

**SARAH JOHNSON**  
**ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR OF OPERATIONAL FINANCE**  
**THE ROYAL MARSDEN NHS FOUNDATION TRUST**

### CAREER JOURNEY

I have been a qualified Chartered Public Finance Accountant since 2012. I am currently acting into the role of Associate Director of Operational Finance at RMH (AFC B9), leading on both the annual financial plan and annual accounts submissions. This role reports directly into the Trust CFO and is a key member of the finance leadership team.

I am responsible for the oversight of the Trust's financial accounting function and financial management function. This includes preparing and presenting monthly finance reports and business planning updates at Finance and Performance Committee and Audit and Finance Committee. I am also responsible for chairing key groups established to resolve ongoing reporting and billing issues post EPIC go live (the Trust's new Digital Health Record which went live in March 2023). This role has two direct reports – a band 8D Head of Financial Management (my substantive role) and a band 8C Financial Controller.

My career Journey in NHS and public sector accounting prior to this role:

- I joined KPMG's public sector audit team as a graduate trainee in 2009. I worked as a trainee for 3 years and stayed for an additional year post qualification. I specifically chose the public sector audit team and the CPFA qualification because I knew I intended to move into a public sector environment.
- In 2013 I joined Royal Marsden as the B8a financial Accountant, taking responsibility for: the compilation of the annual accounts and FTCs, as well as monthly and quarterly reporting of balance sheet and cashflows to Monitor; preparing and presenting the monthly balance sheet review to the Chief Financial Officer; overseeing accounting for fixed assets and VAT, as well as the outsourced payroll function; and liaising with key internal and external stakeholders including internal and external auditors.
- I was in this role for 5 years but took 2 separate periods of maternity leave and on my return from the second of these I seconded into the role of Finance Manager for Sutton Community Services (band 8a). I specifically moved into Finance Management in order to gain experience working with business stakeholders, and to broaden my understanding of the finance function.
- Within 3 months of joining the financial management team I secured a promotion into my next role as the Finance Business Partner to the Cancer Services Division, Chief Nurse, Performance and Information, and Workforce

Directorates. In this role I acted as a Business Adviser, providing expert financial, commercial and strategic advice to the division and the wider Trust, whilst also retaining oversight of the divisional I&E reporting. This role reported into the Head of Financial Management but also into the Director of Strategic Finance.

- I subsequently spent 2 and half years as the Trust's Head of Financial Management taking responsibility for the provision of a robust management accounting infrastructure and reporting service for the Trust, leading a team of 24 qualified and part qualified management accountants with 5 direct reports.

To a large extent my career journey has been planned. I wanted to gain a holistic experience of NHS Accounting encompassing financial Management, financial accounting and strategic finance. I was grateful for the opportunity to take a sideways route into Financial Management in order to progress, and I think this is something that Royal Marsden as an organisation does (and should) encourage. I also think that my early experience in financial accounting has been invaluable within my financial management roles, and certainly in my current interim role as Associate Director of Operational Finance.

In my current role, I spend a lot of my time in meetings: this includes internally within finance; with the wider Trust; with external stakeholder such as audit; with shared service providers including SBS and procurement; and with regional colleagues. This means that I have to be ruthless with my time management. In addition, because of the current financial situation of the NHS and in particular SWL ICB, the level of oversight has increased exponentially. A significant proportion of my time is spent providing reporting and additional analysis to both NHSE and SWL ICB. I have excellent organisational skills and this is very much needed as we have to keep a tight grip on all deadlines.

Outside of the meetings I like to think that I am a strong and compassionate leader for my team and that I am both approachable and supportive.

In terms of mentoring, the previous Director of Financial Strategy was my mentor for a long time, and I learnt a lot from her particularly around the business case process.

On a more informal basis I have worked with the interim CFO for many years, and she has always provided me with a sounding board for my endless query. I am extremely fortunate to have worked for two very strong and inspirational women.

In terms of advice that I would give to others – it would be to never stand still. Always challenge yourself. Face those difficult conversations. Put yourself forward to learn new skills. Attend conferences and events. Listen to webinars. Ask to shadow more senior colleagues in meetings.

Importantly - don't be afraid to move sideways if you can't see an obvious path forward. And just try to make the most of every learning opportunity that comes your way. Also – don't underestimate how much you can learn from your peers. Spend time with them, be curious.

Most of all – finance is a support function – so spend time with your business stakeholders. This is particularly critical if you are in a financial management or strategic finance position. Sit with them, get to know them, be their first point of contact for any finance queries.

I am a Mum with two relatively small children so my work life balance is critically important to me. I love being able to put my children to bed every evening, and to spend time with them at the weekend. But my life is very demanding, and it can be hard to carve out time for myself. I am trying to be more regimented with this – fitting in exercise, social engagements with friends, even just time to read a good book. I also particularly love cooking, so I make sure I batch cook at weekends so that as a family we can eat healthily during the busy week.

I am immensely proud of my career journey at the Royal Marsden, and I feel incredibly lucky to have had the opportunities I have had to progress. I am also pleased that I am a trusted colleague for the wider Trust, and that people contact me if they need support.