

# Me and my shadow

Shadowing can be a useful experience for aspiring leaders wanting to gain insight into a new role. Interim recruitment specialists **Claire de Gidlow** and **Rachel Osborne** spent some time on the frontline to see what they could learn for their clients

**W**hile shadowing has long been recognised as a powerful tool for aspiring leaders to gain key insights into a role or career path, it is often not considered by those making recruitment decisions.

Understanding the internal workings of an organisation and the context within which the successful candidate will operate, is vital to appreciate the full remit of the role, and the essential qualities that are needed at that position.

So, why is it that so many recruiters rely only on past experience, external soundings or paper-based research?

We set out look at how things work – and find inspiration – on the other side of the fence.

We arranged to shadow Jennie Bashforth, then director of adult and community services at Worcestershire CC; Dr Adi Cooper, strategic director of adult social services at Sutton LBC; as well as two children's services directors – Liz Graham (interim), from Newham LBC, and Liz Nicholson, from Shropshire CC.

We felt it was time to get a fresh perspective on what it now takes to be a director within adults and children's services. And it proved a positive experience for both of us.

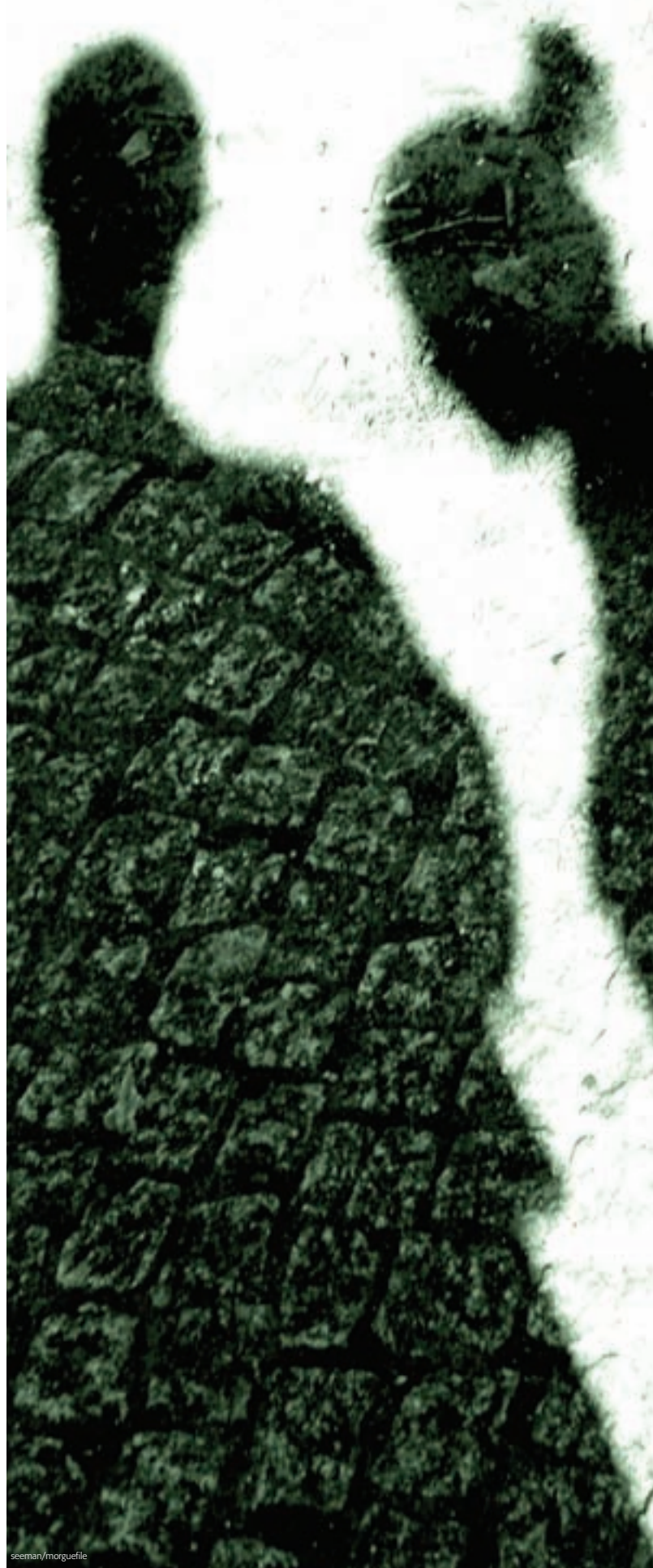
What soon became apparent was that selecting the right person to shadow and knowing what you want to gain from the experience is key to a successful outcome.

Liz Graham was first introduced to shadowing as part of the 'Take your daughters to work' campaign in the early 1990s. She was shadowed by two 12-year-old girls, the daughters of colleagues, over a day, for several years. 'It was great fun,' she remembers. 'I was never sure how much they took in, but their parents reported how much they enjoyed the experience.'

Liz agrees preparation and planning is key. The shadower needs to be able to question why decisions are made, and those being shadowed must play an active role in helping the shadower understand the politics of the situations observed, the complexity of judgements being made, and the reasoning behind them.

Another benefit which should not be underestimated is the opportunity to build a cross-organisational network and relationships with key decision-makers, who otherwise would be difficult to access.

Liz Nicholson emphasises the importance of this aspect within children's services, in particular, due to the multi-agency/partnership focus of the work. 'Remember, too, that some of the benefits are reciprocal. Interacting with the host and their colleagues allows them to gain a greater appreciation of the work



that you do, resulting often in closer working relationships.'

Jennie Bashforth sums up the initiative: 'I would recommend shadowing to anyone as part of a personal development plan. I'm just surprised that it is not promoted more.' ■

*Claire de Gidlow and Rachel Osborne are both partners in interim leadership at GatenbySanderson*

*Rachel Osborne, shadowed Jennie Bashforth, then director of adult and community services at Worcestershire CC*

**Rachel says:** 'Jennie is a strong advocate of shadowing and was keen to know what was important to me. She then made arrangements to involve me in a day which allowed me to see her operate in a variety of settings, with a "golden thread" of themes relating to my initial request.

'My priority was to observe the complex interrelationship officers share with their portfolio holders. I sat in on a one-to-one portfolio member briefing meeting and, as a resident of the county, was invited to offer my opinion as well.'

**Jennie says:** 'Some of these experiences have been more valuable than others, and I have learned the difference between an excellent and OK experience is dependent on some key factors.

First, the level of commitment of the person being shadowed and the shadower. Second, preparation time together with a clear focus on outcomes. This helps the shadower put the right programme in place and involve other participants at an early stage. Finally, it's crucial to build in time for de-briefs in order to make sense of and build on learning from the experience.

*Claire de Gidlow shadowed Dr Adi Cooper at Sutton LBC*

**Claire says:** 'The intention at the outset was to experience a "typical" day. The structure worked well, with a broad range of strategic, management, corporate and service-delivery issues faced at any one time. From experiencing Adi's working life at Sutton, I was able to gain an insight into the absolute "must haves", as well as some of the more subtle skills required to run an adult social services department.

I could better assess exactly what it takes to deliver leading-edge services against increasing demands for improvement and significant financial pressures.'

**Adi says:** 'As well as being an important learning opportunity within and across organisations, being shadowed by a recruitment consultant added fresh perspective from a recruitment point of view.'