

CIPFA Diploma in School Financial and Operational Leadership

Ally Bigwood, School Business Manager, Bridge Learning Campus

Ally chose to study the Diploma in School Financial and Operational Leadership in 2019. He successfully completed the course in 2020.

Ally has worked as a School Business Manager (SBM) at Bridge Learning Campus in Hartcliffe, Bristol since 2017. This is an all through school with children from Nursery to Year 11 attending. Before moving to Bridge Learning Campus, Ally was the SBM at Parson Street Primary School, Bristol for four years.

Prior to working in schools, Ally worked as an Assistant Director of an Education Centre in South Bristol where he was responsible for finance and business.



What made you choose to do the CIPFA Diploma in School Financial and Operational Leadership?

Having previously enjoyed completing the Level 5 Diploma in School Business Management, I was ready for my next challenge. I had been looking around at what courses I could do that were relevant to my role and would benefit me in the long run. I'd whittled it down to a few courses and looked at the course content of each one. I spoke with ISBL during a local conference to get more details as well and eventually chose the CIPFA SFOL. For me personally, timing was key. I have a young daughter with another one on the way. I knew that if I didn't do a course now, realistically it would be a lot harder to do with a bigger family and more outside work commitments. I was thinking I would have to put it off for maybe four or five years. I had spoken to my family, and they agreed, now was a very good time to do it. I can also still hear my Dad saying very vividly to me, "Ally, if you want it enough you will find the time to complete it". They were really supportive during the course duration.

How did you go about getting approval from your line manager to do the programme?

I spoke to my Head Teacher and he was happy for me to pursue and sign up for this course. I also spoke to the MAT FD and Head of HR and they too were very supportive of me doing this. We were in a fortunate position where we had not spent all our CPD budget and therefore I wrote a business case and spoke to my senior colleagues explaining how the course would benefit me, the school and the MAT. Lucky enough both my school and MAT support staff with CPD opportunities. I gave a commitment back to them as well that I would stay for a certain period of time.

How did you manage to balance a full-time job and studying?

Having previously completed the Level 5 Diploma in School Business Management I was aware that you have to put the hours in to get the outcome you want. I was quite disciplined that I would get the laptop out most Monday and Tuesday evenings and try to aim for a couple of hours each night, sometimes I did less than this, sometimes I did more. Where necessary I would also plan a few Sundays to work a few hours. It's so right, what was said many times by our tutor at the start, that if you do the hours, you will get the result. These hours were not done every week but most and it became a routine. Once again, a supportive family helped. Uniquely to us this year, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, having Lockdown was a massive help as well. You couldn't go anywhere for a couple of months so once again at weekends the laptop came out and I worked on some of the reflective activities.

What was the most challenging part of the CIPFA programme?

For me, I missed one session that I couldn't attend for personal reasons. I found it a bit tricky that I didn't have all the written-up notes that I would have had from attending the workshop. Luckily, I knew a couple of other people on my course who worked at local schools, so I managed to either share notes with them or go and visit them at their school.

What has been the most rewarding aspect of the CIPFA programme?

The most rewarding part for me is the level of the qualification. I don't consider myself an academic and having tried University and not seeing it through, mainly because the course I had signed up for didn't appeal to me at the time, I am now always keen to push myself as far as I can. The achievement hasn't really sunk in yet, but I think in time I'll look back and say, "fair play, not many people will achieve this". I compare this to the feeling I had when I completed a marathon, it took a fair amount of time to sink in and realise it was actually a really good achievement.

What would you say to anyone who is considering the CIPFA programme?

Look into it. Get as much information about the course as possible. Speak to people who have done it (Anyone is welcome to contact me and get my thoughts). Be realistic, is the time right for you to do the course? e.g. do you have the time to commit, because you need to. Get the backing from your family, school, MAT because that can really help. Overall, go for it. I really enjoyed it and found it really worthwhile. As my Dad said, "if you want it enough you will find the time to complete it".

How has the CIPFA programme developed you as a professional?

Even in the short period since I achieved the qualification, I feel more confident in all aspects of my role. Each unit I covered was relevant to my role and gives me the confidence to join in conversations, challenge, advise my colleagues and others, knowing I have this qualification to support me. With this qualification I am now looking at becoming a Fellow of the ISBL. I will plan this properly and give myself the right amount of time to complete my application.

What are the on-the-job benefits of doing the CIPFA programme?

I think the relevance of the course content. I found it all worthwhile in my role. Some of it I already had experience of, other units were new to me. My colleagues who knew I was studying and who now know I have completed the qualification; can now know they have an SBM in place who "knows his stuff".