



Department  
for Education

# **Evaluation of the Practice Leadership Development Programme**

**Evaluation report**

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## Executive summary

It is widely acknowledged that stability and strong leadership play a principal role in the delivery of services. Yet learning and development programmes for social work practitioners as they progress in their professional career into more senior roles has been limited to generic leadership courses, with little emphasis on associated development interventions such as coaching and job shadowing.

To help strengthen leadership within social care and drive improvement, the Centre for Systemic Social Work (CfSSW) developed the Practice Leadership Development Programme (PLDP) for aspiring practice leaders, funded by the Department of Education, which is practice-based and bespoke to leading children's social care. The PLDP has two phases: a twelve-month 'preparatory' phase consisting of a programme of educational residentials and seminars, during which time aspiring practice leaders prepare for future leadership opportunities; and an 'in-role' phase where practice leaders are supported to make the transition to their new role. There has been an annual intake of between 20-25 participants since the first cohort went through the programme in 2017/18.

The CfSSW commissioned an independent evaluation of the PLDP to explore to what extent it contributed to career development and to supporting practice improvement. A multi-level framework was used to evaluate the learning, behavioural change, and impact of the PLDP on individuals, the organisation, and the system. Summative feedback from participants, gathered previously by the CfSSW via course feedback forms, was first analysed. This was followed up by qualitative interviews with a sample of PLDP participants, their coaches, line managers, and direct reports, to assess the application of learning and wider impact of the programme.

The formal elements of the PLDP, delivered and facilitated by experienced leaders with accompanying application of theory to practice using immersive discussions of real-life scenarios, helped extend participants' knowledge and understanding of the practice leader role. Learning was further enhanced by in-role development experiences which included one-to-one coaching sessions and networking opportunities.

The evaluation found that the PLDP increased participants' confidence and ability to do their job, through maintaining a consistent focus on practice and working collaboratively to implement change around social work practice. PLDP participants had time to reflect on their values and develop a clear vision for children's social care, which they then communicated to others. They also gained a broader perspective and insight into local authorities' corporate parenting responsibilities, though working with politicians remained a key area of learning and development for many newly appointed practice leaders as prior exposure to council politics as a head of service was often restricted.

By the end of the programme, PLDP participants were more confident in their leadership abilities, as specified in the professional standards for practice leaders, and displayed a range of effective leadership behaviours: e.g., cultivating a shared strategic vision, championing change, leading by example, making evidence-based decisions, building relationships, trusting the workforce, promoting accountability, and developing others. Moreover, line managers' and direct reports' observations concurred with participants' accounts of the application of learning and resultant behavioural changes in the workplace.

The commonly adopted leadership style was authentic, open, visible, and collaborative. PLDP practice leaders promoted a uniform approach to social work practice across their local authority and the system, which they role modelled with practitioners, colleagues, and external stakeholders. They used a relationship-based approach to engage with staff, children, and families, and to involve partners to obtain support for children's services. Through devolving responsibility for the provision of social care, PLDP practice leaders are fostering a culture of distributed leadership and driving innovation and change.

Essentially, a high proportion of PLDP alumni have obtained a promoted post as a practice leader. Whilst it is difficult to establish a direct link between cause and effect, changes in participants' knowledge, behaviour and skills were perceived to have improved outcomes for children and to have positively influenced a range of performance indicators, such as 'children in need' statistics and staff turnover. In addition, the PLDP was believed to have contributed to an improved Ofsted judgement in instances where practice leaders had a strategic overview of and close line of sight to practice, demonstrating a real understanding of what was happening for children and families.

As part of the continuous improvement cycle, evaluation feedback was sought about the separate elements of the PLDP to identify how it could be improved. A few minor changes to the content were suggested: i.e., to add the topic of anti-racism and disproportionality to the content; and to invite a practice leader who has been on an Ofsted shadow visit to present at a seminar and speak about what they had learned from the experience.

The most powerful aspect of the PLDP was the social learning experiences generated from the face-to-face training and events and individual relationships built up over the duration of the programme. Consequently, PLDP participants stressed the importance of the CfSSW continuing to facilitate such networking opportunities. Given how valuable participants found the exchanges of information with their peers, it was recommended that the CfSSW explores the potential of developing an online resources bank or toolkit for practice leaders to share documents, policies, and other material.

The least accomplished element of the PLDP was the application of learning via the work-based project, aimed at improving practice or a service in their respective local authority, as there was wide variation in the scope and quality of individual projects. The project could feature more prominently, and be more useful, if it were assessed or monitored regularly. Additionally, although the development of some PLDP participants was significantly enhanced by their coach, experiences of the coaching programme were inconsistent. Therefore, it was recommended that a coaching contract (or 'learning agreement') and learning or development opportunities for coaches were introduced.

The evaluation concluded that the PLDP is a highly successful leadership development programme which should be continued, in order to boost the recruitment of high-quality leaders into children's social care. Wider promotion of and accessibility onto the programme will help extend its reach and build a cohesive community of practice leaders across the country. Establishing a critical mass of like-minded individuals, with shared values and a joint vision for children's social care, is likely to lead to the self-sustaining adoption of a systemic approach, and enable future leadership to contribute further to, and challenge, politics, and policies of change in social work practice to raise standards and drive improvement.

## Introduction

Social work leadership plays a crucial role in improving professional practice and driving improvement - a reality reflected in Ofsted inspection reports where failure is often associated with poor leadership and success with strong effective leadership. Confident and competent leaders are needed to inspire and empower the workforce to embed a coherent consistent approach to practice and to affect change. However, local authorities are experiencing difficulties retaining experienced social workers and recruiting to senior leadership roles, within the challenging context of funding cuts and rising demand for social care services.

According to annual updates from the Association for Directors of Children's Services (ADCS) dating back to 2007<sup>1</sup>, approximately 30% of all local authorities in England experience a change of director each year. The ADCS data also show that the majority (80%) of permanent director appointments are filled by assistant directors, which include practice leaders<sup>2</sup>, and a small proportion by existing directors of adult services becoming twin hatters. Unfortunately, there are no national statistics regarding the turnover of assistant directors to evidence the recruitment and retention challenges of other senior leaders in the sector.

The continual development of employees is key to improving retention; and by managing talent, organisations can fulfil critical roles e.g., recruit to specialist senior leadership positions. Indeed, the transition from a management role, such as head of service, into a practice leader role requires additional support and opportunities for experiential learning and reflection, which can be facilitated through a leadership development programme.

The Department for Education (DfE) funds a suite of development programmes to support social workers throughout their professional career, from the Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE) to a supervisor, or team manager, up to director. Whilst there are many established leadership programmes available, none were centred on leading children's social care. Therefore, the Practice Leaders Development programme (PLDP) was developed by the Centre for Systemic Social Work (CfSSW) who has received grant funding from the DfE since 2017/18 to deliver the programme annually.

The aim of the PLDP is to develop the next generation of talented practice leaders to strengthen the delivery of services to vulnerable children and families. Its content was informed by the social work post-qualifying standards, the Knowledge and Skills Statement (KSS) for Practice Leaders<sup>3</sup>, which sets out what leaders should know and be able to do. The programme is grounded in practice and delivered by leaders from Partners in Practice<sup>4</sup> and other leading local authorities. It incorporates systemic principles which emphasise the importance of relationships and view individuals as part of a wider set of systems. Implementing a whole-system approach, beyond individual practitioners, is promoted to improve experiences for young people and families.

The structure of the PLDP (see [Appendix 1](#)) is based on the 70:20:10 model, which refers to the ratio of knowledge obtained from three different sources: job-related experiences, interactions with others (social learning) and education events. It recognises that learning and working are integrated, emphasising that practical on-the-job experiences play an important part in the learning process and that only a small proportion of

learning comes from formal structured intervention. The 70:20:10 is a reference model, rather than a formula, in the sense that the precise ratio may vary depending on the situation and organisational environment. Therefore, when planning a learning and development programme, the principles of the 70:20:10 model should be used as a framework for incorporating the three types of learning experiences.

The PLDP was designed such that it builds on taught elements (i.e., residentials and seminars) through integration with on-the job in-role experiences and learning from others. The PLDP incorporates new opportunities for learning within the workplace via: i) a job-related project; ii) a coaching programme to facilitate development into the role; and iii) peer learning from group discussions and scenario exercises, formal networking events organised by the CfSSW and informal social media groups.

(See [Appendix 2](#) for a list of the PLDP learning outcomes, LO1-LO25)

A total of 67 heads of service (or equivalent senior managers) have completed the PLDP across the first three cohorts and the programme is now in its fourth year. The CfSSW has collected feedback from participants following each seminar and residential but required an independent review of the data gathered to date, combined with further research, to evaluate the impact of the programme. The results of this evaluation will be used to inform how the design and delivery of the programme could be developed to further support practice improvement in the sector.



## Aims

The over-arching aim of the evaluation was to understand the impact of the programme on participants, the organisation, and the system more widely. The associated research questions, specified in the project brief, were:

1. How has the programme contributed to participants' leadership knowledge, skills, behaviours, and career pathways?
2. To what extent has the programme contributed to supporting practice improvement at organisational and sector levels?
3. To what extent has the programme produced unintended outcomes?
4. How could the programme be improved to further support practice improvement in the sector in terms of how it is designed and delivered

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<sup>1</sup> Association for Directors of Children's Services, ADCS DCS Update – as of 31 March 2020 [https://adcs.org.uk/assets/documentation/ADCS\\_DCS\\_Update\\_March\\_2020\\_FINAL.pdf](https://adcs.org.uk/assets/documentation/ADCS_DCS_Update_March_2020_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Practice Leaders, frequently referred to as Assistant Directors of Children's Social Care, are qualified social workers with the responsibility across the local authority for child and family social work practice.

<sup>3</sup> Social work post-qualifying standards: knowledge and skills statements, DfE, November 2015 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/knowledge-and-skills-statements-for-child-and-family-social-work>

<sup>4</sup> Partners in Practice, Practice Review Report, May 2020 [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/932330/Partners\\_in\\_Practice\\_PiP\\_Features.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/932330/Partners_in_Practice_PiP_Features.pdf)

# Methodology

## Design

As this evaluation was conducted after the design and delivery of the PLDP, a non-experimental design was chosen to fit with the evaluation aims. Since information was required about knowledge, skills, and behaviours, in addition to perceived outcomes, self-report measures were employed to gather the data.

The evaluation involved a mixed methodology approach: It utilised both quantitative and qualitative methods to provide a detailed understanding of learning, behavioural change, and impact, whilst respecting the uniqueness of each person and their individual circumstances. Structured interviews were favoured over focus groups because the research was interested in individual experiences, whereas the latter are more suited to exploring attitudes or beliefs and generating ideas. As self-report data can be susceptible to biases and limitations, practised independent interviewers were employed to ask a set of open questions, using probes and follow-up questions to gain further insight or clarity.

## Method

Following conversations with the course developers and provider (about the programme's design, structure, and content) a range of data were gathered to inform this evaluation:

1. Participant feedback about the various elements of the programme collected via:
  - Residential feedback forms
  - Seminar feedback forms
  - Start and end of course questionnaires
2. Verbatim transcripts from structured interviews with course participants and their direct reports, line managers and development coaches
3. Details of participants' career pathway since enrolling on the PLDP i.e., where they obtained a promoted post as a practice leader, if applicable.

First, summative data previously collected by the CfSSW from PLDP participants from cohorts 1, 2 and 3 were analysed to evaluate how well the programme was received and what participants felt they had learned. This included feedback about the delivery, relevance and appeal of the content, and speakers' knowledge and responsiveness to the group.

Next, a sample of PLDP participants were interviewed individually over the internet or telephone to obtain further qualitative feedback about how they were applying the learning in their role. The responses on the CfSSW feedback forms shaped the development of the interview questions, for example to determine whether intentions had translated into behavioural change. Evidence of impact of the programme was also sought by asking participants if they could make connections between the PLDP and service improvement.

In addition, interviews were undertaken with other stakeholders (i.e., development

coaches, line managers and direct reports of participants) to collect evidence from the perspective of those potentially affected or influenced by the programme and to validate participants' subjective responses using 'other-report' data.

Finally, information collected by the CfSSW about participants' career journey was examined to determine the proportion who had obtained a promoted post as a practice leader.

All the data were analysed according to the research questions. A thematic analysis of the qualitative data was also undertaken, to identify key themes in the learning and changes in thinking and behaviour of PLDP participants.

*Nb. Each participant was presented with an information sheet explaining the purpose of the evaluation and the consequences of consenting to take part, along with a data protection privacy notice explaining how their data will be used and stored, and how anonymity will be protected.*

## Sampling

24 PLDP participants (ppts) were interviewed i.e., over one third of all participants who had been on the programme during the three-year period being evaluated. A quota sampling technique was employed to ensure an equal representation from each of the three cohorts and across four geographical regions: London and the South East, the South West, the North of England, and the Midlands and East of England - as shown in the following table.

**Table 1: Region of PLDP participants compared to the sample of interviewees**

Region	London	South East	South West	East	East Mids.	West Mids.	North East	North West	Yorkshire & Humber
All PLDP Participants	40%		9%	17%			34%		
Interview sample	37½%		8%	17%			37½%		

Source: Programme participant data

The resultant sample contained a mixture of participants who had obtained a promoted practice leader post (79%), made a sideways move to another head of service role (13%), or not yet changed role (8%). Of those who had moved into a practice leader role, around a half had obtained a promoted post within their local authority and the others had made an external move (some following a sideways move).

Adding further sampling criteria to an already small number, combined with the fact that a couple of participants dropped out at the last minute, meant that it was difficult to concurrently ensure the sample of participant interviewees was demographically representative: 8% were male and 21% were from a Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) group,

compared to 10% and 10% respectively of the total PLDP population. Since the method used to recruit participants for the evaluation was self-selecting, it was acknowledged that the sample may be misrepresentative: for example, it was more likely to include participants who had obtained a promoted post. Consequently, transparency and scientific rigour were maintained when collecting the data and interpreting the findings.

Additionally, 12 line managers and 10 direct reports were recruited using snowball sampling i.e. referred by PLDP participants (whereby over half of all participants provided at least one referral). The sample of six development coaches was self-selecting, although all had at least two years' experience coaching PLDP participants.

## Kirkpatrick's evaluation model

The structure of this evaluation was based on Kirkpatrick's model for evaluating training programmes<sup>5</sup>, which was developed to help organisations objectively assess the effectiveness and impact of training. Kirkpatrick recognised that training has no value unless what is learned gets applied on the job and contributes to organisational outcomes. The model has four successive levels, each representing a more precise measure of effectiveness:

1. Level 1 of Kirkpatrick's training evaluation model assesses participants' reaction to the programme. Kirkpatrick defines 'reaction' as "the degree to which participants react favourably to the learning event" and according to the New World model<sup>6</sup> has three categories: customer satisfaction, engagement (e.g., level of interest) and relevance. The data collected during the PLDP by the CfSSW, via course feedback forms<sup>7</sup>, fall under level 1 of Kirkpatrick's training evaluation model.
2. Level 2 measures to what extent participants acquire the intended knowledge, skills and attitude based on their participation in the programme. An assessment before and after a course is the ideal means of measuring what participants have learned. Although the CfSSW 'start and end of course' questionnaire only asked about participants' confidence in each KSS, qualitative explanations were requested. The questionnaire also included a question asking about the degree to which participants thought they would have the opportunity to apply what they had learned on the taught parts of the programme to their job. Further insight into the actual knowledge and skills gained was yielded from the internet/telephone interviews.
3. A limitation of evaluating the effectiveness of a programme at levels 1 or 2 is that reactions and intentions are not necessarily correlated with behavioural change. Behavioural change (i.e., level 3) is more difficult and intensive to measure and so was missing from the CfSSW's continuous evaluation cycle. Consequently, the supplementary data collection exercise in the current evaluation aimed to gather evidence at level 3 of Kirkpatrick's evaluation model by exploring whether participants were applying their learning to practice and asking whether they were aware of any changes in their behaviour.
4. At level 4, the results of the training or development programme are evaluated. This includes the outcomes the programme was designed to have an impact on,

in this case, obtaining a promoted post as a practice leader and becoming an effective leader. In addition, the evaluation interviews sought to find evidence of impact on the individual in their role and on practice, whilst respecting the difficulties in linking specific outcomes directly to a development programme.

**Table 2: Summary of Kirkpatrick's multi-level evaluation**

Kirkpatrick level	Description	Further explanation	Source of data for the current evaluation
1. REACTION	Reaction of the participants to the programme	Levels of satisfaction, engagement, and relevance of the programme	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Residential and seminar feedback forms</li> </ul>
2. LEARNING	Acquisition of knowledge, skills, and attitude	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What have they learnt?</li> <li>What do they think they'll do differently?</li> <li>How confident they are that they can do it?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Residential and seminar feedback forms</li> <li>Start and end of course questionnaires</li> <li>Interviews with participants</li> </ul>
3. BEHAVIOUR	Application of learning i.e., change in thinking and behaviour	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Have they put their learning to use?</li> <li>Are they aware of changes in their behaviour?</li> <li>Have they passed their knowledge, skills, or attitudes onto others?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Interviews with participants</li> <li>Interviews with coaches</li> <li>Interviews with direct reports</li> <li>Interviews with line managers</li> </ul>
4. OUTCOME / RESULTS	Impact of participants' behaviour on performance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What is the impact on the organisational performance indicators?</li> <li>What change(s) directly links to a specific improvement?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Career progression/ promotions' data</li> <li>Interviews with participants</li> <li>Interviews with line managers</li> </ul>

<sup>5</sup> The Kirkpatrick Model <https://www.kirkpatrickpartners.com/Our-Philosophy/The-Kirkpatrick-Model>

<sup>6</sup> New World Kirkpatrick Model <https://www.kirkpatrickpartners.com/Our-Philosophy/The-New-World-Kirkpatrick-Model>

<sup>7</sup> These feedback forms were a formative method of evaluation as they took place *during* the programme

# Findings

## Analysis of the first residential feedback forms

### Participants' reaction

The first residential made a positive first impression on every participant who provided written feedback: 92% stated that they were 'highly likely' to incorporate what they had learnt into practice. Overall, participants enjoyed the two days and felt privileged to be a part of the programme; and several commented that they were looking forward to the ensuing seminars.

*"Feel inspired. Going back refreshed. Clearer about the type of leader I want to be."*  
(Cohort 2 participant)

Participants indicated that the residential was well organised: All responded with an 'excellent' or 'good' when asked to rate its organisation; and everyone had received information prior to arrival (although a couple stated that they would have liked a reading list beforehand). The venues were also highly rated, with respect to the quality of the meeting room, refreshments, and accommodation, though one participant commented that "the room felt a little cramped".

### Feedback about the exercises and content

Quantitative feedback was sought from participants regarding the exercises and content, using a 4- point forced Likert scale. Everyone rated the content as either 'excellent' (4) or 'good' (3) and all except one participant rated the exercises and case studies as 'excellent' or 'good' on each of the three aspects: i) stimulating, ii) relevance, and iii) delivery. Moreover, 80% of all ratings were 'excellent'.

**Table 3: Ratings of the content and exercises from the first residential**

RATINGS	Content			Exercises/case studies			ALL
	Stimulating/ interesting	Relevance	Delivery	Stimulating/ interesting	Relevance	Delivery	
<b>Excellent</b>	83%	89%	81%	73%	83%	74%	80%
<b>Good</b>	17%	11%	19%	27%	17%	24%	19%
<b>Satisfactory</b>	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	2%	1%
<b>Poor</b>	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%

Source: Programme Feedback Forms

### Feedback about the speakers

The six speakers were generally regarded as knowledgeable, responsive to the group, and to have provided a constructive learning environment within a safe space to respect social differences: All except one of the six speakers were rated as 'good' or 'excellent' more than 90% of the time, as evident in the following table showing speakers' amalgamated scores across all four of the aspects assessed.

**Table 4: Ratings of the speakers who presented on the first residential**

RATINGS	Speaker 1	Speaker 2	Speaker 3	Speaker 4	Speaker 5	Speaker 6	ALL
Session(s)	Welcome session	Numerous sessions	What makes a good PL	Ofsted (Cohort 1)	Ofsted (Cohort 2)	Ofsted* (Cohort 3)	
<b>Excellent</b>	94%	92%	84%	61%	69%	7%	76%
<b>Good</b>	6%	8%	16%	34%	30%	14%	15%
<b>Satisfactory</b>	0%	0%	0%	6%	1%	41%	5%
<b>Poor</b>	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	38%	4%

Source: Programme Feedback Forms

\*The Ofsted session that was poorly rated has since been changed, illustrating that the CfSSW acted swiftly on negative feedback from participants.

### What did participants appreciate most?

Responses to the question asking what participants appreciated most about the residential yielded three key themes: the opportunity to meet with peers; having time to think and reflect; and the quality of the content. A safe learning environment to explore critical issues and concepts also contributed to the success of the residential.

Participants appreciated spending time with like-minded peers to share ideas, discuss similarities or differences and support one another, which consequently helped develop the group identity (LO1). It appeared that leaders rarely had opportunities to network with peers in similar roles outside their organisation, which would explain why this was the modal theme.

Participants also valued the opportunity to have time to reflect on their practice and leadership style (LO4). Simply having time to think was appreciated, though this was further facilitated through the exercises. Several participants added that they found the sessions “thought provoking” through challenging their beliefs and ideas (LO3). Moreover, the content and quality of teaching was key to providing participants with ideas to take back to their role (LO2). Speakers were described as experienced, skilled, and inspiring.

*“Opportunity to meet the other participants and form the group. Really interesting, stimulating, thought-provoking content and discussion. Lots to think about; lots of challenging ideas with some space to give it some thought.”*

(Cohort 1 participant)

*“The high level of intellect on the subject area, promotion and value of self. A warm, safe, and inspiring environment. The varied speakers were excellent.”*

(Cohort 2 participant)



## Which ideas presented might participants use in their role?

Numerous ideas presented during the residential were considered applicable to participants' role, which demonstrated that the content was deemed appropriate and relevant. Participants appeared keen to move towards systemic relationships-based social work: Many intended to adopt a more narrative approach, to concentrate on building relationships and to question staff more. Participants also planned to focus more on safe uncertainty<sup>8</sup> and holding risk.

*"Loads! Questioning more clearly what individual managers want to get from the service. Greater awareness of what I do, how I influence and lead, 'inviting' responses I want."*

(Cohort 1 participant)

*"Everything! Particularly refocus on my relational contexts - Re-engaging these conversations."*

(Cohort 2 participant)

There was an underlying theme of the need to have more confidence in their personal judgement (self-efficacy) and an interest in learning more about themselves and developing their individual style, with a particular emphasis on their personal narrative and relational constructs. Such reactions evidence the learning outcome of reflecting on one's own leadership style (LO4).

*"My impact on others. The history/value base from which my leadership comes from and how I can manage /challenge this. To be brave and have confidence in what I believe. Understanding my drivers and how I need to articulate them. Systemic practice across the organisation and my role in this."*

(Cohort 1 participant)

*"Being me. Owning my position. Really thinking through my vision and how I will articulate this going forward."*

(Cohort 3 participant)

## What did participants want to change?

A substantial proportion of participants reported that they thought the residential programme was well-balanced, though a consistent theme throughout the feedback was the request for "more time": more time to think and reflect, and more time for group discussions with colleagues to share ideas and find out what works well. Furthermore, several participants stated explicitly that they desired more time with the government's Chief Social Worker for Children and Families.

No-one commented on what they would like less of, although three participants gave suggestions about how the Ofsted session could be improved: e.g., pitched at a higher level and include a different quality of conversation (which has since been addressed by the CfSSW's programme developer). One participant noticed that some of the content was the same as in the separate systemic leadership course, which could be interpreted as a positive or negative.

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<sup>8</sup> Safe uncertainty requires clarity of intent, resilience, and agility. It is about knowing where you are going, and having the confidence you will get there, although you might not be sure about how

## Analysis of the seminar feedback forms

### Feedback about the exercises and content

The quantitative feedback about the seminar content and scenario exercises provided a measure of how each seminar met its respective set of intended learning outcomes. The average rating of the content and scenario exercises was 3.7 out of a maximum score of 4, indicating that participants were highly satisfied with the seminars. There were no differences in scores between cohorts.

**Table 5: Ratings of the seminar content and scenario exercises.**

<b>AVERAGE RATING across all three cohorts</b>	<b>Learning Outcomes</b>	<b>Stimulating/ Interesting</b>	<b>Relevance</b>	<b>Delivery</b>	<b>ALL</b>
KSS 2 seminar's scenario exercise	LO6-LO8	3.6	3.7	3.6	3.7
KSS 3 seminar's content	LO9-LO10	3.8	3.9	3.8	3.8
KSS 4 seminar's content	LO11-LO13	3.9	3.9	3.9	3.9
KSS 5 seminar's scenario exercise	LO14 & LO15	3.7	3.7	3.6	3.7
KSS 6 seminar's scenario exercise	LO16 & LO17	3.7	3.9	3.8	3.8
ALL seminars	LO6-LO17	3.7	3.8	3.7	3.7

Source: Programme Feedback Forms

### Feedback about the speakers

Each speaker presented on the programme an average of two occasions each across the three cohorts, and five speakers presented for three years running which reflected both their popularity and commitment to the programme. Moreover, speakers' sessions were rated 'excellent or 'good' on all five of the aspects measured (i.e., how interesting/stimulating, relevance, knowledge, delivery, and responsiveness to the group) except on two occasions where a speaker received lower ratings.

The CfSSW has changed the speaker and content of some seminars in response to feedback from participants, for example: the training on preparing to shadow an Ofsted visit was removed from the programme following discussions with Ofsted about how the session could be replaced with a short briefing before shadowing an Ofsted visit; and the presentation on interpreting the 360 report, piloted to cohort 3, was excluded from future seminars following criticism of the value of this session.

### What did participants appreciate most?

Participants commonly found the seminars relevant and thought provoking and valued the opportunity to reflect, hear from experienced leaders, and share ideas with their peers.

*"This was a great opportunity to reflect on practice. Prompting good thought and op-*

*portunity for discussion around communication/positioning/change and relationships. Techniques to use and think about were interesting. Enjoyed analogies and link to practice.”*

(Cohort 2 participant, Seminar three, KSS 3)

The seminars helped participants link theory and research with practice, through providing practical examples applicable to their role. In addition, listening to leaders’ different perspectives about how they approached improvement gave participants ideas on how to reflect on their own leadership style.

*“Interesting discussions that were generated, meaning different viewpoints. Understanding the challenges of role and ideas on how to tackle them.”*

(Cohort 2 participant, Seminar two, KSS 4)

*“Great to hear about how leaders have had to adapt their strategy as they go - Gives me confidence what you can review/reshare.”*

(Cohort 3 participant, Seminar one, KSS 2)

Three presentations were especially appreciated: 1) working in a corporate and political environment (Derek Myers); 2) risk and uncertainty (Eileen Monroe); and 3) what research tells us about practice (Prof. Donald Forrester). The prominence of the former two topics in participant feedback suggested that participants were less knowledgeable and experienced in KSS 5 and KSS 6 i.e., supporting effective decision-making, quality assurance and improvement. For example, numerous participants valued insight about the political context and appreciated advice about how to interact with politicians and build connections outside the local authority; and wanted to know more.

*“Living and breathing local authority challenges of managing upwards. Lots of handy hints!”*

(Cohort 1 participant, Seminar five, KSS 6)

## Which ideas presented might participants use in their role?

Participants were asked to rate on a Likert scale of 1 (‘none’) to 4 (‘high’) the likelihood they would incorporate the learning in their practice. For each seminar, an average of 93% of participants who answered this question, indicated that they were highly likely to incorporate the learning into practice.

**Table 6: Likelihood of incorporating the learning into practice.**

<b>RATINGS</b> for each seminar	<b>1</b> (none)	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b> (high)	<b>%</b> <b>‘high’</b>
KSS 2: Lead & govern excellent practice	0	0	4	46	92%
KSS 3: Creating a context	0	0	2	40	95%
KSS 4: Developing excellent practitioners	0	0	2	37	95%
KSS 5: Support effective decision-making	0	0	5	31	86%
KSS 6: Quality assurance & improvement	0	0	2	39	95%
All	0	0	15	193	93%

Participants planned to use a range of ideas in their role. Some common responses included:

- Reflect on own leadership style and how to create a shared vision to lead change (KSS 2)
- Apply a systemic/relationship-based approach (KSS 3)
- Observe practise and supervision (KSS 4)
- Manage risk using a reasoned approach incl. focusing on the quality of decision-making (KSS 5)
- Manage politicians and elected members incl. CMM<sup>9</sup> and the positional triangle (KSS 6)

## What did participants want to change?

Overall, participants wanted more of the same, some suggesting a longer day, and many asking for more time for group discussion to share ideas and explore how to apply theory to practice

## Analysis of the end residential feedback forms

### Participants' reaction

Feedback about the end residential was extremely positive: Participants were appreciative of the opportunity to be part of the programme, as reflected in the numerous "thank you" comments written on the feedback form.

Everyone was happy with the information received beforehand and thought the residential was very well-organised. The venues were also highly rated, with respect to the facilities, accommodation, and refreshments: 99% of participants rated the venue as 'excellent' or 'good' on these measures.

*"Well-organised thought-provoking, safe space to reflect, lovely comfortable stay with fabulous itinerary and organised to perfection!"*

(Cohort 3 participant)

### Feedback on the content, exercises, and case studies

Every participant rated the content, exercises and case studies as either 'excellent' or 'good', on each of the three aspects: i) how stimulating/interesting, ii) relevance, and iii) delivery.

**Table 7: Ratings of the content and exercises on the end residential**

RATINGS	Content			Exercises/case studies			ALL
	Stimulating/ interesting	Relevance	Delivery	Stimulating/ interesting	Relevance	Delivery	
<b>Excellent</b>	75%	77%	75%	71%	73%	89%	<b>74%</b>
<b>Good</b>	25%	23%	25%	29%	27%	29%	<b>26%</b>
<b>Satisfactory</b>	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	<b>0%</b>
<b>Poor</b>	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	<b>0%</b>

Source: Programme Feedback Forms

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<sup>9</sup> CMM stands for coordinated management of meaning

## Feedback about the speakers

The speakers were regarded as knowledgeable, responsive to the group, and to have provided a constructive learning environment with safe space to acknowledge and respect social differences: All were rated as 'good' or 'excellent' more than 90% of the time, as evident in the following table showing speakers' amalgamated scores across all four of the aspects assessed.

**Table 8: Ratings of the speakers on the end residential**

RATINGS	Speaker 1	Speaker 2	Speaker 3	Speaker 4	Speaker 5	Speaker 6	ALL
Excellent	83%	83%	91%	85%	68%	43%	77%
Good	17%	8%	9%	15%	25%	53%	21%
Satisfactory	0%	8%	0%	0%	7%	3%	2%
Poor	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%

Source: Programme Feedback Forms

*"It was the mixture for me of the capability within the group and the exposure to successful leaders who were willing to share, sometimes some quite difficult stories. I found that speakers tended, in the main, to take off their powerful garments' and feel quite human, which was really positive in terms of being able to learn from them."*

(Cohort 2 participant)

## What did participants appreciate most?

Consistent with feedback provided during the course, participants valued the opportunity to hear from experienced leaders about the challenges faced, which increased understanding of the practice leader role and generated ideas of how to approach similar problems in their local authority. Similarly, discussing issues and sharing ideas with peers from across the country was a powerful learning opportunity, as these conversations helped participants to apply theory and knowledge to practice. The final residential gave participants the much-needed time to reflect (LO18) and facilitated consolidation of learning in preparation for taking the next step in their career, especially in preparing for an interview (LO19). The following quote encapsulates what many participants appreciated about the final residential:

*"Reinforcement of ideas, opportunity to reflect, space to think, opportunity to continue to share with colleagues on the course. Interviewing skills was relevant and helpful."*

(Cohort 1 participant)

## Which ideas presented might participants use in their role?

Participants were asked to rate on a Likert scale of 1 (none) to 4 (high) the likelihood they would incorporate the learning in their practice. An average of 84% of participants, who answered this question, indicated that they were highly likely to incorporate the

learning into practice.

A key idea that participants took away from the residential was embedding a culture. This incorporated: creating a shared vision in collaboration with staff; using reflecting teams discussions; and maintaining a focus on practice. Secondly, the session on preparing for interview was deemed very useful, for example in rehearsing responses to possible interview questions.

## What did participants want to change?

Participants did not want to change anything about the residential: They thought the content was relevant and well-balanced, and merely desired further opportunities to discuss ways to implement their ideas in practice. A few participants mentioned that it would have been nice to hear more about peers' development projects, as these were considered relevant to the practice leader role.

*"This has been an excellent opportunity for development, and I would definitely recommend it to others."*

(Cohort 2 participant)

## Analysis of start and end of course questionnaires

Participants were asked to complete a questionnaire at the start and end of the PLDP to measure changes in their confidence in each of the six aspects of the KSS for Practice Leaders. The mean (average) rating of confidence increased from the start to the end of the programme. Moreover, a set of Wilcoxon signed rank tests indicated that confidence in every area of the KSS at the end was statistically significantly higher than at the start ( $p < .05$ ): KSS 1 ( $N=21$ )  $z = -3.8929$ ; KSS 2 ( $N = 23$ )  $z = -3.0465$ ; KSS 3 ( $N = 27$ )  $z = -4.2524$ ; KSS 4 ( $N = 23$ )  $z = -4.1973$ ; KSS 5 ( $N = 14$ )  $z = -4.1973$ ; KSS 6 ( $N = 21$ )  $z = -4.0145$ .

*(Nb. Only 36 out of the 67 participants completed both a start and end questionnaire as cohort 3 was given the wrong end questionnaire in error, and the response rate was less than 100% for cohorts 1 and 2.)*

At the end of the programme, participants' enthusiasm remained high: They were inspired by the speakers, had developed a greater understanding of the practice leader role, and had time to reflect on their leadership style. Consequently, they felt more confident in their ability to do the job.

*"A lot of the course content has changed and my view of how I want to act and be as a practice leader and how the system should work."*

(Cohort 2 participant)

The written comments indicated that a range of learning had occurred (i.e., at level 2 of Kirkpatrick's evaluation model) that aligned with the KSS for Practice Leaders post-qualifying standards as follows:

KSS 1 - Lead and govern excellent practice: Through gaining an understanding of what



an effective practice system looks like, and how it fits within the national context, participants had developed a vision of what they want to achieve, the leadership skills required, and the importance of involving others to drive change and realise the vision. Participants were aware of their limited experience of leading and governing and consequently valued opportunities to take on additional responsibility and develop their skills through further learning experiences such as undertaking an interim practice leader role and working with a coach.

*"I am clearer on the methodology of leadership and the need for coherent operating models - I feel stronger - able to articulate change and model systemic practice with greater clarity."*

(Cohort 2 participant)

*"I have benefitted from stepping into an interim assistant director role during the course and from having a very supportive and available mentor. It's been excellent to relate learning to the role as I am currently doing."*

(Cohort 1 participant)

KSS 2 - Creating a context for excellent practice: As resistance to change was perceived as a key barrier to being able to perform the practice leader role, participants recognised the importance of engaging with staff, children and families, and partners (both internal and external). They continued to reflect on creating a context for excellent practice, though many had yet had the opportunity to significantly influence the culture within their organisation.

*"The course has developed my knowledge with regards to the right conditions and relentless focus on the frontline practice. My beliefs remain central to the ability to create the context and I have learnt more about how I relate to others and the impact and influence I can have."*

(Cohort 2 participant)

KSS 3 - Designing a system to support effective practice: Participants stated that they knew what good practice looks like and had become more confident in how they would approach improving a system, for example through building relationships across the organisation and continuing to put children and families first. Few participants appeared to have had the opportunity to implement or shape a practice system whilst a head of service, some openly stating that they required further experience in this area.

*"I feel confident about my views/expectations as regards to the factors that need to be addressed and the things to be put in place to develop an effective practice system - I have been mindful of this when implementing my development project."*

(Cohort 1 participant)

KSS 4 - Developing excellent practitioners: Many participants believed developing the workforce to be one of their strengths, and enjoyed this aspect of their current role, yet said that the PLDP had taught them how to be more effective through reflecting on their leadership style and applying a practice model.

*"I understand the importance of developing a learning organisational culture which is central to developing good justice practices. I understand the relationships between training, reflective spaces, leadership and mentoring/coaching."*

(Cohort 2 participant)

*"I have the humility to see I need to find expert practice and clinical leads and empower them to help implement the practice model."*

(Cohort 1 participant)

KSS 5 - Support effective decision-making: Participants had lots of previous experience of making decisions around risk and uncertainty, but said the research and theory covered on the PLDP (incl., the 'behavioural insight' session) had enhanced their knowledge, so they felt more confident in this area since enrolling on the programme.

*"I use Mason's paper<sup>10</sup> on safe uncertainty as the theoretical underpinning for decision making in my service."*

(Cohort 2 participant)

*"Understand that listening to others, being accountable, explaining thinking and rationale and holding risk can talk to practice and this helps people understand where you are coming from."*

(Cohort 2 participant)

KSS 6 - Quality assurance and improvement: Participants emphasised the importance of setting and upholding high standards of practice and gave supporting examples of what they had learnt on the PLDP about quality assurance. As an example, practice weeks were being introduced for leaders to hear from service users and staff about the work they do, to develop/maintain a high-quality service.

*"Over the last year I have focused my work on developing practice week and quality assurance processes, which I have taken from the input and PLDP days."*

(Cohort 2 participant)

Finally, the PLDP increased participants belief in their ability to do the role - an important step in the journey of becoming a practice leader.

*"I've never undertaken a leadership course before, although I've been a manager for nearly 15 years in children's social care. This has been a brilliant course for me. I've battled at times with negativity or behaviours at a senior level and wondered what the expectations of myself should be. This has made me have a strong belief in myself, my leadership style, my confidence, ability to challenge and carve a path through the many obstacles that are flung in your path in local authority life. What matters is the practice. I'm glad I've always believed this and now I know I'm not crackers after all! Thank you for the opportunity".*

(Cohort 2 participant)

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<sup>10</sup> Mason B (1993) 'Towards Positions of Safe Uncertainty'. Human Systems 4 (3-4) 189- 200

## Feedback about other elements of the PLDP

Following the summative evaluation evidence gathered by the CfSSW as part of the iterative process of making ongoing improvements, various elements of the PLDP (including the seminar content) have been modified since the programme was first conceived over three years ago. Nonetheless, the qualitative data gathered during the interviews yielded additional feedback about specific aspects of the programme and how it might be further improved, particularly the in-role phase:

### 360-degree feedback exercise

At the beginning of the programme participants were given 360-degree performance feedback about a range of leadership competencies from a variety of stakeholders (minimum six people). This typically included their line manager, direct reports, and peers, although some participants also approached internal corporate colleagues (e.g., the Head of Legal) and external partners (e.g., the police). The person receiving the feedback also completed a self-rating survey that included the same questions.

A composite 'cohort report' of the 360-feedback was formerly produced for the CfSSW, highlighting key areas for development, but was perceived to be too general to inform the programme's structure or content, and so was discontinued. Nevertheless, a personalised detailed feedback report was produced for each participant, to be discussed with their development coach. Unfortunately, several participants did not fully utilise this report, primarily because regular coaching sessions did not take place ([see next section](#)) though a couple of participants were also doubtful about the value of the 360.

*"I got the feedback for my 360 and shared it in my sessions with my coach. He gave me some great feedback about the areas that we could work on. I also did share it with my direct line manager as well and thought about how I would implement it in terms of the good leadership with my direct reports, an area that I wanted to develop."*

(Ppt 05, Cohort 2)

*"I used my 360 to speak with my development coach to look at what were the gaps for me...It was good that I was able to use my coach to do that, because I needed somebody who could see it from a different perspective, and he was able to very clearly."*

(Ppt 18, Cohort 3)

There was a noticeable difference in the perceived benefits of the 360-feedback exercise between cohort one and the other two cohorts, the first cohort being the least satisfied. This difference was probably because cohort 1 was given a generic set of questions about leadership, whereas the questions on the 360 were re-designed thereafter to align with the KSS for Practice Leaders.

*"We went through the 360 together and looked at the areas that we felt we needed to work on and then I don't recall whether we did much else with it."*

(Ppt 15, Cohort 1)

*"It's the best 360 I've ever seen. I'd never seen one before and I've never seen one*

*after like it, because it was aligned to the Knowledge and Skills Statement. I think sometimes we underuse the knowledge and skills statements...We don't embody them into our work in probably the way we should."*

(Ppt 16, Cohort 2)

One participant reflected that it was a lot of hassle seeking feedback from everyone and suggested that perhaps an alternative psychometric assessment would be more useful. Indeed, the CfSSW experienced challenges getting some 360s completed, due to problems getting emails through and people failing to submit the survey within the desired timescale (i.e., before the first coaching session). Coaches also commented that the odd participant was a bit sceptical about who had said what.

*"The value [of a 360] is [dependent on] how much you want to put into them yourself. One of them was a bit more sceptical; got caught in the trap of dealing with who said that...The second [ppt] was absolutely open, embraced it, really used it to help her think about how she would go away and work on stuff for herself and she wasn't defensive about it."*

(Coach 05)

Nonetheless, the 360-degree feedback was well received where participants welcomed others' views and when it was employed successfully during coaching sessions. Interestingly, participants scored themselves more harshly than their contributors. The feedback was used to highlight strengths and weaknesses, identify gaps in knowledge or skills, and to help create a personal development plan. Subsequently PLDP participants became more self-aware and knew what behaviours they needed to develop. Ideally, the development plan should be reviewed against the KSS in the coaching sessions on a regular basis to monitor progress, but this was not common practice. Coaches were familiar with the KSS for Practice Leaders and were able to reference it to shape their coaching conversations but considered it to be an under-utilised framework within the sector.

*"It was useful for me to understand other people's view rather than just my own. That always influences your thinking."*

(Ppt 09, Cohort 1)

*"I was shocked at how low she scored herself and how she didn't see her strengths...So I think the 360 enables a bit of balance in there. I had to re-calibrate [her] and say 'You said this but actually you are brilliant and what the other people said and the people around it had all said much stronger things, including the line manager. So, I had to help her understand that while she thought she was below the bar on certain things, clearly this showed all the people around her think that, so it was it was a nice piece of facilitation really to get her to see her strengths."*

(Coach 06)

*"The person I'm mentoring forwarded me the 360 but also some of their comments that were associated with that and I had an opportunity of reviewing that before our follow up session. So that follow up session was specifically about those areas in in her 360 where I felt we needed to review those together and also more broadly her self-view. And this isn't untypical, and particularly it's not untypical of women who are in leadership positions, her self- assessment was more critical than that of the people involved in the 360."*

(Coach 03)

A time delay between completing the 360 and obtaining the feedback may have reduced its impact, as it was sometimes a while before participants had the opportunity to meet with their development coach. Nonetheless, a couple of participants who were not allocated a coach until later in the programme, still discussed the 360 feedback with their colleagues. It was unclear whether the 360 report was re-visited or considered in subsequent development activities.

The PLDP 360 exercise might be expected to be less useful where the organisation already uses 360s to enhance development or improve performance, for example as part of the corporate appraisal process. However, this did not appear to be the case: Some participants indicated that they had not done a 360 before and those who had, said that it had been a long time ago or was not specific to their role.

## Development coach

Participants are allocated a development coach at the start of the programme, to support them throughout the first year, who may stay with them into the second in-role phase or be replaced by another coach. *“We’ve built up a really nice relationship that is ongoing. I’m still able to have those conversations with her and she’s been really helpful in having a safe place, particularly to talk about some of those complex dynamics about managing the political interface... While coaching, I also feel she very much champions me in our exchange, so she gives me a lot of positive feedback.”*

(Ppt 12, Cohort 3)

Coaches are not required to have a formal coaching qualification but are assessed over a telephone interview with an experienced Director of Children’s Services from a local authority judged by Ofsted as either outstanding or good (though this criterion has since been expanded to accommodate strong practice leaders regardless of the LA Ofsted rating, many of whom are PLDP alumni now in practice leader roles).

*“I’ve never had any formal training as a coach, but I’ve been a social care manager for a considerable amount of time to which supervision is a key skill and activity that you’re engaged in, but it’s a transferable skill, I would say.”*

(Coach 01)

Coaches are provided with a two-page guidance document summarising the role and expectations. i.e., to:

- Identify strengths and areas for development for the participant, based on observation and interpretation of the results of the 360-degree feedback report.
- Offer advice, guidance, and reflection in one-to-one conversations about challenges faced by the participant in their work, to develop confidence, skill, and expertise as a leader.
- Support the participant with their service development project.
- Facilitate opportunities for the participant to observe the development coach and/or others in leadership contexts, such as implementing a change programme, or working with politicians.

- Provide feedback to the participant at the end of the programme in a written statement.

The nature of the coaching conversations was dependent on the local context, for example the culture, the legacy of previous senior management, and the LA Ofsted's rating. Consequently, coaches were used to enhance learning and development in a range of ways: as sounding board to talk things through and test out ideas; to challenge and offer a different perspective; to give advice; to signpost to further support; and to help prepare for a job application or interview. Coaches added that they had supported PLDP participants to consider business cases, review documentation, share resources and explore practice principles, culture, and partnerships to enable and affect change through the project. They had also encouraged participants to step into the practice leader role or 'space' when still a head of service to gain exposure and enhance development, for example by running a whole service meeting.

*"When I applied for this role, they [my coach] supported me prepare a presentation, so they were able to talk it through with me. I was able to have a run through, so it just felt like you had somebody to really support that. I'm still in touch with them now."*

(Ppt 14, Cohort 3)

*"We talked a bit about getting her to push herself into that space of being an assistant director in the role that she was in; there was nothing stopping her as a head of service of being ambitious in terms of her working practice and her leadership role in her organization and taking on tasks and functions which you made prescribed to an AD running whole service meetings and testing herself out from a purely leadership role."*

(Coach 05)

Since the development coaches were all senior leaders, with busy diaries, who gave up their time freely, many participants struggled to book formal face-to-face sessions with their coach on a regular

basis. This issue seemed more apparent for Cohort 1, which may be because their coaches were mainly Directors of Children's Services (DCSs) with high demands on their time and/or because coaching sessions have recently been carried out online which is less time-consuming.

*"I did have a coach, but he just didn't have the time, so now I'm a coach and I make time for this."*

(Ppt 10, Cohort 1)

*"My coach became a director while I was on the course and became really busy. I think I might have only actually met him once, because whenever we set up to meet, unfortunately something else came up."*

(Ppt 13, Cohort 3)

Participants' experiences of the coaching programme were inconsistent. The PLDP promotional material states that, *"participants will spend up to five days over the course of the first year in the authority of their development coach and will be joined by their development coach in their own authority for up to two days."* This was certainly not the

case across the board: Only about a quarter of participants mentioned during the interview that they had observed their coach or others, for example had sat in on a management meeting to observe leadership in action.

*“...in their visits to me they observed practice, but equally it planted some seeds in terms of what they might be able to do innovatively and creatively in their own authorities. I think it gives them exposure to different ways in which initiatives have been implemented in a local setting. So, often we hear about some of these national programmes, but there only as good as your ability to be able to implement them in your local context, and I think giving that permission to be able to experiment and do things differently, that's relevant to your setting is really important.”*

(Coach 01)

Participants who had visited their coach's local authority and observed good practice in other service areas, and/or been observed by their coach, gained additional benefits. A couple of examples of the areas where participants extended their learning following peer observations or job shadowing facilitated by their coach included: working effectively with members; and getting a macro-grip on the organisation by balancing directing with giving the workforce ownership.

*“My mentor [coach] actually came and observed a discussion that I had previously talked through with her: So, I talked about what the issue was, what the challenge was, how I planned to address it, and then she was able to observe that in action. And so that was really helpful, to have her there but understanding the sort of context and then being able to give me some feedback...and actually, I suppose reassuring that my assessment of the situation and of the challenges, I suppose how I'd chosen to address those.”*

(Ppt 20, Cohort 1)

*“...mainly through the coaching, but also through the through the actual course itself, I was able to challenge myself on how I have a grip of an organization at a macro level, rather than knowing all the detail myself.”*

(Ppt 06, Cohort 1)

Having the opportunity to be coached inspired some participants to themselves become a coach for others inside or outside their organisation.

*“Then I thought about becoming a coach myself. I'm currently mentoring two people in my organization that approached me...they wanted some support around career progression and wanted to shadow me and different things and I think that's great. They're both deputy service manager level. and they want to go into service manager levels, so that's helped.”*

(Ppt 05, Cohort 2)

Many participants viewed their development coach as assuming a mentoring role, particularly when seeking input and direction from them, and frequently referred to them as their 'mentor' during the evaluation interview. The mentoring aspect of the relationship was accentuated at the beginning of the PLDP when participants were processing/digesting the course content and developing their understanding of the practice leader role. Once confidence increased and participants moved into a permanent pro-

moted practice leader position, the emphasis shifted towards having coaching conversations to help the individual find a solution to the issue within themselves.

*"I certainly was never wanting to be directive or anything. It was a reflective space, which I feel is a very important part of coaching, enabling them to get to where they need to be through their own kind of exploration, as opposed to mentoring which is slightly more directive potentially. But I know I moved into that role sometimes because I got the impression from their line of questioning or their reflections that they probably wanted that, but I was trying to be a coach. I was pushing myself back into being the coach more."*

(Coach 05)

*"They would coach me to think through things, but I do wonder whether a mentor might be more appropriate because you're growing and developing as you're going through it...There's so much input and information coming from the programme, which is great, I think a mentor would have been a better space to come away and talk through what it meant, as well as have the opportunity to learn from them and what their own journey had been."*

(Ppt 14, Cohort 3)

*"I think once people get in role [as a practice leader], I think I've probably seen it shift from mentoring to coaching more and saying 'Tell me you what you want to focus on. Let's, think about what you're saying,' rather than giving solutions and answers, or talking about scenarios in which you've been through something similar."*

(Coach 03)

Some, but not all, participants indicated that the CfSSW had found them a new coach to provide support during the second 'in-role' phase, and that this continuing support was very useful. Others took the initiative and found themselves a coach of their own accord, through personal connections made with the PLDP course leader, guest speakers on the programme, or an external source. And some of the participants who had been unable to regularly meet their assigned coach, turned to their peer network for support.

*"Where it became absolutely invaluable was when I started in the role because I would come up against things that I hadn't come up against before and you only have so much time with your own supervisor, your own DCS. I was able to talk to her [my coach] about a process that I didn't feel particularly confident with and how she managed those feelings and thoughts. It was just a safe place to reflect on your journey and key points that you'd come up against, so I really welcomed it."*

(Ppt 03, Cohort 3)

*"I've had different experiences with the coaching: when I first went on the programme, I had a coach that was a DCS in another local authority and I only saw them once. My experience of that was fairly negative which I fed back to the programme and it wasn't down to her fault, just a DCS is really busy and in a local authority that was not near to me. (Obviously easier in the virtual world now) so it wasn't particularly helpful, and she hadn't done much coaching before, I think. But then when I got the permanent post, I got an assistant director...and that was a totally different experience: She had the time and also a great deal of experience,*



*so that was absolutely fantastic. She gave me more confidence but also help through some sort of tricky issues that I was dealing with."*

(Ppt 17, Cohort 2)

*"I think the mentoring as well following the programme was a real plus... that you don't have a cliff edge that 'You're on the programme, you finish the programme. That's it. You get on with it now'. There was a kind of reflective space about the 'So what?'"* (Line Manager 12)

Overall, experiences of the coaching programme varied widely. The differences were dependent on numerous factors: the availability of the coach, which was, in turn, related to their job role and professional responsibilities; the physical distance between the coach and coachee's employing local authority; the coach and coachee's commitment to the coaching programme; and one's understanding and interpretation of the expectations of the role/relationship. A coach's influence was also limited by other dynamics around the LA culture and approach to systemic practice.

*"In that first year, things like roles and responsibilities and expectations were perhaps not quite as clear...Not everybody has coaching skills already when they go into those coaching roles."*

(Ppt 11, Cohort 1)

*"There wasn't much of a construct around it in terms of what they were doing or what I was doing. It wasn't really that clear and I could say that from both the coach's perspective because I was asked to be a coach and from a participant perspective...We just didn't follow it through really...If it is going to be a valuable aspect of the programme, it needs to be better described in terms of the roles of each participant: the participant and the coach."*

(Ppt 09, Cohort 1)

## Service development project

During the first year of the PLDP, participants are expected to undertake a project which would lead to a service or practice improvement in their local authority. This could be a piece of work they were already working on, or something identified as a need within their authority. The work-based project is an area where coaches can provide input and guidance. Participants are asked to give a presentation about their project to the group towards the end of the programme, at the final residential.

The project was *"really good at not over-working people that are already busy"* (Ppt 01, Cohort 2) since it was related to a participant's existing job and contributed to their professional portfolio. Accordingly, it was also beneficial to the local authority. The project gave participants the opportunity to pilot an idea on a small scale with input from peers and experienced leaders e.g., their coach and other participants. Coaches reported that they had an initial conversation with their coachee/participant to help decide which new or ongoing practice development project they wanted to undertake and what they hoped it to achieve.

However, the development project was one of the least accomplished elements of the

PLDP. Some participants could not remember much about their project (perhaps because they completed it over three years before) and others disclosed that they did not finish it. Development coaches had not necessarily been involved in supporting participants with the implementation of their project, though the coaches who were interviewed said that such participants did not agree or discuss a specific project with them.

*"We didn't spend a real lot of time talking about the project. We just didn't. It wasn't a prominent feature of the programme. For me, having said that, although we didn't perhaps discuss it as explicitly as we might have done, that didn't prevent me from taking all of that learning, all of that reflection, into the project that I did have underway."*

(Ppt 20, Cohort 1)

*"I think there was something about the link between the role of the development coach and the project that perhaps wasn't as clear as it could have been, and obviously depending on the experiences of your development coach, they might not necessarily be the right person to support that project, so it wouldn't necessarily work like that anyway. None of that was a great problem, but I think there was a sense of expectation that that would be more joined up than perhaps it was."*

(Ppt 11, Cohort 1)

The commitment to, magnitude, and quality of development projects varied between participants, largely because the project was not pushed, emphasised, or monitored by the CfSSW throughout the programme; but also, because participants had numerous work projects underway. Many participants suggested that the project should have been visited more regularly during coaching sessions, at the seminar days, and by progress checks carried out by the CfSSW.

*"In retrospect, I think being able to be better pinned down in what our project is earlier on in the programme would have been good. I didn't know what people's project was until the end when we presented it and actually had we had to define it earlier, we could probably have then connected with people who have maybe similar projects.... and that would enhance your learning."*

(Ppt 14, Cohort 3)

*"And maybe the encouragement about talking about it from day one, because as you're going through the practice leaders' course, what is it that you could apply? You know, when someone comes and does that talk about child friendly leads or something, is there something there that you could apply to work? So, I guess you could have that challenge constantly... I think it is about challenging that 'how can you apply this?'"*

(Ppt 15, Cohort 1)

*"I think it [the project] needs to be much more explicit and it needs to be followed throughout the time...I think it just needs a lot more focus and... you are actually monitored on it and providing some feedback on a regular basis and that is part of the coaching role...and I think that would be one of the things, just to have a bit more of a framework around it."*

(Ppt 19, Cohort 2)

Participants enjoyed hearing about one another's projects and wanted to know more

about them, as they were viewed as supplementary learning opportunities. The project could have been better utilised to demonstrate the application of learning to inform practice, though this would require more explicit learning outcomes and structured criteria to be set by the CfSSW. The learning could then be shared and formally disseminated to other participants to extend and enrich learning.

*“I definitely think as a product of the course, some plenary narrative around what the projects were (whether a piece to journal or whether it's just a presentation) any kind of subsequent evaluation of those projects and their impact would be a real interest to people... I think probably there's a lot of really valuable stuff going on that hasn't had the profile it requires.”*

(Coach 04)

Alternatively, a few participants suggested that the development project could be replaced by a different activity or assignment, such as a reflective journal around an individual's professional developmental area, or an exercise where one evaluates an area of practice in the sector which needs improvement and then shares their findings with the group.

*“As individuals, we all have an area of where we are worried about or where we might have a bit of impostor syndrome, or where we might think that we don't know. And maybe there's something about a reflective piece of work on that area where you think is your area for weakness, or whether you're 360 has highlighted that, so maybe it's not necessarily a project.”*

(Ppt 23, Cohort 1)

*“It might be helpful if we were all set, or we were in subgroups, where we were given some key challenge to address and think about it and look at across the sector in your little group: What is the practice like in in your authority? What could be better? What could be different? What could you do? What could this? What could we as the sector do to develop this or address this? So that we are perhaps evaluating each other's practice, but also thinking about a development journey that we could all go on together.”*

(Ppt 24, Cohort 3)

*“Bearing in mind in the interview in the application the application form, you have to really talk in detail about your practice model, it might be that we could have focused more on what is your practice model and how you are using some of your learning and putting it in your practice model.”*

(Ppt 21, Cohort 2)

## Ofsted shadow visit

The CfSSW endeavours to provide each participant with the opportunity to shadow an Ofsted monitoring or focused visit. Setting this up involves a number of administrative/organisational tasks: collecting information from participants regarding their previous employment history to avoid any conflict of interest; liaising with Ofsted regarding the upcoming inspections; matching participants with the appropriate visit; and communicating arrangements with participants.

Participants who had the opportunity to shadow an Ofsted visit, highly valued this experience. They gained an understanding of what Ofsted were looking for and the associated challenges of collating supporting evidence in a short time frame. It also gave insight into how to prepare staff for an Ofsted visit, especially with regards for how to answer their questions.

*"I did a two-day Ofsted inspection with two very nice Ofsted inspectors and I even participated in writing some of the report in the feedback. That was a really good experience. I enjoyed that and it gave me an insight into how they worked...Understanding the key lines of inquiry, understanding where they're coming from and, also, that they are time poor. They absorb so much information in such a short period of time, that you also have to be careful that they don't just go with the first thing that they see. So, from a challenge point of view that was interesting."*

(Ppt 15, Cohort 1)

*"It was just interesting in terms of observing how the inspectors triangulated all of that [hard (quantitative) evidence and (qualitative) meetings with staff] in what was quite a short space of time. You know, just understanding the challenges that they had within that, but also I think it was almost like it was more a reinforcement of the role of a practice leader in taking evidence to them and that proactive approach...but equally having the confidence that you do know your service, and you do know your children, and you do know your families, and you do know your partnership, and within that, your strengths and your areas for development. And being able to take that to the inspectors but also stand your ground and stand it strong if you felt that that was necessary."*

(Ppt 20, Cohort 1)

*"They [Ofsted] genuinely want to know the information, but they and you need to make sure that you provide it that. You need to be clear about what it is that you want them to know, and make sure that they know it, and if they are seeing something that you don't think that they are potentially looking at it in the wrong way or from the wrong lens, you need to kind of be confident enough to say something and not just accept that there it is for them....They are heavily regulated as well, so even though you think they're on the same page, once it's gone through their QA process, it can look very different, which was interesting."*

(Ppt 19, Cohort 2)

Only a small proportion (17%) of participants who were interviewed indicated that they had shadowed an Ofsted visit – all were from cohorts 1 or 2 – and almost a half stated explicitly that they had not shadowed an Ofsted visit. It was a disappointment for par-

ticipants who had missed out on this opportunity. Shadowing visits for cohort 3 participants had been cancelled due to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic since all routine inspections were suspended<sup>11</sup>. Other reasons given for missing the opportunity to shadow an Ofsted visit were that: the participant received an Ofsted inspection before a shadowing opportunity had been arranged; the participant had to cancel the shadow visit because their local authority received an Ofsted visit or inspection that same week; the date was released too late to be able to fit it into their diary; the shadow visit had been set up but was cancelled by the CfSSW or Ofsted (reason unknown).

## Networking opportunities

As was reflected in the residential and seminar feedback forms, participants highly valued opportunities to have discussions with peers and experienced practice leaders. Many stated that this was the most appreciated aspect of the PLDP since they rarely had opportunities to network with peers and experienced practice leaders outside their authority.

*“You got to talk to people who’d got to the top and done it, or who were employing the practice leaders. And you got to spend time with other people who either, are about to go into the role or thinking about it. So, you were having conversations with like-minded people. So, that in itself created some support and, I mean basically networking. The biggest thing this programme does is networking.”*

(Ppt 02, Cohort 1)

*“I think an important part of the practice leadership course was the networking with people in similar situations across the country... It was really fantastic how they pulled that together because it's very unusual that you would build a network with your equivalent on a countrywide basis.... I think that was amazing because you learn a lot out of that.”*

(Ppt 16, Cohort 2)

*“It [networking] was just a critical element of the course... That sense of looking up from your own place and understanding what was going on elsewhere, and what that looked and felt like, and how different it was for different people in different places. And I suppose it gives you a sense of how important context is, because you tend to know your own thing really well, but it's only when you see that in the context of another thirty people doing the same job in such completely different circumstances that it really did make a reality out of that.”*

(Ppt 11, Cohort 1)

The residentials were great for getting to know one another and developing the group identity, as they allowed for more time to chat and connect compared to the one-day seminars, though one participant stated in opposition that the requirement of an overnight stay may preclude some people from attending should they have caring responsibilities at home.

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<sup>11</sup> Ofsted guidance and information relating to coronavirus (COVID-19) <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/ofsted-coronavirus-covid-19-rolling-update>

*"I think the residential at the start in the beginning is a total must because you're instantly gelled. What you've got in common is social work and potentially practice leading or being a senior manager in an organization and you just talk and talk and talk. So that's great and you kind of get loads of ideas of how different organizations are run."*

(Ppt 06, Cohort 1)

*"The two residentials were really instrumental, in terms of getting the cohesion within the group, and building some of those trusting relationships really, so I would absolutely advocate for those continuing because I think they were really, really important."*

(Ppt 20, Cohort1)

PLDP participants formed personal connections with individuals on the programme from across the country, who they turned to for continuing support and guidance. Some had made use of these relationships to arrange a visit to another local authority to observe good practice and/or see an innovation project in action.

*"I've got a good relationship with about three or four [fellow PLDP participants]. We're not constantly in touch, but I know they're my 'go to' people...I can connect in if there's something that I need to check out, or follow up on, or think about. They'll be the first person that I might go to ...and even if it's not them, they can help me, I know that they can point me in the right direction."*

(Ppt 24, Cohort 3)

The CfSSW has facilitated the development of a practice leaders' network by creating a social media group for each cohort to keep in touch and share ideas, and co-ordinating networking opportunities to groupthink through challenging issues, shape new initiatives and contribute to influencing policy. Three practice leaders' days/conferences (one per year) have been arranged by the CfSSW for PLDP participants and alumni, to help implement the national systemic leadership model and develop a community of practice.

*"There's a number of people in the region now who've been on the course... There's five of us out of the 12 who now been on the course in the [region], so there's a critical mass of people as well regionally...You start to build a shared kind of conversation, a shared way of thinking about things."*

(Ppt 11, Cohort 1)

*"The network is really powerful, even the things like the WhatsApp group. We've organized independently as a cohort 3 - We've met up now two or three times separately via Teams, and just sharing together the learning, particularly through COVID, has been amazing. Just sharing experiences, picking up on best practice in different agencies or reassurance around what are you experiencing...It's great that it doesn't just end at the end of the programme, and I think that would be a real shame."*

(Ppt 14, Cohort 3)

*"Having the experience of a shared cohort of other people who are aspiring or becoming practice leaders has been invaluable and continues from the point of view of our shared WhatsApp group and how we are able to continue to learn from each*

*other.”*

(Ppt 07, Cohort 2)

The cohort meet-ups and national events organised by the CfSSW were welcomed by all participants and they wanted more. Individual cohorts have continued to meet informally, by organising themselves, but they would like the CfSSW to co-ordinate similar events beyond the second in-role phase. There were some reservations about inviting non-PLDP practice leaders to join the established forums or networks (such as the social media groups) because trusting relationships have been established that are based on a set of shared values.

*“I really enjoyed it and it was really helpful, in terms of networking, when they brought the three cohorts together...It sort of makes the world social work world a bit smaller because it puts a lot of senior leaders in one room, and you can put faces to names.”*

(Ppt 13, Cohort 3)

*“The fact that I was cohort two and we subsequently went on to have sessions with both cohort one and cohort three felt like a positive experience because you hear from cohort one who’ve been successful in being appointed into the roles, and you know that how they are directly now leading in their organization and you hear from cohort three who are kind of at the beginning of that journey. I thought some of those sessions worked really well.”*

(Ppt 07, Cohort 2)

*“There's one thing about meeting up with a massive three cohorts, but I think I'd still like to meet up with my cohort around learning, even if it was twice a year, because I think that's really important, especially as more and more people go into the higher up jobs as well. There's a safety being in your cohort. You know it is a little bit scary, the cohort two and the ones above us who've gone before. We are still learning... because we built that relationship, there was a real safety about being able to ask stupid questions.”*

(Ppt 22, Cohort 3)

The social media group set up for each cohort is used frequently to ask questions, share guidance or documents and even to advertise vacancies. These groups are still active, more than three years on for the first cohort. Participants placed the highest value on the support and input from their cohort of peers, acknowledging that not only is there a lot to learn when new in post, but that it can be a lonely role when you are the only practice leader in the authority.

*“You get to work with your group. You get to build those relationships. You start to have those soft conversations. So, this is what's going on over here; we had that, or we did this; do you want me to send you over paper and what we did? And I think, that was really, really, really important...I mean, I've just had a message from XX asking the whole of our group, the first cohort, about some practice information that she needs and already, I can see a number of people have responded.”*

(Ppt 23, Cohort 1)

*“They [the CfSSW] set up a WhatsApp group for the cohort which has been absolutely brilliant. We still use it to this day, and it's been really helpful during COVID... You've*

*got immediate access to national leaders or people in different positions...So that's really valuable, checking out things about approaches to different/new policies, procedures, practice, getting tips and ideas all along the way really. It's been so valuable. I think that's been as valuable as the whole programme really."*

(Ppt 17, Cohort 2)

*"I think it [the PLDP]'s provided that additional world for her because she has ongoing relationships with the practice leaders' group, and I think that's very healthy for people because it can get a bit insular with the people you work with in your immediate team."*

(Line Manager 08)

Because of the coronavirus pandemic, and the associated imperative to create and amend policies, the DfE increased the frequency of consultation meetings with practice leaders, which were concurrently moved online. PLDP participants and alumni appreciated the opportunity to attend these bi-weekly meetings, where they got to hear about the national context but also had an opportunity to input and shape policy in real time. The forum was perceived as a reference/focus group which provided a safe space to discuss ideas, and, in the eyes of PLDP participants, worked both ways because the DfE benefited from being brought closer to practice. PLDP participants want these meetings to continue and evolve so that practice leaders can influence other areas such as leading the recommendations of the Children's Social Care review.

*"They were brilliant because we were all learning to do things differently weren't, we? So, we were all coming with ideas and testing them out with the DfE and/or the DfE was saying "what are you doing?" because what we were doing, this was creating public policy in live time... There is something about people coming together in live time which isn't planned six months in advance but actually deals with issues of today."*

(Ppt 08, Cohort 2)

*"The DfE really wants to know what the struggles are on the ground and they want that feedback. But also, we understand from their point of view what they're looking at and what they're dealing with. We had a day, actually at the DfE, which was brilliant, and the children's minister came and spoke to us, which was helpful...and also just to go to the DfE and to meet people in the DfE that ultimately are writing the policies that affect what we do, and the fact that we've now been able to be part of that feedback loop is great."*

(Ppt 21, Cohort 2)

*"You hear from the big national perspective what's happening. I think it's also really good for the DfE to be hearing from us all, what the key issues are. Also, we get the Children's Commissioner speaking, so I think we can influence as a group nationally, policy and practice and also raise the profile of the children's social work workforce, which is really important."*

(Ppt 17, Cohort 2)



## What was missing or needed greater emphasis?

At the end of each interview, participants were asked whether they felt anything was missing from the PLDP. Although, there was overwhelming support for the programme, a key missing element, raised by five participants, was that anti-racism needed to be put on the agenda by bringing in inspirational BAME speakers and facilitating discussions around disproportionality of BAME individuals.

*"I definitely think that there needs to be more around disproportionality and more around race...As practice leaders, we have a responsibility to get succession planning and get people the right opportunities for them to be able to progress. I think as practice leaders, we all have a responsibility and I think the question should be asked at every cohort, that we know that there's disproportionality in leadership. What are you as a practice leader going to do to be able to influence the system?"*

(Ppt, anonymity maintained)

*"I would have liked to have discussed a lot more about breaking the glass ceiling and an acknowledgement of what that looks like for women, but also what it looks like for black women and black men...I would like somebody from the black community or maybe even from industry to come and talk about how hard it is to break that glass ceiling."*

(Ppt, anonymity maintained)

Nonetheless, the PLDP has given some practice leaders the confidence to strategically address cultural identity, diversity within the workforce, racial discrimination, and unconscious bias within practice, for example in doing focused audits to make sure race and disproportionality was addressed in case work.

*"I've implemented a programme...about being the best you can be in terms of dealing with unconscious bias, dealing with the micro-aggressions, and being as inclusive and as restorative with families."*

(Ppt 13, Cohort 1)

*"There's lots of stuff for us about race, inequality and response to Black Lives Matter and creating safe forums for staff to speak. And while that's very much focused at staff...in helping staff have those conversations they'll then be better able to have those conversations with young people and families and strengthen even more our practice around issues to do with disproportionality and disadvantage and exclusion in communities."*

(Ppt 12, Cohort 3)

## Application process

Applications to the PLDP are shortlisted for interview based on the following criteria:

Criteria	Source of evidence/assessment
Preparedness for the practice leader role	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>➤ CV</li><li>➤ key achievements</li><li>➤ written statement</li></ul>
Ability to articulate a practice framework	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>➤ Written submission/statement</li><li>➤ references</li></ul>
Potential as a leader	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>➤ References</li></ul>
Overall quality/standard of applicant	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>➤ All aspects of written statement</li><li>➤ CV</li><li>➤ references</li></ul>

Following the telephone interview, successful candidates are invited to attend an assessment centre (termed 'development day') which consists of an interview in front of a panel of practice leaders, a group discussion, and a written exercise.

## The assessment centre

Feedback collected by the CfSSW about the development day was very positive: Candidates thought that the day was well-organised, and the exercises and interviews were suitably challenging, though a couple of participants commented that they felt a bit rushed at times throughout the day.

In addition, the assessment process was mentioned by numerous participant interviewees as a rigorous, yet positive and motivating experience. It was seen by many as key to the success of the programme because it selected the right type of people i.e., those with similar values and a shared vision.

*"The way we were interviewed and the recruitment for the programme really looked at very much the right things around collaboration, systemic thinking and in looking at wider systems, being close to practice rather than...something that might be more, much more management focused and driven by performance, etc."*

(Ppt 17, Cohort 2)

*"There's something very exciting about this this programme, in terms of everybody feeling as though they are all talking the same language. I think the way that the programme finds the right people to go on it in the first place was very clever...A great deal of effort went into the front end of getting the right people onto to the programme rather than just almost accepting anybody."*

(Ppt 09, Cohort 1)

## Geographical region of participants

The PLDP has been particularly popular in London which was unsurprising given that much of the programme's delivery was located there. Since the CfSSW is based in the London Boroughs of Kensington and Chelsea, Westminster and Hammersmith and Fulham, it was also predictable that the programme attracted applications from these local authorities. Although the 67<sup>12</sup> participants came from 45 different local authorities across England, 15 of them (i.e., one-third) had more than one employee participate in the programme across the three cohorts which suggests that participants had recommended the programme to their colleagues following a positive experience.

*"I feel very privileged to have done it. I meet with the ADs in [name of area], they haven't done the course, but I constantly tell them about it, and I share it...I think it's very unique in the way that it works, and I've done other leadership courses, with other organisations, but it's never hit the mark."*

(Ppt 19, Cohort 2)

## Diversity of applicants

Following an earlier analysis of the ethnic background of applicants and participants, the CfSSW made a concerted effort to attract more applications from BAME groups: for example, BAME leaders were represented on the interview panel, and BAME applicants were offered a pre-interview coaching conversation to help them prepare for the interview.

*"I've helped in conversations with [the Chef Social Worker] to shape the agenda around leadership and Black and Asian minority groups in leadership roles...We've been involved as a group of practice leaders in the cohorts: Black and Asian participants have helped to interview and also coach those in cohort four."*

(Ppt, anonymity maintained)

The resultant impact of these activities has been an increase in the representation of BAME participants from 5% in 2017/18 (cohort 1) to 12% in 2019/20 (cohort 3). However, the proportion of practice leaders nationally who are from a BAME group is unknown, so it is unclear how representative PLDP participants are of the comparative social worker population.

*Nb. The CfSSW is working towards increasing the diversity of applicants such as involving PLDP participants from BAME backgrounds in promoting the programme by recording their experiences and sharing these videos on their website.*

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<sup>12</sup> One participant left the programme to move overseas

## Thematic analyses of changes in thinking and behaving

As part of the evaluation, interviewees were asked how they had applied their learning from the PLDP to their role. Participants, their coaches, line managers, and direct reports described changes in thinking and behaving. A thematic analysis of their qualitative responses yielded three main themes, presented overleaf:

1. Better understanding of the role
2. Importance of a practice model
3. Collaboration within and across the system

## Thematic analysis of the learning and the changes in thinking and behaving of PLDP participants.

### 1. Better understanding of the role

#### a. Deconstruct the role:

- Gain knowledge about the role
- Understand the realities of the job
- Allay misconceptions

#### b. Become more self-aware:

- Become more aware of strengths
- Reflect on values and beliefs
- Be conscious of one's impact on others

#### c. Increase confidence:

- Get accepted onto the programme
- See like-minded peers' progress
- Feel more informed (e.g., via research)
- Remove self-doubt

#### d. Gain a broader, strategic perspective:

- Be mindful of the wider system
- Accept the holistic responsibility of a practice leader
- Develop awareness of the challenges of managing the political environment

#### e. Shape one's leadership style:

- Develop a shared vision for social care
- Maintain a focus on practice
- Be your authentic self

### 2. Importance of a practice model

#### a. Need for a consistent approach to practice:

- Define a clear model of practice
- Understand how the model contributes towards improving practice

**b. Overcome the barriers to defining, implementing, and embedding a model:**

- Overcome confusion about what a practice model is
- Deal with previous misinterpretations of the approach to practice
- Focus on getting the basics right first
- Keep the model at the fore
- Recognise that the system is not necessarily systemic

**c. Communicate the model:**

- Message clear expectations
- Re-write policies to align with the model
- Provide staff training on the model
- Role model the model
- Share the model with partners

**d. Change culture:**

- Use language in a considered way
- Close the learning loop
- Move away from a blame culture towards an appreciative high-challenge, high support culture

**3. Collaboration within/across the system**

**a. Work with corporate colleagues and council members:**

- Engage in dialogue to build relationships
- Align objectives
- Secure support for children's services

**b. Involve partner agencies:**

- Respect the different perspectives
- Invest time to engage with partners
- Explain the approach to practice
- Challenge the system
- Set up multi-agency forums/teams

**c. Maintain relationships with families:**

- Work relationally with families
- Give children and families a voice
- Keep the focus on the child

**d. Adopt a distributed leadership style:**

- Be visible
- Empower others e.g., do 'with' not 'to'
- Share responsibility and accountability
- Facilitate learning

**e. Develop a community of practice:**

- Contribute to the national network of PLs
- Promote a shared vision

- Attend forums/events to exchange ideas
- Influence national policy

## Better understanding of the role

A principal outcome of the PLDP was that it gave participants a better understanding of the practice leader role. Many were previously relatively unaware of what the job involved and found that the speakers' honest presentations, practical examples, links to the KSS, and the ensuing conversations, helped deconstruct the role.

*"I didn't have much of a clue as to how the role would be, because you don't normally get that kind of intensive training around what the expectations are and get to speak to lots of really fantastic people who have done that role."*

(Ppt 23, Cohort 1)

*"It [the practice leader role] was something I had thought about but didn't actually think I would ever possibly achieve. I think the programme broke it down so it deconstructed really very much the role of as an assistant director into a practice leader and that was something that actually enabled me to think, 'actually, I can do this'... It brought the role to life through using the KSS, which is the knowledge and skill statement... So, it enables you to understand very clearly what the role entailed and gave you the confidence through your skill set that you actually had those skills within those knowledge and skills areas to be able to do the role."*

(Ppt 03, Cohort 3)

The PLDP provided participants with opportunities to reflect on their values and reaffirm their beliefs about social work. It also helped consolidate thoughts about a shared ambition for children's social care and an associated need for changes in social work practice to deliver better outcomes for children and families.

*"It [the PLDP] really confirmed where I stand as a social worker and as a leader and so I then very quickly learned that maybe this was something that was in my sights because my vision is clear, my understanding of social work is clear, and I felt it was a confirmation that my actual belief in what should be happening with children and families was along the right track."*

(Ppt 10, Cohort 1)

*"It [the PLDP] just reinforced a lot of things that I already thought and knew were the right thing to do but allowed me to really have that drive and go for it in terms of allowing families to see their own strengths and focusing on that."*

(Ppt 13, Cohort 3)

*"What it [the PLDP] was rooted in was a kind of sense of needing to know yourself and know what was really important about your own values and beliefs and how you wanted to do things, and also, I suppose, a kind of confidence that you would do it differently to other people."*

(Ppt 11, Cohort 1)

Many had preconceptions about practice leaders which had precluded them from considering going for a promotion in the past. A common misconception was that the practice leader role would take individuals away from practice, but participants were encouraged to find that the PLDP emphasised the importance of leaders staying close to practice. Simply naming the job title as practice leader, as opposed to assistant director, sat



better with practitioners because the role is about leading practice.

*"I think it kind of reaffirmed, really strongly, the idea that the practice leader role should be really involved in practice. And I think it would be quite easy to believe that it was a role that was a long way away from practice. It [the PLDP] very helpfully challenged that kind of assumption and it almost gave credibility and permission to the idea that that was a critical part of the job."*

(Ppt 11, Cohort 1)

*"As you go into the roles of a head of service or assistant director level, you are seen as drawn away from front door practice more. But what this course has allowed me to realize is, actually, it doesn't have to be like that. In fact, it is your duty and responsibility to understand what frontline practice looks like."*

(Ppt 05, Cohort 2)

*"To be honest, before I did the practice leaders' course, I didn't really see myself as a director because I'm too attached to practice and what it made me see was that I could be a leader, senior leader and still be involved in practice."*

(Ppt 21, Cohort 2)

The PLDP encouraged participants to think about what type of leader they wanted to be. Some viewed previous or other leaders as having a command-control leadership style that they felt expected to simulate; but PLDP participants learnt that there are other ways to lead, such as a distributed approach, which aligned closely with their social work values.

*"This course has really helped me to think about who am I as a leader and what kind of leader do, I want to be? I think this course has really helped me to think about being an authentic leader, being true to myself as opposed to a leadership style that matches the organization that I'm working for. If the organization that I work for is very commanding control, I think I would probably have fallen into that. Whereas now, I can see that type of leadership around me, but I can hold my own ground and stay authentic knowing that command and control leadership isn't going to get the best out of the workforce and isn't going to improve outcomes for children."*

(Ppt 18, Cohort 3)

Whilst on the PLDP, participants developed a greater self-awareness of their strengths and challenges (e.g., a woman going into a leadership role) and the impact of their behaviour as a leader on others. They were inspired to be their authentic self, realising that they have a lot to bring to a leadership role by transferring humility, credibility, and trust to others.

*"Your awareness is hugely raised and therefore because you are far more aware of the impact you as a personality may have on others or your leadership style might have...and that's really what leadership is about: It's about relationships...It's how you take others along with you. And I think that became much more sophisticated, having done the programme."*

(Ppt 08, Cohort 2)

*"I had an idea or preconception about how people should behave in terms of that leadership style at a more senior level...I think it made me realize I just had to be*

*myself and that and to develop that style of authentic leadership rather than try and be something that I wasn't."*

(Ppt 16, Cohort 2)

*"What it [the PLDP] did was solidify and cement my recognition that being authentic, being who you are, valuing that relational way of working really gave me better and greater confidence."*

(Ppt 24, Cohort 3)

*"The course has given her permission to be herself and do it in the way that she wants to do it with a focus on children and families, rather than a focus of money or corporate guidelines, or how other people say she should do the job or be a manager who's removed from other people. It gives people vision to do their job the way they think it should be done."*

(Line manager 01)

*"What I do see is somebody who's probably a little bit more aware of her context of her environment and the impact of her and everything that comes out of her mouth, that level with the organization that it has meaning. So, I think probably what I have seen is she's probably come a little bit more sort of politically, small 'p', aware."*

(Line Manager 10)

Undeniably, the PLDP developed participants' confidence to lead. For some, just being recommended by their line manager to apply to go on the programme was a confidence boost in itself; and being successful in passing the rigorous application process also helped build confidence as it required applicants to reflect on their abilities and career development aspirations.

*"I always at times have a bit of impostor syndrome, and one of the really good things about the really rigorous application onto the course was 'I got that on my own merit'."*

(Ppt 22, Cohort 3)

*"I must say the recruitment for it, so the interviews and everything, were really robust and in some ways really quite scary I think, but in a really good way. It was clearly high standards and that itself, the fact that I got through and got offered a place gave me quite a lot of confidence."*

(Ppt 17, Cohort 2)

*"I just think generally getting on the course itself was a real confidence boost for her... around validating her professional expertise and her skills... because she always believed she wouldn't get on it. She didn't believe she was good enough."*

(Line Manager 07)

Once enrolled on the PLDP, participants started to better manage their internal dialogue of self-doubt because they had reaffirmed their values, knew themselves better and felt more informed and supported. Moreover, seeing peers progress into practice leader roles, and with support from their coach, encouraged them to take the next step. Several participants commented that they would not have sought a promotion at that point in time had they not been on the PLDP, as it helped prepare them for the role but also helped them realise that they were ready to take the next step. Being on a programme

with like-minded individuals with shared values helped participants shape their vision and make a smoother transition into leadership.

*“There were people on my course who would then get assistant director jobs who I then kind of realized were no different from me...no offense to them, we were like minded people, you know, and I probably have the same skills and experiences as them, so it probably gave me more confidence.”*

(Ppt 06, Cohort 1)

*“I probably would have [applied for a practice leader role if I hadn't been on the PLDP] but with a very different mindset and a very different starting point. I think what it helped me to do was to be really clear from the very beginning about what kind of things I needed to put in place and how to start. Perhaps if I hadn't had been on the programme, I may well have spent the first six to nine months almost kind of working that bit out really. So, it's certainly helped to kind of hit the ground running.”*

(Ppt 11, Cohort 1)

The experienced leaders who presented at the residentials and seminars spoke about the realities and challenges of the role. Participants subsequently became more mindful of the wider system: They spoke of a shift in their thinking to a more outward facing approach i.e., a broader more strategic longer-term perspective that helped them become less reactive, which was observed by line managers.

*“Being able to see it from the wider perspective and the wider organizational perspective, I think the courses really helped me to do that. There's something about being able to pull myself away back from the operational end of things to actually see it from a different*

*perspective... The course helped me to really think through strongly about the whole practice system as opposed to just thinking about my service area.”*

(Ppt 18, Cohort 3)

*“It also made me to think more about nationally, we are social workers and practice leaders; and thinking more of what's happening outside my own local authority... and that responsibility that it isn't just about your local authority, it's about our profession and the influence that we can have wider.”*

(Ppt 22, Cohort 3)

*“The programme allowed her to take a more macro perspective, to take a more systemic look at the issues that we were grappling with, the challenges we had, and start to evolve strategic thinking, rather than resolving the issue in the moment, taking a longer-term perspective around what the issues were.”*

(Line Manager 07)

Participants spoke about the knowledge gained from the academic research and theory presented on the PLDP. But, by far the greatest knowledge gap (and hence biggest knowledge gain) was understanding the political and public context of leadership, because heads of service generally experience limited exposure to local councillors and policy makers. Participants recognised the challenges associated with differing agendas and had learnt that part of the practice leader's job was to promote children's services to elected members and advise them on making strategic decisions.

*“One of the key bits of the course for me was having other assistant directors, directors, ex- chief execs and politicians come to talk about the political risk. And that was an eye opener for me because I suppose at a head of service level, which is below the assistant director, the exposure to the power and the politics is minimal.”*  
(Ppt 03, Cohort 3)

*“It [the PLDP] definitely opened my eyes on the political agenda and also how to see a council as a whole, not just within your sector of children services. It has allowed me to think about my relationship with members, and I think in this role in particular being the corporate parent for young people, how you expand that and make it the Council's agenda.”*

(Ppt 05, Cohort 2)

*“The real significant thing for me in this role is how we think about our relationship with our lead member, with the chief exec, the interface with the leader of the Council, and ultimately to the DCS and how we manage those (who all can have very different agendas, different political priorities, obviously very different understanding of the role). It's not really until you are in this post that anybody really understands how complex that is. I think the course absolutely helped me start thinking about that, but certainly once I was then acting up, it allowed me to start making sense of that because that's the challenging bit.”*

(Ppt 12, Cohort 3)

Although participants felt they had picked up a lot about how to navigate the political climate, they acknowledged the need for further support and development in this area. This was reflected in coaches' and line managers' feedback too. Stepping away from the detail and considering the expanded landscape of working with elected members and the political considerations associated with the 'corporate table' were aspects of the practice leader role that were explored and reflected upon in many coaching sessions.

*“Everybody that I have spoken to has talked to me about that [political exposure and working with politicians] being a gap in their knowledge and experience and something that they really felt they needed, because we often, in children services, we work in a very hierarchical system: staff, second and third tier staff may not have exposure to elected members.”*

(Coach 03)

## **Importance of a practice model**

Participants stressed the importance of having a consistent approach to practice i.e., a 'practice model'; and that for this to be achieved, it needed to be clear, explicit, and understood by all. (One participant alluded to the fact that she moved authorities because it lacked clarity of direction with regards to a shared approach to practice.) The PLDP allowed time to reflect on one's preferred model and to develop a clear vision and expectations of how social work practice was to be carried out. There was no single preferred model of practice, though all were family-focused, strengths-based (i.e., draw on individuals' strengths) and necessitated having meaningful relationships.

*“I would say that that programme gave my thinking more sophistication. There were so many things that perhaps I've always done in my career, but I haven't put a framework around it. Sometimes by putting a framework around it, you begin to*

*understand your default position more.”*

(Ppt 08, Cohort 2)

*“In terms of the practice leaders’ course, there was a lot of seminars and lectures around a practice model, around it doesn’t matter which practice model you choose, but you get one in an organization, you embed it in the organization to change practice and improve practice.”*

(Ppt 06, Cohort 1)

Local authorities are at varying stages of defining, implementing, or embedding a practice model; and the PLDP participants were no exception: Some reported that there was no practice model in place before they were appointed; some had a model which was being interpreted differently by individuals; and others had been working in an authority with a systemic practice model in place for many years. A couple of PLDP participants also admitted that it took them a while to fully understand what a practice model actually was.

*“When I came to [name of local authority] I wanted to understand about the social work’s identity: how do they practice, do they have a model? And it was really interesting because everybody talked about something different, so it was quite clear then that we didn’t have an identity.”*

(Ppt 03, Cohort 3)

*“When I first went on with the programme, they talked a lot about what your model of practice was, [which] we didn’t have. We’d be better if we brought together everything that we were doing, but in a way that that people could understand. So, I designed a very clear one-page model of practice after being on this course...I think it had a fairly significant impact in the fact that people really understand the values of what we’re trying to achieve now in a way that they probably couldn’t describe before. So, they had all the little bits of the jigsaw, but it wasn’t put together.”*

(Ppt 09, Cohort 1)

PLDP participants were at different points, with regards to implementing a comprehensive practice model. Several had to begin by defining the model or bringing together various approaches into one, but each then required communication of the model and engagement with staff, using clear messaging and supporting training as applicable. Even those in local authorities with an established model felt better able to articulate it following participation on the PLDP and recognised the need to keep the framework alive and to train new recruits in the adopted approach.

*“The first thing I did was roll out practice standards; not just around performance and data, but what would I expect to see in terms of quality of practice; and having that in a really visual format.”*

(Ppt 14, Cohort 3)

*“What [Name of participant] does really well is take some deeply conceptual ideas and translate them into a workable practice and methodology on paper and articulate it then to staff... At that first point when we were just talking about practice, the things are important to us, the things we want, [Name] translated that into a workable practice model that now flows throughout our children and family service, so that staff know it, see it, understand it, can articulate it, and can practice with those values.”*

(Line Manager 02)

*“I think being on the programme has helped me to consider how we continue to keep that framework to the fore and alive, bearing in mind difficulties and staff retention and recruitment. So, we really highlight that when we are looking at our retention programme but also making sure that we've commissioned ongoing training and support for that model to continually be developed and considered by such and used by social work staff.”*

(Ppt 24, Cohort 3)

Before embarking on something more innovative, practice leaders made sure they were getting the basics right, through identifying areas of concern and acting accordingly, such as ensuring a uniform approach to auditing.

*“The challenge for us all is to have that focus and maintain that focus on those key areas that we know are critical. For us, it's about not being complacent, not resting on our laurels, continuously having that focus on what we call, ‘doing the simple things’.”*

(Ppt 20, Cohort 1)

*“I think the biggest thing really is about getting those basics of social work right. [She] will say that herself over and over again. It's about...What we do is our bread and butter, our day- to-day getting our basics right, treating people with respect, treating people in the same way that we would want to be treated, building/forming those relationships, in order to try and achieve with our family the best possible outcome.”*

(Direct report 08)

To further embed the practice model, and prevent it becoming tokenistic, leaders have rewritten local policies to be more practice-focused and introduced reflective sessions for practitioners to discuss complex cases. Furthermore, practice leaders were sharing their model of practice with partner agencies and endeavouring to influence the wider system to positively impact children and young people. For example, one PLDP practice leader had re-worded their vision in a document outlining their approach to highlight that *“early help is everybody's responsibility, every agency every individual working with a child or a family.”*

(Ppt 14, Cohort 3)

*“That's something that we've done a lot over the last year in terms of working with partners and working with the more strategic boards...both getting them on board with this way of working and that strengths-based model of practice; and training that out to them so that they understand that more and then getting them involved in the work of the Council as well.”*

(Direct report 10)

PLDP participants were making progress towards 'creating a context for excellent practice' (KSS 2): In many cases, they were acting as champions of a new practice model, modelling the expected behaviours with staff and in their conversations about children and families through a considered use of language, for example, in humanising people and writing to the child in supervision notes. Subtle but powerful changes in terminology mentioned by PLDP participants included: "alternative home" instead of "placement"; "family time" instead of "contact"; "practice information" instead of "performance data". PLDP participants also learnt to use narrative storytelling that people could relate to, in order to influence others and improve the quality of practice. This shared language was displayed in the evaluation interviews with direct reports too.

*"There is a lot of learning around how to change a culture...how do you shape a culture and the importance of that leadership presence and role modelling that, that's been really significant. So, from the minute you walk into the door, how you present the conversations you have and how you value staff that you're working with."*

(Ppt 14, Cohort 3)

*"She's very big on that restorative point of view...She's very clear about the language that people are using, how we are describing families, how we're working with families, and about working with and not to or for families, looking at that wider picture."*

(Direct report 08)

These behaviours have been cascaded down to staff who have subsequently bought into the vision and are striving to improve. Direct reports of PLDP participants in practice leader posts, reported that their manager was clear about how they wanted them to practice. For example, managers are expected to role model the model in supervision. Frontline practitioners then role model the model with families, which is helping to break the rhetoric in communities that social workers take children away from their family.

*"She has a very clear vision, and she's able to communicate very strongly what needs to change to be able to get there...There is a sense of that leading to a greater collective, kind of ownership, of what needs to change."*

(Direct report 07)

PLDP participants felt that successful implementation of the practice model was supporting culture change and enabling improvement, including having a positive impact on staff recruitment and retention, particularly where a whole-system approach was being implemented. One participant also commented that communication and adoption of a shared approach had contributed towards an increase in the number of compliments and a reduction in complaints into the service.

*"I've done a lot of role modelling in the past 12 months, and that's really fundamentally come from the course. I've done that in order to change a culture, because the culture in the organization that I'm in has been very much about social work doing 'to' families and not 'with' families. I've led on a number of practice forums with social workers, with early help officers with family support workers around, 'What does good look like in terms of how we engage families? What is social work about?'... I*

*know if I role model in a particular way which is inclusive open and honest, then actually that's the social work practice that's going to happen when social workers go out into the frontline and sit with families."*

(Ppt 18, Cohort 3)

*"Challenging the use of power appropriately; making sure that social workers are mindful of the power they've got; mindful of the responsibility the parents have; and that our duty is to work alongside parents and with parents, not to do things to parents or to children; how we make decisions about children but getting the system to be appreciative of the child's experience."*

(Ppt 02, Cohort 1)

While on the PLDP, participants developed their knowledge, skills, and confidence in 'supporting effective decision making' (KSS 5): The PLDP most definitely facilitated a move towards being risk conscious rather than risk averse. Knowledge and research presented on the PLDP about managing risk using a clear evidence-based rationale, increased participants' confidence to take responsibility and to trust the workforce. Practice leaders were encouraging more reflective discussion with practitioners and supporting them in managing safe uncertainty. As a result, local authorities are reclaiming social work and moving away from a punitive and adversarial way of working with families to prevent intervention and avoid taking the wrong children into care.

*"We wanted to move towards a more strength-based way of working and we knew we needed to build our confidence in the workforce to be able to do that...I started to do a lot of work with the management teams and a lot of that was around building our confidence in understanding thresholds...It's that sense of managing uncertainty, confidence in management decision making, and trying to really steer us out of that place that perhaps our heads were stuck in because when you work in an inadequate authority, people...can start to become quite risk-averse."*

(Ppt 16, Cohort 2)

*"I think that the programme has very much encouraged and enabled a proportionate risk management approach. I think one of the key things that has stuck with me is around creating a culture of safe uncertainty. Recognizing we're never finding that position where absolutely everything's going to be safe and there's no risk, but really being able to step back and reflect around those risks and everyday life. It's about how we manage those proportionately in working with the family."*

(Ppt 14, Cohort 3)

Another, almost universal, change in practice directly brought about by the PLDP was the introduction of practice weeks as part of the quality assurance process: They involve team audits of cases, observations of practice, and discussions with families. Previously audits were often focused on record keeping, and what had been recorded on the case files did not necessarily offer

*"that richness of understanding and appreciation of the level of work or interventional understanding that the social worker might have about that family."*

(Ppt 24, Cohort 3)

Senior leaders involved in these activities reported that it helped them stay close to practice and identify areas of improvement. Additionally, practice weeks were being



used to praise staff, share good practice, and close the learning loop.

*"You need to close that loop in terms of being satisfied that what you think you are asking of your workers and that we were clear about what our vision is. If families don't experience that, then you've failed. And the practice week was a vehicle to be able to do that...If you focus on practice, you really do understand what is being delivered in your organization, so there isn't a disconnect from you as a leader to what families are experiencing."*

(Ppt 19, Cohort 2)

*"We absolutely brought the practice methodology for all of our staff and our assurance framework together...Our poor old social workers, they just felt completely done 'to' because we had this quality assurance framework that felt like you were the person being audited rather than the work and the service that was delivered. So, we just rewrote all of that with everybody and now everybody audits everybody else, everybody quality assures everybody else. And I've done a lot of work to amplify the voice of children and families."*

(Ppt 04, Cohort 1)

*"She introduced practice weeks and it's definitely enabled us all to sit closer to practice, but it's also given the frontline staff and young people the support that they need to do the job well and, for a start, identify areas for improvement and areas that are working really well."*

(Line Manager 04)

PLDP participants significantly developed their knowledge and skills around 'quality assurance and improvement' (KSS 6). The programme was a catalyst for participants to change the way performance management was viewed and utilised. PLDP practice leaders encouraged open conversations with practitioners when discussing performance data, to include qualitative information, which helps obtain support from the workforce to implement the required changes. Through making deep dives, exploring the meaning behind the data, and practitioners taking a more holistic view of the child, leaders were able to get a better grip on frontline practice.

*"We've changed the way we analyse the data more rather than just data in itself: 'What's the meaning behind that? How does that relate to practice and practice development?' So, we have a meeting once a month when we bring together all the service managers across our service and we have a specific discussion around practice at each of those as well, but when we review the data it's much more on an analysis of what that means."*

(Direct report 01)

*"They are called performance in practice conversations: They [the performance team] will take some data along to the team (they are the different teams) and they'll say, 'Look, we've found this! What do you think of that? What does it tell you and tell us about the practice related to that data? What do you think is going on?' and then come up jointly with some recommendations and that's really working well."*

(Ppt 17, Cohort 2)

*"I think for us as an organization, there's evidence now that there is stronger management grip, because her scrutiny at the top has filtered down and everyone else*

*underneath her is keeping an eye on things a bit more closely. I guess, what I said at the beginning about accountability, practice and children, I think it's probably had an impact on the time we spend in court, for example: she's driven things through looking at things more carefully, we go quicker, and we get hopefully the right outcome for the child quicker."*

(Direct report 05)

*"She, for example, meets really regularly with her heads of service and team manages to discuss performance. She really focuses quite heavily on performance. She understands that looking at data, isn't the whole answer. So, she understands that quality of practice comes in many sources: feedback from children and families; looking at file audits; talking to social workers; the importance of supervision."*

(Line Manager 10)

In some authorities, performance dashboards have been created for everyone (including the Chief Executive) to provide a better line of sight to practice, which are also serving as an alert system for potential concerns. Leaders have seen a shift from a punitive blame culture, focused on numbers and timescales, to an appreciative high-support high-challenge one centred around securing better outcomes for children. Scrutiny by council members has also become more constructive in many instances. Furthermore, one practice leader commented that they had been able to present a stronger case for increased resources by having greater confidence in their performance information.

*"We've completely revised and reviewed the performance management framework...That's allowed us to create reports and performance dashboards and such like in a way that we just never were able to have before, so our understanding and line of sight in terms of what's going on around performances is completely different...and we've set some of them to almost become like an alert system so people can see what to do before it even happens."*

(Ppt 11, Cohort 1)

*"I think it was summed up by a member of staff saying to us, 'for the first time, we now talk about practice, rather than performance'."*

(Line Manager 02)

*"I think it's around that recognition of a standard, that lack of any sort of blame culture. A recognition about approachable, humanistic, authentic social work with people having the autonomy to intervene in the way they see appropriate and fit to with families allows for a richer understanding of family life, and therefore potentially better outcomes for the child... So, it may be that in some cases they have not necessarily been on time scale, but the richness of the visit in the direct work that's being done has yielded better results or better interventions, or a real difference for that child."*

(Ppt 24, Cohort 3)

## Collaboration within and across the system

Following knowledge gained on the PLDP regarding the wider corporate agenda, participants have invested time and energy in building relationships with corporate colleagues and external partners, such as the police, education, and health. Part of this process entailed communicating to non-practitioners the preferred approach to social work practice and highlighting the corporate responsibility to the child with the aim of holding other stakeholders to account.

*“There's one thing about leading practice in this role, but there's another thing about looking upwards where practice to people is, they don't even know what practice is... So, it's about how you use the corporate resource better to influence, to make practice and influence outcomes to children and families that you work with looking outwards. How do you navigate in the system?”*

(Ppt 06, Cohort 1)

*“I think she's really learned (and I'm sure she would say this) to be less directive when working with partners in maybe corporate, because actually you need them to be on side... She's really grown in that ability to understand the links that are across corporate and also that politically there's the ceiling of decision-making. So, she may think this is a great idea, but we have to go and talk to 12 Chief Execs before we decide that we're going to do something.”*

(Line Manager 09)

*“The fact that she knows she's a leader, so sees herself as leading in practice, and if there's issues, we bring to her attention, she will do her best to then think strategically how she can bring on board partners and work collaboratively with them and trying to always remind them of their responsibilities to children.”*

(Direct report 01)

*“Since [she] has taken over that role, there's a lot more confidence in the leadership. There's a need for less scrutiny... I think that's really telling how the trust and the confidence they have in [her] leadership to be able to do that... It comes back to that clarity of vision and an absolute grip of what needs to happen and by when and role modelling that. So, she's leading very regular meetings with partners, with the lead member and the wider council; and so is very much someone that is an advocate of children services, but a level of confidence and skill in terms of explaining and communicating that to others.”*

(Direct report 07)

To help ‘create a context for excellent practice’ (KSS 2) PLDP participants were endeavouring to engage with the wider partnership to find common ground to align their services and to gain support for social care and the vision for children and families.

*“What is key, is making sure that at all points you're making those connections and maintaining key relationships and really taking it from a recognition that there's difference in perspectives and we need to get to find a ground where we can negotiate or agree to disagree. But if your objectives and aims and outcomes are agreed and going to be the same, then we can all go about it, maybe differently in our disciplines,*

*both towards the same objective and having that more strategic plan.”*

(Ppt 24, Cohort 3)

*“She’s engaged with those politicians and corporately with a focus on ‘this is what we’re doing to deliver for children’...which helped get them on board because it helps them realize that the most important thing that we do is to work with children and families, and that’s what unites the politicians and the corporate colleagues... Then we have some common ground and it’s easier then to build up those relationships.”*

(Line manager 01)

*“One of the first conversations that she brought to the table really was around the need to have a practice model and the way in which she managed that was very much a collaboration, a coproduction; and I think previously, to compare with our previous director, a very different approach: very kind of open collaborative conversations as opposed to ‘right, this is what we’re doing, make it happen’ approach... And I think by doing that and having those conversations with staff across children services, it supported people to buy-in to the changes.”*

(Direct report 02)

Specific approaches to increase engagement included:

- Doing more, or reintroducing, appreciative inquiries involving multi-agency partners to identify what could have been done differently but also examples of good practice to share.
- Inviting lead members to sit with social workers and hear about what they do, in order to develop their understanding.
- Setting up a schools’ forum, visiting schools, and reviewing threshold documents to help reduce the number of referrals.
- Changing the IT system to record exactly which agencies were involved in a strategy meeting to show which partners were being excluded and needed to be invited.

*“She could see the power of social workers being in schools, in demystifying social work, and getting in earlier with families (earlier intervention I suppose is what we say) ... And we did start to see a dip in referrals at the time from schools, because you were able to deal with things on the ground... I do think she was instrumental in that.”*

(Direct report 09)

A relationships-based approach has also strengthened partnerships, and a leadership style where responsibility is shared is helping drive change towards a systems approach. Some practice leaders have created multi-disciplinary partnership teams who are educating each other to create community cohesion and resilience and less reliance on statutory services. In a few such cases, the service had successfully bid for additional funding to create new posts and train social workers in specialist areas.

*“[She] will hold people to account, and I think she does that in a very measured and non- aggressive manner...She’s learned that as a system, as a safeguarding system, we can’t do it on our own can we? We need our partners with us, or, walking alongside us.”*

(Line Manager 10)

*"She's now got much more of a relationship with the police, in terms of that joint role around child protection. I think the way [she] does it, is around forming those relationships, making those links, having those regular conversations... So that means, if there's an issue of practice around a specific case in our area, then she will pick up the phone and sort it out, rather than it boil up or it be escalated up further."*

(Line Manager 06)

Despite the challenges associated with the wider system not being 'systemic', the PLDP helped participants see things from other perspectives and gave them the confidence to challenge the system to focus on children – This is part of a practice leader's responsibility to 'lead and govern excellent practice' (KSS 1). As an example, one participant had values-based conversations with the Justice Board, using narrative storytelling, to influence the courts to put the child first. Another ensured qualified social workers were answering calls from schools such that partners felt more comfortable making referrals.

*"The challenge of social work is when social workers try to fit into a system that is not about relationships, that isn't necessarily interested in children and is more interested in money or just getting a good Ofsted."*

(Ppt 02, Cohort 1)

*"Research tells us that there's a lot more anxiety in an inadequate authority. And it [the PLDP] gave me the confidence to push back at our legal department, because they've got way too into social work decision making, and to bring it back into us making decisions, and constantly having that dialogue."*

(Ppt 21, Cohort 2)

*"I've observed a meeting with police and justice colleagues... There was a clear relationship that made those conversations flow... and I witnessed challenge when [she] didn't understand or somebody had got the wrong end of the stick, or she hadn't explained herself in a way that somebody understood, and 'no, that's not what I meant'. Challenge to, potentially plans that another agency might want to put in place, which didn't fit really with what we might have thought was in the best interests of our service and children and families."*

(Direct report 04)

'Designing a system to support effective practice' (KSS 3) was an area requiring development for many PLDP participants. Aware that financial astuteness was not their strength, some had sought to work closely with corporate finance to manage spending and maximise financial flexibility, for example through being innovative on how to allocate funds. Similarly, human resources colleagues were viewed as specialists and a further source of support.

*"What I've learned is make friends with the Director of Housing, make friends with the Director of Finance. Get to know, put effort into those relationships, because they matter in terms of getting corporate support for your department. And that's the kind of thing that to be honest, I never really thought about before and didn't have much interest in. It's about trying to get other parts of the corporate leadership of the council interested in what children services does."*

(Ppt 02, Cohort 1)

*"Having a good connection with the HR lead so that you can keep close oversight of staff sickness for example...What does that mean? How can we respond to that in terms of emotional well-being, how we support each other? So, recognizing those connections are key. It's not just around remaining kind of looking at your own belly button, but that seeking outward as well."*

(Ppt 14, Cohort 3)

A practice leader's relationship with their line manager, typically the DCS, is key to being able to influence the service and beyond. Participants remarked that it was important to have the support from your DCS to allow you the time to attend the PLDP and implement changes within the authority. Accordingly, a couple of PLDP participants commented that they had researched the leadership style and practice approach in the local authority before applying for the practice leaders' role. One line manager suggested that the PLDP could do more to engage DCSs with the programme to make them more aware of its focus and ambitions, which concurred with feedback from certain participants around feeling they had to promote the benefits of an approach or practice model to their line manager to get them on board.

*"I think that the practice leadership programme helped me think, it's not every practice leader role that you would want. Given the level of responsibility that comes with the role, it's a really careful, measured choice in terms of the local authority, the leadership, political leadership, the practice framework...There's a number of things that you would want to consider."*

(Ppt 20, Cohort 1)

*"I was very fortunate when I first came to have a DCS who, I mean, she's not a practice leader... but she had those values and she encouraged me to do the course."*

(Ppt 22, Cohort 3)

*"This is a sort of constructive criticism: I think the programme could do more to engage the senior leaders in the authorities from which those people are coming, in what's in the programme, what they're doing, what they're trying to do."*

(Line Manager 11)

The PLDP highlighted the need for leaders to have a clear vision with associated expectations to be communicated to the workforce. PLDP practice leaders are honest and authentic in their approach and have adopted a visible leadership style. They communicate and engage in discussions with staff in a variety of ways: visits to staff offices (pre COVID-19); writing a weekly bulletin; attending team meetings; holding drop-in/coffee mornings and corridor conversations etc.

*"I go to team check-ins, where you really make time to do that, and previously I might not. I didn't used to do that as much as I do now, where I'm actually with individual social workers and teams talking to them about what it's like to be in on the frontline."* (Ppt 13, Cohort 3)

*"One of the key things that I'll always take away from it is... When I say visible, what I used to always mean was I'm there in the office and the staff can see me, and they [my coach] really challenged me to think about "what does visibility mean?" It's more*

*than just physical being there. It can be lots of other things: How can you be visible without being physically present in the office, and you can in multiple different ways, so that was really good."*

(Ppt 14, Cohort 3)

*"I think she's very much a person who leads by example, so she's very much herself there. She's often in the office with the pod of staff working that day. She works alongside people. She's got massive experience that she shares with staff and they've got tremendous confidence in her and her judgment."*

(Line Manager 08)

PLDP participants are committed to 'developing excellent practitioners' (KSS 4). Health and well-being are high on their agenda, particularly since the ever-changing working conditions brought upon by the pandemic. Practice leaders are in constant communication with their staff, albeit remotely, and have found innovative ways to stay in touch with and support practitioners to boost morale. Some leaders have secured funds to resource specialist psychotherapists to work with staff during a difficult time. Whether the PLDP was a catalyst for any of these initiatives was unclear. Nonetheless, a couple of PLDP alumni, who had a positive experience with their development coach, have offered coaching to their direct reports, also acting as coaches themselves.

The PLDP has instilled in participants the concept that a successful leader takes their people with them. They understood the need for the workforce to see themselves as representatives of the local authority and to feel valued *"if they're going to change their behaviour in terms of their professional practice"*

(Ppt 02, Cohort 1)

*"There's something I suppose, thinking about the practice leadership programme, of the ability to take your people with you in relation to that vision, that overarching strategy and plan but equally to have that absolute focus and grip and modelling when it comes down to practice."*

(Ppt 20, Cohort 1)

*"Staff hadn't felt listened to with the previous leader, so my first thing was to get engaged with staff. I think the fact that the programme encouraged that practice leadership role, rather than an AD role, typically around bringing staff with you, getting close to practice and that permission if you like, meant that I spent my first weeks in the role absolutely meeting with staff, engaging with them...And then a year later we are absolutely in a much better position around recruitment, staff retention, and motivation."*

(Ppt 17, Cohort 2)

PLDP participants are changing their organisation's culture to promote learning and reflection (KSS 5). Staff feel valued and are more invested when they are involved in the decision-making, as reported by several participants. PLDP participants worked collaboratively with staff, regardless of whether in a practice leader role or still a head of service, to involve them in the decision-making. They were having more dialogue with staff, for example, by setting up panels to include practitioners in discussions.

*"I think she's really grown just in terms of how she works with people really and*

*spends a lot of time taking their views into account, listening, making sure she's involving as many people as she can who would be stakeholders, I guess, in any of those decisions."*

(Line Manager 05)

Moreover, participants have stopped making so many decisions alone and have started making more collective decisions, concurrently empowering staff to take responsibility. Several articulated that by trusting their workforce, they were able to keep a grip on the organisation without needing to know everything – something line managers had also observed. Again, this differed from a command- control leadership style, where staff are "told" what to do, towards a distributed leadership style.

*"I think there is still something about kind of continuing to work on empowering, particularly frontline managers, to have the confidence to take the decisions that we ask them to take. That's definitely something that if you've been in a place that there's been some really significant improvement work needed so that you start from a position of needing some level of compliance. You've then got to slowly wean everybody off that into a place where they've got that kind of confidence to do things differently."*

(Ppt 11, Cohort 1)

*"There's something for me about, that hold, the dispersed leadership...I'm only human and I have that responsibility, obviously, as a practice leadership to have that oversight and that scrutiny on a range of key areas. But also, it's how I empower and support and enable others to do that across the system."*

(Ppt 20, Cohort 1)

*"Sometimes as leaders, there is a sense that we got to know the answer and people come to us wanting us to know the answer and I think I learned a lot: It doesn't take away my ability to lead by actually putting it back to people and starting the dialogue as opposed to just being a decision maker."*

(Ppt 21, Cohort 2)

PLDP participants have instilled a strong sense of accountability in their staff (KSS 6). The workforce was given more autonomy and trusted to take ownership in numerous ways, for example:

- Audits, formerly a desktop exercise, are being done 'with' (not 'to') staff, yielding richer information that practitioners can learn from.
- Managers undertake dip sampling, and subsequently come up with the solutions themselves.
- Performance data is discussed with staff and joint recommendations are made.

*"We used to do that [auditing] as a desktop exercise...We changed all of that and now all of our auditing is done sitting alongside the social worker whose piece of work it is... I certainly think the kind of experience of social workers being involved in this collaborative process is much better received and that definitely came from conversations on the course about not doing things 'to' social workers, but very much feeling that that was and that sense of creating a learning organization."*

(Ppt 11, Cohort 1)



*"I have utilized some of the learning from the course about how to empower people to make changes and see them through changes...I looked at how could I influence a system to become more connected, to become more cohesive, but to own the outcomes rather than it being owned in various places alone...When I went to a meeting, the Quality Assurance team would say so, here's the action plan based on the audits and every action was owned by the Quality Assurance team.... Now what we've got is a system that all undertake their own quality assurance that feeds into a bigger picture."*

(Ppt 03, Cohort 3)

Such activities, which encourage open conversations about what is and isn't working, have shifted social care away from a culture dominated by compliance and judgement, towards a learning culture. Quality assurance, once a siloed process, is becoming more connected and cohesive; and social workers, probably spend less time trying to do prove what they've done, and more time doing what they do need to do.

*"When I first came, there was a suspicion that you couldn't get team managers to effectively mark their own homework...Having a quality assurance framework whereby you get team managers to try and objectively evaluate the quality of practice of their own practitioners and then have somebody else to moderate, I think, is ultimately where we need to be, and we just instigated that this month."*

(Ppt 07, Cohort 2)

*"What the [PLDP] course has taught me is there's something about not doing 'to' people, do 'with'. There's something about owning the responsibility and sharing the accountability. There was something about showing people if we do it in a particular way, what the positives and the benefits were for children and young people and their families. And I think the other bit for me was around, you know, I can't do everything and why should I do everything and how do you distribute that to empower people to be able to make decisions? And there was something about that learning culture that this cannot be an environment where you know you've done something wrong, so therefore you're going to the naughty step. It's about how we use that to learn, and how we have those open dialogues."*

(Ppt 23, Cohort 1)

*"I think for us as an organization, there's evidence now that there is stronger management grip, because her scrutiny at the top has filtered down and everyone else underneath her is keeping an eye on things a bit more closely. I guess, what I said at the beginning about accountability, practice and children, I think it's probably had an impact on the time we spend in court, for example: She's driven things through looking at things more carefully, we go quicker, and we get hopefully the right outcome for the child quicker."*

(Direct report 05)

The PLDP is clear about having good relationships with families too; and it was evident that participants and their practitioners were working relationally with families. The PLDP cemented participants' views about working relationally using a restorative strengths-based approach to practice: again, doing "with" not "to"; involving families in collaborative audits; getting feedback from families; having more family group conferences with a child's wider family network; and maintaining a respectful use of language.

*"We were rolling out [an approach] that was looking at a more youth-led, family-led, family group conferencing: to think about how families need to be listened to differently and how they take charge of the plans when we are intervening in their lives...acknowledging what they need help with, what they believe their strength is and building around that rather than a situation where professionals are coming in and telling them what they think are the issues and the worries. So that's been a real key achievement and that's still ongoing and we're seeing some differences in the approach. It's really just the shifting of approach really to how we intervene in people's lives and that standard and culture of a different sort of expectation about how our social workers will be and behave."*

(Ppt 24, Cohort 3)

*"Child protection numbers were extremely high because we were just doing things 'to' families.... So, I think she was really good at making social workers stop and think about 'What are we doing here with this family? What is the purpose of this?'"*

(Direct report 09)

*"She's much more willing and able to get the voice of children and families into audit, the user feedback, and to use that then in service development, and much more focused on participation of children and families in the work, and again that speaks to an approach which is fundamentally relational rather than oppositional."*

(Line manager 01)

As discussed earlier in this report, working in collaboration with peers from other local authorities is developing a community of practice leaders with shared values and a joint vision about statutory intervention. Previously, no network of equivalents existed on a country-wide basis.

*"The most lasting benefit of that for me has been the cohort that I was on and our community of practice, as it were, that we're still, you know, on a very regular basis problem solving with each other...That regular touching base with people in different parts of the country doing this role and helping each other to deal with some of the challenges, has been of the most benefit to me."*

(Ppt 07, Cohort 2)

34 local authorities have a practice leader in post who has gone through the PLDP i.e., 23% of all local authorities in England. This network is being employed to enhance learning of individual leaders and to influence national policy. For example, PLDP alumni are invited to regular meetings with the DfE which provide opportunities to hear about the national perspective, discuss current issues and shape the wider system. As a result, practice leaders are more confident to challenge and change practice both within and beyond their organisation. Furthermore, some practice leaders have become more innovative in their approach and showed more desire to get involved in other projects, such as the National Assessment Accreditation Scheme.

*"Any considerable change in practice and moving to a fairly brave model of social work practice requires a number of people, probably lots of people nationally to be on the same page. So, if anything, I think it [the PLDP] can be credited for that in the fact that it's brought lots of people in the same part of the system to be on the same page about what good social work looks like."*

*“I'd like to see that really harnessed and taking forward so that people don't just go on this journey and then go back to their respective workplace. If they are just that individual who's gone through this process and all the colleagues around them have not, then you're not going to get the impact are you. So, the more people engaging, the more people involved and the more they don't forget what they've been through and apply that learning to practice the stronger the system will become won't it.”*

(Line manager 10)

## Assessing the wider impact of the programme

An effort was made to gather evidence of impact of the PLDP on participants, the organisation and sector more broadly by i) analysing the data on participants' career progression, ii) examining Ofsted ratings, and iii) asking PLDP participants and their line managers about the perceived impact of their behavioural changes on outcomes.

### Career progression

As of January 2021, 51% of PLDP participants from the first three cohorts had obtained a promoted post as a Practice Leader or Director of Children's Services. Understandably the proportion of promotions was highest for Cohort 1 as more time had elapsed since completion of the programme.

Role change	Cohort 1 2017	Cohort 2 2018	Cohort 3 2019	Total	%
Promoted to Director of Children's Services	0	1	1	2	3%
Promoted to Practice Leader	14	11	7	32	48%
Promoted to other post (e.g., Ofsted inspector)	0	1	2	3	4%
Sideways move	3	6	2	11	16%
Remained in the same post	1	5	13	19	28%
<b>Total</b>	18	24	25	67*	
<b>Percent promoted to PL/DCS</b>	<b>78%</b>	<b>50%</b>	<b>32%</b>	<b>51%</b>	<b>100%</b>

*\*One participant left to work abroad so has been excluded from the figures in the table above.*

In addition, 59% of promotions were internal moves. This shows many local authorities benefitted from supporting a head of service on the PLDP, which could be viewed as part of a talent management strategy. Other PLDP participants had to move authorities because there wasn't a practice leader vacancy within their existing organisation.

Further examination of the individual career moves of PLDP participant showed that about a quarter of those who have become practice leaders, initially made a sideways move and/or obtained an interim practice leader position. Moreover, although participants who had made a sideways move were equally split between internal and external

moves, all participants who had become a practice leader following a sideways move had moved local authority beforehand. Reasons given for making an external sideways move were to gain more experience and/or work in a local authority which shared their values and approach to practice. Equally, some participants chose to remain in their current role within the local authority, but the coronavirus pandemic had delayed career progression in other cases.

A few participants and line managers expressed concerns over the PLDP potentially having a negative effect on the pool of heads of service from which practice leaders are recruited (i.e., moving the recruitment issue elsewhere) but accepted that most PLDP participants were, or were close to being, ready for promotion so would have moved on eventually. They stressed the importance of upholding the high selection criteria to maintain the quality of PLDP participants.

*“There's almost this pressure that you need to go and get the role. If we're not careful, that will disrupt, from a wider perspective, that will disrupt people at the next level down. So, if too many people the next level down all of a sudden move up, you've got great people at the top, but you've then got a bit of an issue about some of your other leaders in the in the organization.”*

(Ppt 09, Cohort 1)

One direct report thought that the course application criterion of needing to be recommended by your line manager to be able to apply for the PLDP could be a barrier for some suitable candidates; and added that practice leader applicants who had not been on the PLDP could be disadvantaged if the programme were perceived as a ‘golden ticket’.

## Ofsted ratings

The 34 PLDP participants who had obtained a promoted post as a practice leader were employed by local authorities with Ofsted judgements ranging from inadequate through to outstanding. Indeed, some participants chose to move to an authority after it had been rated inadequate by Ofsted, so they could contribute to its improvement journey.

Nationally, the overall effectiveness of local authorities as judged by Ofsted continues to improve: “As of 31<sup>st</sup> March 2020, the proportion judged good or outstanding for overall effectiveness increased to 50%; and there has been a continued fall in the percentage judged inadequate, decreasing to 14% from 22%.”<sup>13</sup> Some PLDP participants are presently practice leaders in local authorities who have improved their Ofsted rating: For example, out of the 18 judged by Ofsted to be ‘outstanding’, 13 achieved this status after July 2018, five of which had a PLDP practice leader in post when the inspection took place.

It would be imprudent to undertake a direct analysis of the changes in Ofsted inspection outcomes across the 34 local authorities with a PLDP participant in the practice leader role. Firstly, 13 (38%) enrolled on the PLDP *after* the most recent inspection. Secondly, a comparable historical Ofsted rating was not available in every local authority<sup>14</sup>. Thirdly, since the CfSSW did not record the date when a PLDP participant was appointed as a practice leader, one could not ascertain how long each practice leader had been in post before the Ofsted inspection took place. It should also be noted that graded inspection

of social care services was ceased in March 2020 due to the pandemic.

Qualitative evidence of participants' impact on the Ofsted rating was therefore sought during the evaluation interviews, to gain insight into their perceived influence as a practice leader, where applicable (as some had yet to obtain a promoted post). The feeling was that a greater level of oversight and scrutiny had provided practice leaders with a closer line of sight to practice and a better understanding of what was happening for children, which was thought to contribute to a successful Ofsted inspection. Practice leaders were able to evidence that they had a practice model that was working for children and families through a combination of: performance management information (such as a reduction in referral rates); rich qualitative information yielded from audits and dip sampling etc.; and working collaboratively with partners to ensure an appropriate level of purposeful intervention.

*"My contribution [towards an improved Ofsted inspection rating] was the ability to bring both my technical knowledge, my strategic knowledge, practice framework and values together in one place to influence change."*

(Ppt 08, Cohort 2)

*"One of the things I picked up within the practice leaders programme, was around really functioning collaboratively with different service areas, so particularly education in this role has been significant, and that came through in the Ofsted feedback."*

(Ppt 14, Cohort 3)

*"The threshold of intervention was the right threshold, so they [Ofsted] agreed with the children that were in the system were the right children."*

(Ppt 18, Cohort 3)

*"For me it [a 'good' Ofsted rating for leadership] was about the changes that we'd made in the system...Let's not intervene in people's lives, unless they really need it, and when we do so, let's do it in a purposeful way. So, let's be really proud of our social work, children social work and our children, social care practitioners and let's have a practice methodology."*

(Ppt 04, Cohort 1)

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<sup>13</sup> National Statistics Children's Social Care data in England 2016

<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/childrens-social-care-data-in-england-2016>

<sup>14</sup> Of the remaining 19 local authorities with a PLDP practice leader in post, 10 (i.e., 53%) have seen an improvement in their Ofsted inspection rating, 5 saw no change and 4 were downgraded.

## Perceived impact on individuals and practice

When asked to give examples of service improvements they had influenced or achieved that could be credited to the PLDP, almost half of the participants who were interviewed commented that the PLDP was only part of their development journey; adding that it was difficult to attribute organisational success to a specific aspect of the PLDP since numerous factors come into play. The complexity of linking cause and effect is why a real-world level 4 Kirkpatrick evaluation is difficult to fully achieve.

*“It's hard, isn't it [to make direct connections with the PLDP] because part of my journey in the last few years has got to be attributed to [the local authority] and the way of working here. I need to give [the local authority] credit for that in terms of that philosophy.”*

(Ppt 13, Cohort 3)

Nonetheless, behavioural change at an individual level by PLDP participants was believed to facilitate successful implementation of a practice model and subsequently impact a range of organisational performance indicators as follows:

- Decrease in the number of referrals
- Step down of children on child protection plans to Children in Need
- Reduction in the number of care orders at home
- Decrease in the number of children in care
- Reduction in the size of the pool of auditors
- Improved staff morale and retention
- Increasingly permanent workforce

Most importantly, the PLDP was a significant piece of learning, specific to children's social care and relevant to the KSS for Practice Leaders, as evidenced throughout this report. Participants were explicit about the extensive impact of the programme on their approach to leadership, declaring that it had helped them become a better leader, because they:

- Knew themselves well, so could be authentic
- Had the confidence to lead
- Were strategic in their approach
- Articulated a clear vision to stakeholders
- Focused on practice and outcomes for children
- Championed change
- Empowered others to take responsibility
- Took people with them

*“It [the PLDP] has helped me become a better leader, because there's nothing like that course out there... So much that is actually out there is so horribly generic... It really supports you as a leader because they have tailored the course specifically to what we need and the knowledge and skills statements.”*

(Ppt 16, Cohort 2)

*“I thought it was the most excellent piece of learning and development that I've had*

*in my thirty-odd year career. I think in just about every aspect, it prepared me for the role particularly in the interactions with other participants, I mean the quality of the inputs was fantastic."*

(Ppt 07, Cohort 2)

Line managers observed positive impacts of PLDP participants' leadership style on the workforce as well. A collaborative approach has led to increases in staff morale and improved retention. This was particularly evident where the quality assurance process had been changed to undertake audits alongside social workers, and where practice leaders had *"enabled managers and practitioners to own performance more, rather than it being a 'deficit model'."*

(Line manager, 06)

*"In terms of the staff, they feel that they've got confidence in [her]. They can see that she's listening, she's understanding their point of view, you know, they come to decisions together. And so, I think the staff really value that...and I think that really increases their morale...General key performance indicators have massively improved, and I think that is down to morale in the teams working together and having a joint vision and view of what they want their service to be and what they want the outcomes to be for children and families."*

(Line Manager 05)

*"We've seen a real stabilization in our team managers that [Name of participant] is responsible for, and I think some of that is about [name]'s style and how she works with them. I suppose an example is performance: she very much gets them to own performance and to bring performance issues to her leadership rather than her just constantly being that challenge on the performance."*

(Line Manager 06)

*"I think from a motivational point of view, workers not feeling left alone, they feel part of the system. We've just had our health check back from the social work feedback and certainly people do feel supported...people feel safe to practice. It is not blame culture, and I think that does help good and innovative practice and not defensive practice."*

(Line Manager 12)

Finally, direct reports agreed that PLDP practice leaders were contributing towards their professional development, and through empowering practitioners to make decisions and giving them ownership, the workforce have an increased confidence to practice.

*"She is somebody that allows you to make your decisions and develop your own thinking style; but then you know she's there to make sure that you're making the right decisions and reflect on that with you... For me it's been great in terms of my own development because she's allowed me to be confident in my decision-making; be confident in what my views are and my actions and have that autonomy."*

(Direct report 10)

## Unintended outcomes

Some unintended outcomes of the PLDP reported by participants are described below:

1. The rigorous application process, that candidates were required to undergo to get accepted onto the PLDP, made them reflect about their leadership style and helped prepare participants for subsequent job interviews, particularly in cases where they had not prepared for an external interview in many years.

*"It [the application process] was really tough...but actually even from that first moment of applying, got you to really step back and reflect about yourself as a leader... I hadn't been to an external interview for some time, but that I found helpful in that it was all part of the learning. Then I went to interview for this role, and I'd had some of that preparation through that assessment centre."*

(Ppt 14, Cohort 3)

2. The Ofsted shadow visit involves visiting another local authority to observe practice. Therefore, PLDP participants fortunate enough to shadow a visit, not only learned about how an Ofsted inspection works, but also came away with ideas of initiatives they could implement in their own authority to improve practice. Furthermore, one participant said that the Ofsted shadow visit had enhanced their professional relationship with the regional inspector, who they now see as a learning resource in terms of accessing and sharing best practice.
3. The practice leaders' network is being utilised innovatively to extend learning beyond the sharing of information and ideas. For example, participants have developed personal connections with peers from their cohort and informally arranged visits to observe practice in other authorities. Similarly, direct reports are beginning to expand their peer network outside their local authority.

*"One of the things about the networking which was really powerful was, I went up and spent some time with another couple of authorities to unpick their approaches both in terms of a front door but also in terms of quality assurance frameworks as well."*

(Ppt 14, Cohort 3)

*"I think, it [the PLDP] widened her network in terms of being outward facing, getting ideas from all the directors and from other people on the programme and bringing those to [name of local authority]. We were a little bit insular before, and it's quite a different approach now where we are engaging more in conversations with lots of different local authorities. And again, I think that programme has supported her to do that."*

(Direct report 02)

4. Participants have brought specific elements of the PLDP that they found particularly valuable back to their local authority in order to develop their workforce and improve practice. Examples include sharing the research and theory with practitioners; exposing heads of service to elected members; and introducing a coaching programme for senior managers.



*“We've commissioned some coaching for our team managers to be able to have that protected time to be looking at what their management style is and how they would work through some of the difficulties and make sure that their messaging was as strong as the rest of the organization. So, I think the coaching element of the practice leadership programme made me think, 'actually, if that's what I've got why aren't I offering that to my workforce?’”*

(Ppt 19, Cohort 2)

5. The development coaches benefitted from coaching PLDP participants too: Having opportunities to visit other local authorities expanded coaches' knowledge base and widened their own outlook. A mutual reciprocity and reinforcement of values was evident, including the joint responsibility for raising the professional status of social work. Coaches had revisited their thinking and behavioural style, for example in how they communicate and engage with their team, bringing new insight and impactful questions from the national oversight gained from coaching PLDP participants. Coaches also commented that they had brought new learning and initiatives back to their own LA following visits to observe their coachee(s).

*“I think that there is reciprocity isn't there? When I'm talking to them about things that we might be doing locally, they're also talking about the context in which they are working, so it gives a real shift to your reality and your perspective, because you can become very tunnel vision around your own local authority and what that does and how that operates, where you can see how other organizational cultures really do influence outcomes for children, and the political dimension in which they are having to navigate their landscape. I think it's a stark reminder that not all local authorities are the same; that they're not all coming from the same starting place.”*

(Coach 01)

*“The interesting bit (I don't know whether you call it development perhaps it is) was because I visited [a different authority] and I visited [another authority] I saw how they did things and I thought 'I'll take that bit away'. So, of course it did in a way develop my knowledge.”*

(Coach 06)

6. Some practice leaders were able to affect change beyond children's services. As an example, one PLDP practice leader extended their relationship-based practice model into adult services, which enabled them to work more efficiently with partners and resulted in quicker assessments, dispensing with waiting lists, and a reduction in the number of people requiring services.
7. The PLDP also raised awareness of national initiatives and networks outside the programme, such as the What Works Centre for Children's Social Care<sup>15</sup> which is creating and sharing research on evidence-based practice.

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<sup>15</sup> The What Works Centre for Children's Social Care: <https://whatworks-csc.org.uk/>

## Summary and conclusion

The PLDP is a successful learning and development programme. Reactions to the programme were extremely positive and participants were highly satisfied with the taught elements: The content, which had been aligned with the KSS for Practice Leaders, was considered very relevant as it was bespoke to children's social care; and the experienced leaders who presented at the seminars and residentials were highly rated with regards to their knowledge, responsiveness to the group, and ability to provide a safe learning environment – The latter was important for exploring critical issues and concepts, which contributed greatly to the success of the programme.

Considerable learning took place at an individual level. By the end of the programme, participants were significantly more confident in their leadership capabilities with regards to the KSS for Practice Leaders. They picked up lots of knowledge from the formal learning experiences provided by the CfSSW and particularly enjoyed the sessions on working in a corporate and political environment (KSS 6), managing risk and uncertainty (KSS 6), and applying research to practice (KKS 4).

Learning was undoubtedly enhanced when in-role (encapsulating the 70:20:10 model) through job-related experiences supported by the other elements of the PLDP, as it enabled participants to practise their skills and learn from others: the development coach to help one navigate through the challenges of the practice leader role; the Ofsted shadow visit to help gain an understanding of what they look for in successful leaders; the development project to test out an idea in the workplace; and the network of peers for continual support and guidance. Networking opportunities was deemed the most powerful resource for effective leadership development, as it provided a medium to share experiences and resources in pursuit of improving practice across the system.

The seminars and residentials allowed time to think and reflect about the type of leader one wanted to be. PLDP participants came away with ideas of how to apply their learning to practice, indicating on the course feedback forms that they were highly likely to incorporate the learning in their role. Moreover, intentions were translated into changes in behaviour in the workplace, which were also observed by their colleagues.

Through gaining a better understanding of the practice leader role, and alignment with their core values, participants' confidence in their ability to do the job increased significantly. They were encouraged to learn that they would be able to do the practice leader role by being their authentic self and through maintaining a focus on practice.

The PLDP helped broaden participants' perspective, to look beyond their department and appreciate the contribution of the wider system in realizing better outcomes for children. A fundamental component of their approach was communication of a set of shared values and promotion of a consistent approach to practice, keeping children and families at the heart. They clearly articulated the chosen practice model, communicated it to others, and role modelled the model internally with staff/colleagues and externally with partners. To help embed the practice model, PLDP practice leaders were seeking to integrate it across all levels of the organisation and system, for example through a considered use of language in policies and in everyday interactions.

In some cases, the PLDP has helped practice leaders move the organisation away from

a management culture focused on compliance with performance indicators, to improving performance. Through encouraging staff to take responsibility, to learn from their mistakes and share the learning, practice leaders were developing the local authority as a learning organisation. They have introduced initiatives and/or changes to close the learning loop and developed an appreciative high-challenge high-support approach to leadership, whereby managed risk is accepted and understood.

The way in which practice leaders engage and work collaboratively with their workforce, corporate colleagues, partner organisations, and the national network of leaders was perceived to be key to driving improvement. Practice leaders were developing good relationships with partners, such as the police and schools, yet acknowledged that more needed to be done to maximise opportunities for earlier intervention. To secure support and buy-in for Children's Services, practice leaders were challenging the system to focus on children and promoting the local authority's approach to practice, for example through involving council members in the children's social care improvement journey.

PLDP participants have commonly adopted a collaborative leadership style, whereby the responsibility and influence on change is shared with others. They invite staff to be involved in decision-making which makes them feel more valued, motivated, and invested in the practice model. A relationship-based approach has been extended to work with children and families, who are given a voice and effectively involved in their plans, which allows practitioners to develop a better understanding of a child's needs as early as possible.

Line managers' and direct reports' observations were concurrent with participants' self-report data. PLDP practice leaders were values-based, practice-driven and role-modelled the desired approach. Line managers had seen participants grow in confidence since embarking on the PLDP and to view the practice leader role and responsibilities through a broader lens, beyond children's service. Practice leaders were authentic and available yet had created a culture where practitioners were encouraged to take responsibility and hold themselves accountable.

Having an awareness of the political nature of the role was the greatest knowledge gap since previous exposure to corporate and council politics as a head of service was limited. Line managers agreed that this remained an area of development for less experienced practice leaders that was best cultivated through further learning and development on the job.

A significant proportion of PLDP participants had obtained a promoted practice leader post, which was the main aim of the programme. Participants also reported that they had positively influenced various children's services performance indicators. However, the direct impact of the PLDP beyond the individual-level was difficult to assess. Since graded Ofsted inspections were ceased in March 2020 (to date) limited data is available to be able to undertake a comparison of Ofsted ratings across local authorities with and without a PLDP practice leader in post. Nonetheless, qualitative feedback regarding participants' influence on the local authority's Ofsted outcome indicated that the PLDP had helped them gain a greater level of oversight and a closer line of sight to practice. Furthermore, the PLDP had brought about widespread behavioural changes and enhanced leadership skills which is improving practice and contributing to better lives for children and families.

## Recommendations

Recommendations on how the PLDP might be improved (some of which have been mentioned earlier in this report) are summarised below:

### Promotion of the programme

- Actively market the PLDP more widely to extend its reach, specifically to local authorities who have yet to support a participant on the programme.
- Increase the representation of applications from under-represented groups, for example through targeted recruitment activities, raising awareness of unconscious bias, and involving BAME PLDP alumni in the application, shortlisting and interview process.
- Inform line managers (particularly directors of children's services) about the PLDP's aims and content, to increase understanding of how they can support the development of their direct report enrolled on the PLDP. Further enhance engagement by inviting line managers along to a PLDP seminar or giving them access to a recorded on-line version.
- Promote the success of the PLDP further afield to raise the profile of the profession.
- Share the CfSSW's rigorous approach to selection with local authorities and partner agencies, as an example of good practice in leadership recruitment.
- Consider expanding the application criteria to make the programme accessible to practice leaders who have recently been promoted into the role but not undertaken the PLDP.

*"I've often wondered whether or not the training should be offered to any new practice leader...There are practice leaders out there that rise up through their ranks and get the job without having the benefit of this training. And I do wonder whether or not, for those new practice leaders that have got there on their own merit, whether or not a program like this [or a version of it] should be offered to them anyway?"*

(Coach 01)

*"I think the reputation of the programme has, in my view, increased the reputation of social work, social workers and social work managers - incredibly enhanced it. So, I think that's been a real positive. Possibly, it's staved some of the negative press stories that have been around. Actually, that's one area that I think the course could do better, and the coaches could help participants with, is press coverage... Feed them good news stories, feed them positive case studies."*

(Coach 06)

### Programme design

- Invite a practice leader who has been on an Ofsted shadow visit to report back to PLDP participants about their experience and what they have learned.
- Include the topic of anti-racism and disproportionality in the programme and approach a BAME role model to run the seminar/session.
- Seek permission from participants to examine the chat text from their social media groups to inform the focus of future PLDP seminars and/or identify resources or

- material that could perhaps be shared more broadly.
- Consider getting the PLDP accredited to gain further recognition and credibility, but also to help ensure the sustainability of the programme.

## The coaching programme

- Provide an induction session for new coaches explaining the expectations of the role which includes: guidance on how to use the 360-feedback report and how it links to the KSS; clarification of the difference between coaching and mentoring; examples of how coaches can support their coachee both during and outside the coaching sessions.
- Offer further opportunities for coaches to learn about the content of the PLDP, so they are better able to reinforce the key learning, for example by inviting them to participate in the selection process or giving them access to a recording of an online PLDP seminar.
- Ensure coaches are formally introduced to their participant coachee before commencing the coaching programme.
- Create a coaching agreement or contract that outlines the expectations and the commitment required of both parties (e.g., frequency of meetings) to be agreed/signed before commencement of the coaching programme.
- Check in with coaches on a regular basis (say, every three months) to ascertain whether expectations are being met. Identify then rectify any issues.
- Provide opportunities for coaches to connect with one another as a group, at the beginning middle and end of the programme, to discuss their experiences and share ideas.
- Repeat the 360-degree feedback exercise at the end of the first year (or undertake a self- assessment against the KSS for practice leaders) to assess and validate progress and to inform the development plan for the second 'in-role' phase.

*"I think what would be helpful going forward, is perhaps a more explicit contract between the coach and coachee, and in particular the sort of thing you might see in a supervision contract, although it's a different relationship, which is 'How often, what are we going to cover? What are the ground rules?' Some of that could be pre-prepared, perhaps by the course, so that what we're actually doing is working in safe parameters and clear expectations."*

(Coach 04)

*"I don't recall there's ever been a 'coaches-only' type session. I certainly don't know who the other coaches were on the programme. I saw the list, but we never sat down and digested any learning that might inform our role... So I don't know whether there's a case for... setting up some kind of initial 'Right, we're going to get coaches only together; look at some of the feedback we've had in the past; look at where it works, what can we do better? This is who you all are, and if you've got any issues.'"*

(Coach 05)

## The development project

- Provide greater clarity about the nature and scope of the development project; and consider tightening its remit such that participants are required to focus on a specific area of development.
- Offer participants the option to undertake an alternative assignment, such as a reflective journal around an individual's professional developmental area.
- Revisit the project/assignment at regular intervals throughout the programme, during the coaching sessions or seminars.
- Monitor progress of individual projects/assignments or capture evidence of the application of learning to ensure completion.
- Schedule more time in the programme for participants to discuss their project/assignment with peers and share their learning.

*"It [the project] felt like they were trying to find things that they didn't have to do additional. 'Well, I'm doing this anyway, so I'll do that'. It's a tricky one this, because I think there is a case isn't there, in terms of the rigor of the programme and the testing of it, of making it more discreet as a project which you need to submit, and you're assessed on and maybe the assessment is triangulated with people back in the home authority... I don't know, but maybe that's a bit too much and will put people off."*

(Coach 05)

## Social learning opportunities

- Maximise the opportunities to go on a shadow visit and explore further ways for participants to engage with and learn from Ofsted.
- Continue to organise an annual practice leaders networking event and facilitate virtual cohort meet ups.
- Maintain the regular DfE consultation meetings with practice leaders.
- Explore ways to extend the practice leader network to non-PLDP alumni; and set up a children's social care BAME leaders' forum if one does not yet exist.
- Develop an online resource bank or repository for practice leaders to share documents, policies, and other material as part of a practice leaders' 'toolkit'.

## Ongoing evaluation

- Amend participant feedback forms to better align with the programme objectives and course outcomes.
- Continue to record and analyse the ethnicity of PLDP applicants and participants to monitor any inequalities in the recruitment process.
- Incorporate summative assessment into the evaluation cycle, for example via the development project or a written assignment. Alternatively, consider undertaking an assessment against the KSS for Practice Leaders at the beginning and end of the programme, to measure knowledge and skill acquisition.
- Continue to track participants' career progression (including the date appointed to a leadership post) and agree what performance indicators best capture the intended outcomes, to be used to evaluate the long-term impact of the PLDP.

# Appendices

## Appendix 1. Overview of the PLDP

Element	Overview
<b>Launch Residential (2 days)</b>	<p><b>Lead and govern excellent practice (KSS 1)</b></p> <p>The programme starts with a 2-day residential programme where participants meet for the first time.</p>
<b>Seminar Programme (5 one- day seminars)</b>	<p>Participants come together for five one-day seminars over the year, which include theoretical and practice input from sector specialists/speakers and facilitated activities which seeks to apply the content to real situations.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Creating a context for excellent practice (KSS 2)</li> <li>2. Quality Assurance and Improvement (KSS 6)</li> <li>3. Designing a system to support effective practice (KSS 3)</li> <li>4. Developing excellent practitioners (KSS 4)</li> <li>5. Support effective decision making (KSS 5)</li> </ol>
<b>End Residential (2 days)</b>	<p><b>Ending of the programme and future planning</b></p> <p>The two-day end residential is an opportunity for participants to reflect on their learning from the previous year, it also provides the opportunity for participants to present their service development projects.</p>
<b>Coaching</b>	<p><b>Further learning from an experienced social care leader</b></p> <p>Each participant is matched to a coach who is either an experienced Practice Leader or Director of Children's Services in a local authority recognised for the strength of their children's social care leadership.</p>
<b>360 Assessment</b>	<p><b>Feedback of leadership knowledge and skills</b></p> <p>A 360 is undertaken for each participant to help assess their strengths and weaknesses. This assessment has been re-designed specifically for the Practice Leader role and is based on the knowledge and skills statements.</p>
<b>Service Development Project</b>	<p><b>Application of learning</b></p> <p>During the first year of the programme, participants work on an area of service development within their local authority. This might be something that they are already working on, or something that has been identified as a need within their authority.</p> <p>This is an area where coaches can provide an insight.</p>
<b>Ofsted Shadowing</b>	<p>Participants have the opportunity to shadow an Ofsted focused visit or monitoring visit.</p>



## Appendix 2. Learning outcomes

### **First 2-day residential** - KSS 1 (Lead and govern excellent practice)

- LO1. Building the group identity
- LO2. Understanding what makes a good practice leader
- LO3. Understanding the importance of basic belief system and influence on practice
- LO4. Reflecting on leadership and management style and own individual strengths
- LO5. Planning for the year with development coaches

### **Seminar programme** - (Five seminars, each focusing on one of the KSS)

#### **KSS 2 seminar** (Creating a context for excellent practice)

- LO6. How to engage staff in a shared direction/vision
- LO7. Creating the environment where effective practice can flourish
- LO8. How to improve when the practice system isn't working

#### **KSS 3 seminar** (Designing a system to support effective practice)

- LO9. Understanding systemic leadership
- LO10. Understanding the necessity of a theory of change for families which provides the basis on which the staff operate

#### **KSS 4 seminar** (Developing excellent practitioners)

- LO11. How to make best use of knowledge and research evidence about effective practice
- LO12. How to ensure there is sufficient professional development within the organisation
- LO13. How to maintain social workers in front line practice

#### **KSS 5 seminar** (Support effective decision making)

- LO14. Knowing how to build a culture where managed risk is accepted and understood
- LO15. Developing a culture of learning, reflection, and acceptance of accountability

#### **KSS 6 seminar** (Quality assurance and improvement)

- LO16. How to manage the politics, corporate centre, and other local authority pressures
- LO17. Understanding the tension between social work accountability and local government

### **Final 2 day residential** - (Reflecting on participant's experience of the programme)

- LO18. Reflections on own progress during the year
- LO19. Preparation for becoming a practice leader

### **360 assessment** – (Feedback of leadership knowledge and skills)

- LO20. Gain an understanding of how others view your performance and how their view compares with your own
- LO21. Develop a better understanding of how your work and performance impacts others you work with promoting more effective team working



**Coaching programme** - (Learning from experienced social care leader)

LO22. Provide constructive and facilitative feedback.

LO23. Learn from observation of the coach in their own local authority

LO24. Learn from feedback received from the coach observing them in different situations.

LO25. Provide an opportunity to visit good practice areas in the coach's local authority.



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