structures very quickly. All information came from them and it was challenging to be dependent in this way whilst getting to grips with their varying views of the same landscape. The need to judge quickly the depth of what I needed and the subtleties behind what I received generated an unexpected sense of vulnerability to start with.

In the background of financial management, she would generate her own financial information to feed into the consolidation process, whereas in her secondment role she has to obtain the information from others:

The biggest difference, apart from the personal learning, is the interface between the five different organisations... When you've generated the information yourself you know all the details; being at the other end and trying to draw it from other organisations without much background is harder. It's difficult because you

⁷ One of the potential secondees decided that they were not ready to take the next step. However, they have since completed several objectives to demonstrate their capability to work at a higher level. They have now been offered an internal secondment for six months.

always have a feeling of scratching the surface and demanding other people's time just to give you the top bit of their information.

A reverse perspective

Jane's secondment is unusual in that the role did not previously exist in any of the organisations she is working with, nor does it 'fit' in any particular organisation. Consequently, the role is still to be comprehensively defined and developed. She admits that this is a challenge, but hopes that it will help to increase her understanding of the organisations she is working with:

It's a complete reverse perspective for me. That's the most challenging thing, because if I find a way to get deeper into that information, I can increase my knowledge and understand the nuances of what I've consolidated together. So that's a challenge, but it's a good one I think.

Driving change

Jane hopes the role will develop further. There is considerable transformation work taking place across the organisations; change to pathways, change to the way care is delivered, and attempts to deliver savings. As the project develops Jane anticipates that her role will involve establishing the cost of current pathways and projecting the impact of the proposed changes. She anticipates that the processes and difficulties involved with transformation will move to the forefront of NHS finance, so the chance to work with organisations attempting to drive change will stand her in good stead. The chance to work with others has also been a positive experience:

Just the feeling of being in a new sort of community, making new relationships with some pretty impressive people, and that feeling of doing something new and putting yourself out there – like I say, it's not always comfortable, but it does give you a sense of wellbeing. It is hard but I'm not scared of 'hard'. I feel good about doing it.

So far, Jane's secondment has been enjoyable and has provided her with food for thought as to her future career path. She still keeps in touch with her old line manager, who updates her about internal changes, and is pleased that she will be able to bring back a new perspective when she returns to LTHT.

I suppose you've got to go into it with the mind-set that you make it... Some of it's up to you to make it what it is, and that's quite hard... It's quite a hard thing to achieve in completely new surroundings. I would say that's the biggest challenge.

Ghafoor Ahmed

Substantive role: CCG Finance Manager, NHS Bradford Districts CCG

Secondment role: Finance Manager, Department of Health

Although Ghafoor enjoyed his substantive role as CCG Finance Manager, including the working environment and straightforward commute, after eight years he was keen to push his boundaries. The secondment position at the Department of Health (DH) has provided this opportunity for him. His key motivation was to improve his knowledge and skills, and he hopes that the secondment will put him in a good position to move forward in his career.

This was a push... I needed to do something different, hopefully it will kick-start me again.

Ghafoor explained that at the CCG his role was largely spent dealing with management accounts, whereas the role at DH involves the publication of year-end accounts. He explained on his secondment application that financial accounts was his "passion", hence the opportunity to help produce "one of the largest single consolidated accounts in the world" would reinforce his knowledge and experience in this area. Ghafoor described the secondment as a "bigger role", as it involves dealing with multiple organisations as opposed to one, and consolidating multiple accounts instead of the solitary one at Bradford. The accounts have to be published in a set format according to international reporting standards – an important skill to master in the world of finance.

"Different environment, different culture, different people"

Going into the secondment, one of Ghafoor's concerns was that it was a new team, a new organisation and that the team may operate differently to how his old team operated. However, he explained that DH had been very supportive in helping him adapt to the new role – he "wasn't thrown in the deep end and told to get on with it!" Aside from the responsibilities of the role, it was also a big change to his work-life balance. Whereas his old role involved a 10-minute drive to work, his commute to DH can be up to 2 hours. So far, he has tried the train, bus, coach and car, and has finally compromised by working four longer days to skip the traffic and reduce travelling time.

He admitted that the decision to take a secondment was a "balancing act", but the experience has provided Ghafoor with exposure to multiple organisations and high-profile staff. It has also helped him understand the bigger picture of finance in the health sector, and has made him empathise with processes that he previously found somewhat frustrating:

CCGs are only a small element of the whole department, whereas now you're looking at the overall picture, which gives you a better understanding of how everything fits in and how they're reporting... Sometimes you ask yourself the question, 'Why are we doing this?' but coming here you understand why! It gives you an appreciation of how things are done at a higher level.

Taking the gamble

Overall, Ghafoor was very supportive of the secondment process. While there are inevitably some risks involved with secondments – a new environment, new commute and new responsibilities, to name but a few – the experience gained from the process should justify the risk. He hopes that his own experience will add to his CV and improve his chances of progressing in his career. He hopes that the secondment will put him in a better position to apply for senior financial accountant or group account roles. Ultimately, for Ghafoor, there is "nothing really to lose" in the long term.

I have certainly enjoyed the secondment so far, as it provides variety of work and you are not always working on the same thing, and also [have] met a lot new people.

He advised potential secondees to consider what they wish to gain out of a secondment, and how the change would fit in with their career ambitions. If the secondment provides

you with the skill, knowledge and experience that you need to progress, he feels it is definitely worthwhile.

It's just taking that gamble... In the short term you might be losing out but hopefully you'll gain in the long term.

Sharron Feather

Substantive role: Directorate Accountant, Sheffield Health and Social Care NHS Foundation Trust

Secondment role: Finance Manager, NHS England – North (Yorkshire and Humber)

Sharron's permanent role was as a directorate accountant at Sheffield Health and Social Care NHS Foundation Trust, which involved providing financial advice and support to directorates, preparing annual financial plans and reporting monthly on financial performance against the plan. She was keen to gain experience in a primary care trust and develop new systems and processes. Before agreeing to take on the secondment, she did some research on the organisation and the services it provides. She also met to discuss the responsibilities of the role, and would advise other potential secondees to do the same. She decided that the move would help her broaden her knowledge of the wider finance function within the NHS, gain insight into how a commissioning organisation operates and allow her to apply her negotiation skills to contract negotiation.

Knocking on your door

Although Sharron had, at the time of this interview, only been in the secondment role a few months, she found the working environment to be more manageable than in her permanent position. This is in part due to fewer budget holders dropping into her office unexpectedly:

I found the old role rather stressful because you're kind of pulled in all directions – you've got the managers wanting you to do one thing, you've got the directorate knocking on your door at any time and pulling you in that direction... I felt more stressed in my substantive post than I do in the role that I'm in at the moment.

Although she felt that there were still new processes and systems to learn, an advantage of the secondment post is the transferability of her accounting skills, particularly as she is still working in an NHS organisation. However, a key difference is that she is procuring from the provider side, so is able to understand a commissioner's perspective. Another difference is the way advice is provided; Sharron suggested that in her secondment role she is led more centrally, whereas in her permanent role at a financial trust she would receive advice from her director of finance: "The organisation works a lot differently". In addition, because she has been seconded into a commissioning body, it has involved supporting primary care, which includes finding out about what GP contracts entail and the funding involved. Ultimately, this has helped to improve her overall understanding of the organisation:

I have enjoyed learning about the services that are provided within primary care and dental, learning what the contracts are made up of and how they are funded. I have enjoyed meeting new people and being involved in the procurement process from a commissioner perspective.

Work-life balance

Sharron was unsure as to what the future holds, but at the time of the interview was enjoying her post, the challenges and the work-life balance brought about by the change. She has had monthly meetings with the secondment line manager, which have helped her to review objectives and manage expectations. An added bonus is that her journey to work has been made considerably easier thanks to the role change, which has helped with her work-life balance.

I'm enjoying it. I'm enjoying the different work. I'm enjoying it because I can leave work whenever I want and not have to consider the traffic that I'm going to be stuck in.

Overall, she recommended that others take the leap and go on secondment, particularly if they are looking to broaden their own knowledge and skill base.

The secondment will benefit my career as gaining experience from a commissioner perspective as well as that of my substantive role from a provider perspective will allow me to apply for roles and be confident that I have the experience required.

Andrew Fletcher

Substantive Role: Finance Business Partner, Leeds Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust

Secondment Role: Finance Manager (CCG Assurance), NHS England

During Andrew's last appraisal at Leeds Teaching Hospital, it became clear to him that he was looking for experiences that he might not be able to obtain in his current role. He decided, along with his line manager, that a secondment would be a good opportunity to gain that experience. Mark Songhurst, the project manager for the secondment pilots, helped Andrew arrange the secondment, which took place at NHS England. He was delighted to see that the opportunity was a near perfect match to what he requested on his application form.

One of the real things I wanted to do was to understand more about the wider NHS policies and strategic issues and that came out through my appraisal and development plan. So really what I'd asked for was more exposure to health economy wide strategic issues and trying to get involved in strategic routes - especially with the five year forward view just taking off.

Andrew was pleased to be able to improve his understanding of the wider strategic issues of NHS finance. It also gave him a chance to work with other organisations across the NHS. One of his motivations was not to necessarily improve his skill set, but to apply his skills to a different context. He was particularly keen to help to try and break down any silos or tensions between providers and commissioners.

This is all about cross-boundary working together, trying to make each NHS pound more efficient and that's exactly where I was a couple of years ago, I really wanted to get involved in that sort of stuff.

I don't think the skills [...] are that different where I am now, it's just that I am looking at it from a totally different perspective [...] I have now jumped across the commissioning spectrum into NHS England and looking at [...] how funding has] been allocated and what that is being used for.

NHS England has been very supportive throughout his secondment, and has provided the included necessary equipment, information and advice to help him in his role.

One thing NHS England are extremely good at is providing lots of information and support [...] because I have come to an organisation who's staff are well informed and well supported I think that made it much easier.

His secondment has taught him a huge amount about the parameters and the challenges that the NHS is facing. It has also provided him with more clarity, allowing him to see how the information that is provided internally in the Trust would be of huge benefit to commissioners and the wider NHS environment. In addition, it has given him an opportunity to network with colleagues.

In terms of me rekindling some relationships with people that I've worked with and met before in the NHS, [...] meeting quite a lot of new people and networking opportunities at fairly senior level within CCGs and NHS England, [...] that's been a huge positive. Certainly the wider strategic involvement that I was looking for, that's been a huge positive.

The most enjoyable aspect of my secondment role so far has been the opportunity to meet many more of NHS colleagues (mainly finance) and develop strong effective relationships - this is key to me having a better understanding of how I can support financial planning and delivery across our healthcare communities.

When Andrew returns to his permanent role, he will "have a far better understanding of what's happening in the wider context" and a better understanding of the "secondary care point of view" rather than the potentially insular viewpoint of a costing team. He hopes to be able to use his newly-gained experiences and knowledge when he returns to his permanent organisation, which he feels will benefit the trust.

I think it's important going back to your substantive role that there is some flexibility, otherwise if [I] just went back and did what [I] did before [...] I don't think they would be getting the best out of the experiences that I've had during this year.

He advises potential secondees to be clear about what skills and experience they want to gain and to ensure that the secondment will provide that opportunity.

It's being clear about what you want, making sure that clarity is on your placement application and being clear about what the job outline is, about what you are going to do when you get there and trying to get the best fit possible.

Overall, Andrew has been enjoying his secondment and it has helped him to decide what he wants from his future career.

It's been a really positive experience and it's opened my eyes to all sorts of opportunities that might become available.

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