



A special supplement from the PPMA in association with **THE MJ**

INSIDE: ■ The art of leadership in today's volatile climate ■ Spotlight on PPMA Talent Programme Winners
 ■ Enacting rapid culture change under pressure ■ People, capacity and organisational resilience

We're in this together

Sandra Farquharson reflects on last month's highly successful PPMA Conference and highlights the importance of reflection and togetherness as the public sector navigates challenging times



SANDRA FARQUHARSON
 PPMA President; Director of
 HR & OD at Hackney LBC

The changes across the public sector today are palpable. At times like this there are compelling reasons to focus on getting things done and taking time out often feels like the hardest thing to do. Yet after taking time at the recent PPMA Conference to purposefully explore and reflect on the future with HR and OD colleagues, I came away feeling more certain of the areas where we really need to focus and of our important role in leading change.

Although the amount of change is significant I am also genuinely energised. This is not just because it was a timely and important event but because listening to such impactful keynote speakers and engaging with the leaders of change in the fringe sessions was incredibly thought provoking.

When we do not find the space to think and learn together we miss out on professional development that is key to our organisations and careers. It really brought home why time with HR and OD colleagues matters. We need the space to think about whether the work



we are doing is still pointing in the right direction.

What makes the PPMA Conference valuable is the quality and honesty of the thinking in the room. This shines a light on the challenges and potential consequences for the people in the communities we serve.

The conference featured a programme of brilliant and experienced leaders. To hear those senior colleagues reflecting so openly about the issues many of us face now, and share practical insight, was invaluable. These conversations and deep learning from experience are hard to come by in day-to-day work and this gives us fuel to plan ahead and deliver.

Across the two days one theme was constant. The challenges facing our sector are among the

most significant in a generation and the requirements of HR professionals are higher than ever. There was a clear message that at a time when the professional voice of HR is an imperative for change we must not wait to be asked to speak up.

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Hearing this throughout the event was important because if those working in HR are going to lead and support organisations through changes they have to be willing to do what leaders do. This means putting difficult issues on

the table, giving honest professional advice and creating the conditions for problems to be fully addressed. If we are to deliver and command the respect of our profession, it will be by making sure that HR is at the centre of innovation and evolution.

We must shape those plans by giving sound professional advice about what is necessary and asking the right questions even when it is uncomfortable.

Alongside that sits a challenge for all organisations about how we think about ownership of the People Agenda. Culture came up repeatedly at the conference. In many organisations there is a tendency to determine culture as the domain of HR whereas the truth is it is part of everyone's job to engage and participate in

changing it. The same is true for learning from mistakes and managing conflicts effectively. HR is the architect but culture is not a done-to programme designed by HR. It is a collective responsibility at all levels.

Civility and accountability was a theme which ran through the conference. In public services we are here to support the needs of everyone in the community. We must do so with dignity and respect and the values that the public sector requires. Our job is to make sure we respond to the right things and hold ourselves to the standard we expect of others. Getting this right is what makes the difference between being merely busy and being the orchestrators of change.

These issues are for every professional at each stage of their career. We are all leaders and collectively our contribution is central to outcomes in our communities. We get there by making time to think alongside people who have faced what you are facing and who share honestly. This is what is so valuable about the PPMA conference. It requires time and space to focus on things that will help our organisations have greater impact.

We are immensely grateful to such impactful keynote speakers and the fringe session leaders who shared such valuable expertise. We also extend our sincere thanks to our generous sponsors and exhibitors whose partnership and support are vital in creating change.

It is important for us to protect and embrace our time together as HR professionals as we look forward to the future. ●

Leadership, culture and meaningful impact in local government

Joanne Roney reflects on the art of leadership in today's volatile climate, and the important role of HR



JOANNE RONEY
Managing Director of Birmingham City Council

At the PPMA Annual Conference, I reflected on what leadership feels like in local government today, and what chief executives increasingly look for from their HR functions in an environment defined by complexity, constraint and heightened public expectation.

Local government leaders are operating in a landscape shaped by financial pressures, organisational reconfiguration, governance challenge and increasing scrutiny. Alongside this, community expectations continue to rise, trust feels more fragile, and questions of accountability and transparency are ever

present. Within this context, public service culture matters more than ever – and HR has a critical strategic role to play.

From a chief executive perspective, the value of HR is no longer measured primarily through process or compliance, but through impact. Retaining great people is business critical – not only because of the cost of replacement, but because institutional knowledge and stability are essential to leading organisations through sustained change. Talent development, meaningful career pathways and a sense of purpose increasingly outweigh pay as drivers of retention.

HR also plays a pivotal role in supporting difficult conversations and effective change management. Developing confident managers and leaders who can coach for performance, lead compassionately and maintain momentum in challenging conditions is essential. Wellbeing sits at the heart of this – not as a bolt on, but as a core enabler of resilient, high performing teams.

As local government reshapes itself, it is important to remember that transformation is fundamentally



Joanne Roney speaking at the PPMA Conference in April

people led, not digital led. This means investing in leadership capability early, being honest about gaps, encouraging

consistency, and ensuring HR professionals are confident in speaking 'truth to power'. Culture must be owned

intentionally – clearly articulated, consistently modelled and regularly challenged. Strong cultures balance focus on people with appropriate risk management, and success should be measured not only by fixing what is broken, but by anticipating issues early and acting decisively.

Looking ahead, HR's challenge is to lead change creatively while maintaining integrity, fairness and trust. Equality, Diversity and Inclusion must be seen not as an initiative, but as a core business priority aligned to organisational purpose. In a complex environment, meaningful impact comes from courageous leadership, clear values and an HR function firmly positioned at the strategic heart of the organisation.

I would argue it's time HR directors had parity with other statutory officers on local government senior leadership teams, financial accountability and good governance are reliant on having good people and good management in place. In short great vision without great people is irrelevant. ●

Rapid culture change under pressure

Juliette Alban-Metcalf looks at the journey of improvement Runnymede BC has undergone, and the leadership lessons the process has highlighted



JULIETTE ALBAN-METCALFE
Chief Executive, Real World Group

Despite being one of the UK's strongest economic contributors, with the second highest Gross Value Added outside London, Runnymede BC faced a stark

warning when it was issued with a Best Value Notice. It highlighted significant challenges: a lack of strategic vision and leadership effectiveness, a range of cultural challenges and insufficient organisational engagement and alignment.

They had just 12 months to demonstrate meaningful improvement in all of these areas or face escalation to Special Measures.

Working closely with Kate Enver, then director of communications, HR and OD, we designed a comprehensive leadership culture programme to rebuild engagement, strengthen leadership and embed a healthier, more connected culture.

The journey began with one to one conversations across the corporate leadership team (CLT). They generated honest reflections on cultural barriers and opportunities and created shared ownership and buy-in to the change ahead.

Senior leaders received tailored development support focused on honesty, accountability, and empowered leadership. This included both the CLT and senior leadership team undertaking 360 feedback at a team and then individual level. This generated transparent feedback which the leaders genuinely owned and acted upon. Workshops and coaching helped them create practical action plans to

strengthen their approach and impact.

This team and individual-level feedback was complemented by the first employee survey in many years. It explored leadership culture specifically, identifying the key barriers and enablers to a stronger more connected and empowered organisation. It gave employees a voice and provided targeted feedback on which to base improvement.

Feedback was delivered in a way that built ownership. It enabled employees throughout the council to have a positive voice in generating the change they wanted to see through Appreciative Inquiry-based focus groups. This approach accelerated

change in leadership and management behaviours, and the impact they had on people.

Within 12 months, success was clear – the Best Value Notice was lifted and a Corporate Peer Challenge commended the progress made. A repeat culture survey has shown real improvement in objective terms in all areas of leadership impact across the council as a whole, as well as noticeable improvements in ratings from employees from underrepresented groups in particular.

This programme not only helped the council avoid intervention but has put them in a much stronger position to rise to whatever challenges the future holds. ●

Shaping the Future of HR and OD: Reflections from PPMA Talent Programme Winners

The PPMA Annual Conference and Awards continue to showcase and celebrate the exceptional talent shaping the future of HR and OD across local government. This year's talent programme winners reflected on how the PPMA programmes and conference experience have strengthened their confidence, broadened their perspectives, and inspired their future ambitions as emerging leaders within the profession.

MOLLY LUCAS



For **Molly Lucas** from the Royal Borough of Kingston Upon Thames, winner of the **One to Watch 2025** award, the programme provided an opportunity to reflect on both her professional direction and wider impact.

'The programme strengthened my long-standing passion for supporting others,' she explained. 'It helped me recognise that I want to apply this more widely across the people profession, supporting employees, organisations, and wider community impact.'

Since completing the scheme, Molly has launched a Workforce Training Programme and led a Reverse Mentoring cohort within her organisation. She also highlighted the importance of shared learning at the conference, particularly discussions around intentional language in policy development and the opportunities presented by AI to improve working practices.

AKDDUS KHAN



For **Akddus Khan** from Oldham MBC, winner of **HR Rising Star 2025**, the programme reinforced the importance of authentic leadership.

'The programme has played a pivotal role in helping me step into more senior leadership with authenticity and confidence,' he said. 'It showed me the importance of bringing my whole self to leadership and recognising that my lived experience is a strength.'

Conference discussions – particularly a chief executives panel session – challenged and shaped Akddus' thinking as an emerging leader.

'It was especially powerful to see two chief executives from HR backgrounds,' he reflected. 'It reinforced how critical HR and OD are in helping organisations navigate uncertainty, drive transformation, and support their

workforce through increasingly complex demands.'

RACHEL JONES



Rachel Jones from Herefordshire Council, winner of the **Peer into the Future 2025/26** cohort, said the programme strengthened her thinking around strategic and system leadership.

'Peer into the Future reinforced for me that strategic leadership is as much about shaping systems and networks as it is about leading an organisation,' she explained. 'It strengthened my focus on system leadership, using influence to connect people, share learning and build capability across boundaries.'

Rachel reflected that the programme encouraged her to be more intentional in how she leads, focusing on creating the conditions for others to collaborate and sustain impact. She also described the conference discussions around Grenfell, accountability and local government reorganisation as particularly powerful.

'The emphasis on responsibility, culture and listening to lived experience was a powerful reminder that leadership decisions, and indecision, have real human consequences,' she said.

Within her organisation, Rachel is now applying this learning by shaping leadership development around systems thinking, collaboration and inclusive leadership, while also strengthening peer learning and sector-wide collaboration.

FAZAL MEHMOOD



For **Fazal Mehmood** from Salford City Council, winner of the **Apprentice of the Year Level 2-3** category, the experience proved transformative both personally and professionally.

'Taking part pushed me out of my comfort zone in a way that day-to-day work doesn't,' he explained. 'Preparing for assessments, presenting my work, and

competing alongside other talented apprentices helped me recognise my own strengths and areas for growth.'

HARVEY COOK



Meanwhile, **Harvey Cook** from Lincolnshire CC, winner of the **Apprentice of the Year Level 4-7** category, described the programme as giving him 'a renewed sense of purpose and a much broader perspective on the opportunities available'.

'Receiving this recognition strengthened

my confidence enormously,' he said. 'More importantly, it showed me the importance of representation and encouragement for others entering the profession.'

Together, the experiences of this year's winners demonstrate the lasting impact of the PPMA talent programmes in supporting the next generation of HR and OD leaders across local government. ●

Applications for the 2026 HR Rising Star and One to Watch programmes are now open.



To find out more about how to apply and get involved, visit www.ppma.org.uk

UNLOCK YOUR POTENTIAL

Join Our Prestigious Development Program Today and Elevate Your Career to **New Heights!**



READY TO RISE?

The PPMA HR Rising Star program is your gateway to senior HR leadership. Tailored for HR professionals with 5+ years of experience, this immersive program challenges your personal qualities through a variety of activities, fostering confidence & resilience along the way.

CLOSING DATE 12TH JUNE

READY TO SHINE?

The PPMA One to Watch program is your opportunity to kickstart your HR career. Tailored for early-stage HR professionals, this dynamic program challenges your personal qualities through various activities, fostering confidence & resilience along the way.



CLOSING DATE 12TH JUNE



MORE DETAILS ON THE PPMA WEBSITE
www.ppma.org.uk



People, capacity and organisational resilience

Graeme McDonald looks at the state of local government today and warns the resilience of the sector will depend on how effectively organisations support, develop and deploy their people



GRAEME MCDONALD
Managing Director, Solace

Local government is, at its core, a people-driven system, one currently operating under sustained and intensifying pressure. The latest insights from Solace's work with councils across the UK shared at the recent PPMA Conference highlight a clear truth for HR and organisational development (OD) professionals: today's financial, structural and political challenges are ultimately workforce challenges. As demand rises and resources tighten, the resilience of local government will depend increasingly on how effectively organisations support, develop and deploy their people.

Across the sector, the operating context is becoming more complex. Demand for services continues to grow, while organisational capacity – both financial and human – is shrinking. Workforce shortages, widening skills gaps, and ongoing recruitment challenges are now persistent features rather than temporary setbacks. At the same time, retention, engagement and morale are under strain due to prolonged uncertainty and the cumulative impact of 'doing more with less'.

This environment has driven a

growing reliance on interim and specialist capacity, creating additional pressures on continuity, institutional knowledge and long-term workforce planning. For HR leaders, the challenge is not simply filling roles, but sustaining organisational capability in a shifting and unpredictable landscape. Simultaneously large-scale reform programmes, including but certainly not limited to local government reorganisation (LGR), devolution and restructuring, are reshaping organisations across the UK. These changes bring profound implications for people and culture.

Periods of transition often undermine staff confidence and psychological safety. Leadership teams face increased uncertainty and reduced bandwidth, while organisational identity becomes blurred. Industrial relations can become more complex, and the risk of disengagement rises.

Without careful management, these dynamics can result in talent loss, change fatigue and the erosion of institutional knowledge. The implication is clear, HR and OD must play a central, proactive role in shaping change not simply implementing decisions after they have been made. Being an early shaper of reform is essential to mitigating people-related risks and ensuring successful outcomes.

Financial constraints continue to drive difficult workforce decisions, often forcing organisations into short-term trade-offs that carry long-term risks. Tensions are increasingly evident between immediate savings and future capability,



vacancy management and service resilience, and cost reduction versus investment in learning and development.

Reduced funding for organisational development and capability-building can weaken organisations just at the point they need to be strongest. In this context, workforce planning, skills prioritisation and innovative job design become critical tools. HR leaders must also recognise that financial decisions are not neutral, they are culture-shaping decisions that influence employee experience, organisational values and long-term effectiveness.

Looking ahead, the challenges facing local government are unlikely to ease. Economic constraints will continue to limit the system's ability to meet demand, while political instability and changing public expectations

add further complexity. Trust in public institutions is under pressure, and the evolving role of technology introduces both opportunity and uncertainty.

At the same time, the psychological contract between employer and employee is shifting. Employees increasingly expect flexibility, purpose and development, requiring organisations to rethink how they attract, retain and engage talent.

In this context, leadership capability becomes a defining factor in organisational resilience. Future-ready leaders will need to operate effectively in conditions of ambiguity and complexity, demonstrating resilience, political awareness and strong system leadership.

Governance and assurance capabilities will also be critical, particularly as expectations for

accountability and transparency increase both internally and externally. For HR and OD professionals, this means focusing not only on individual leadership development but on building collective leadership capacity and resilience.

OD has a central role to play in enabling organisations to adapt and thrive. This includes supporting large-scale change and integration, rebuilding trust within and across organisations, and fostering collaboration across internal and external silos.

Equally important is the development of robust talent pipelines, inclusive leadership practices, and more effective approaches to attraction and retention. These are not standalone initiatives – they are interconnected elements of a resilient organisational system.

Ultimately, the success or failure of reform, service delivery and organisational transformation will depend on people capacity. This places HR and OD professionals at the heart of the local government system.

The challenge is not only to respond to immediate pressures, but to proactively shape the future – ensuring organisations are equipped to navigate uncertainty, build sustainable capability, and deliver for communities in increasingly complex conditions.

For HR leaders, the question is no longer whether people matter, this is already clear. The real question is how effectively we can translate that understanding into practical, accessible and impactful action that strengthens resilience across the sector. ●



It's showtime!

The recent PPMA Annual Conference, held once more at the Hilton Birmingham Metropole, was a massive success, and it was a welcome sight to see so many colleagues from across the public sector for two days of insight, discussion and connection.

We would like to extend our sincere thanks to all our delegates for your energy and contribution, helping to create such a positive and engaging atmosphere throughout the event.

We also would like to thank our wonderful partners and sponsors for your continued support.

Check out ppma.org.uk/ppmah26 for all the post-conference highlights, speaker resources, photos, videos and key takeaways

